

# FOUR PAWS

Law Enforcement



By Deb Weissler

Dogs have a long and storied past working alongside their human companions. 14th century Spanish conquistadors brought them to the Americas as part of their expeditionary forces. Dogs accompanied the Jamestown settlers to Virginia. In fields and streams, towns and farms, and onto the battlefields, dogs have been our loyal companions. When conflicts ended and the dogs came home, they joined federal, state, and local agencies as partners in law enforcement.

Master Deputy Philip Lutz, Gloucester County's newest K9 handler and Rexi. Photo courtesy of Gloucester County Sheriff's Office.



Rexi, a sable German shepherd dog. Photo courtesy of Gloucester County Sheriff's Office.

REXI, THE DEPARTMENT'S MOST POPULAR DEPUTY, WAS OFF-DUTY AND READY FOR SOME DOWNTIME WITH HIS FAVORITE TOY—A BLACK RUBBER KONG.

Every K9 unit expresses admiration for their intelligence, dedication, devotion, and bravery. Our regional law enforcement agencies were only too happy to share their experiences with these four-legged cops.

#### GLOUCESTER COUNTY

A streak of black fur flashed passed me on the stairs at the Gloucester County Sheriff's Office. The padding of heavy paws to and from Sheriff Darrell Warren's office signified that the objective had been achieved. Rexi, the department's most popular deputy, was off-duty and ready for some downtime with his favorite toy—a black rubber Kong.

Intensely personable, Rexi is also an intimidating presence on Gloucester's law enforcement roster. A three-year veteran of the war in Afghanistan, this five-year-old sable German shepherd was selected over dozens of dogs as the department's most recent K9. Rexi's handler, Master Deputy Philip Lutz, couldn't be happier with the selection.

Gloucester County's K9 initiative came after a two-year

effort by Sheriff Warren, Captain David Shield, their grant writer, and Rexi's intended handler, Sergeant Brad Simmons, to secure a grant to finance the acquisition. As the need for K9 services has increased in the county, the department needed a dog with multiple skills—tracking, evidence recovery, narcotics detection, and bite work. It takes a highly intelligent and motivated dog to master all these skills and, in this regard, Rexi scores high marks.

"I was here several years ago when we had a K9 and he was a great resource until he was retired, so when I took office in 2012 I certainly had that goal in mind," Sheriff Warren explains. "I was watching a television show about K9 drug interdictions and knew that for our department to purchase a dog with those skillsets would cost us upwards of \$15,000. I also knew that to train a dog from the ground up would take us months, if not years. The program highlighted a company called K9s4Cops, a non-profit organization who was evaluating dogs to purchase for law enforcement agencies and paid for through a grant process."

Warren researched K9s4Cops and felt they were the perfect





Richmond County Sheriff's Office K9 unit. L to R: Deputy Vernon Baylor with Butters, a bloodhound; Sheriff Steve Smith; Deputy Nick Goodwin with Drago, a Belgian Melinois. Photo courtesy Harold Weissler.

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venue. He turned to Simmons, who has extensive military and law enforcement canine-handling experience; a necessity since the grant specified that the dog had to be turned over to a trained handler.

Based upon need, K9s4Cops not only supplies a start-up dog but continues to sustain a department's needs. As dogs are retired, injured, or killed in the line of duty, new dogs take their place, keeping the pipeline of existing customers filled ahead of those awaiting their first dog. Finally the call came and Simmons spent weeks in Alabama, training with and evaluating the available dogs before selecting Rexi.

"Rexi is certified as a police utility dog by the North American Police Working Dog Association, Simmons explains, "and is trained to do narcotics detection: heroin, marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamines. He tracks both air and ground scents, conducts area and building searches, article recovery, and is trained in apprehension and recall. He must not only be trained to bite and hold, but must respond to his handler's command to recall."

Rexi was selected because he was both social and had a strong nose for narcotics. Simmons has worked with a lot of dogs and acknowledges Rexi is the best dog he's ever encountered for nose skills. Now paired with Master Deputy Lutz, Rexi continues to excite and spoil his handler with his high energy, strong personality, and outstanding abilities. Whether searching a premise or a vehicle, Rexi is never wrong.

"We are all spoiled by his work ethic and capabilities," says Sheriff Warren proudly. "He's a win-win for everyone."

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RICHMOND COUNTY

At the end of a leash, Butters immediately buries her nose in the tall grass, searching, seeking; the perfect olfactory sleuth. Often called a nose with a dog attached, this young female bloodhound and her handler, Richmond County Deputy Vernon Baylor, have proven invaluable tracking down missing people.

With single-minded purpose, Butters' 230 million scent receptors create an odor image enabling her to locate a subject's trail; a chemical cocktail of skin cells, breath, and sweat. Her long, drooping ears drag the ground, collecting odors and sweeping them towards her nostrils. Unlike the stereotypical Hollywood version of a pack of baying bloodhounds hot on the trail, police tracking dogs are silent, communicating instead by body language.

Former Richmond County Sheriff Douglas Bryant saw the need for a K9 unit, and when Vernon Baylor, an experienced K-9 instructor, retired from the Virginia Department of Corrections in 2012, the department immediately hired him. The county's K9 program became a community effort. Working with the county Board of Supervisors, the Rotary, and Ruritans, funds were raised to purchase a bloodhound and provide Bryant with the certification training needed to launch the program.

Paired with Butters, both went through a grueling twelve week training and evaluation course and have since formed a strong bond. They pair has been called out on numerous occasions to search for Alzheimer patients who have wandered away from home. Butters has also tracked breaking and entry suspects. When other locales have requested assistance, they are eager to comply.

Steve Smith, the county's current Sheriff, quickly recognized the value of his K9 program and has since acquired Drago, a three-year-old Belgian Melinois, who was purchased from the DOC as a drug dog.

Belgian Melinois are agile, swift, athletic dogs often described as the



Butters on a scent. Photo courtesy Harold Weissler.



Drago in his patrol car. Photo courtesy Harold Weissler.





CPO and K-9 Officer Frank Spuchesi and Comet. Photo courtesy of VDGIF.

Porsches of the police dog world. Drago literally vibrates with energy. Teamed with Deputy Sheriff Nick Goodwin five months ago, the pair will begin drug interdiction once Goodwin and Drago are certified together this spring.

Drago announced his presence vocally as we approached his patrol car. "He's not at all aggressive," Goodwin pointed out. "This is his way of demanding attention. We didn't want an aggressive dog because we deal so much with the public, particularly school children." Drago will be used for narcotics interdiction—random school inspections, traffic stops, and suspected property searches.

"Our K9 program is supported through our county budgets and generous donations from throughout the county. We are very fortunate in that respect," Smith acknowledges. "We are blessed in Richmond County."

After a hard day's work, a packet of food is Butters' favorite reward; for Drago a wadded up towel. It's all about pleasing their handlers.

#### VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF GAME & INLAND FISHERIES

The small, single shot pistol lay hidden in the grass of our two-acre orchard. Comet, a collie/lab mix, is released from her carrier and instructed to seek. A few passes back and forth across the orchard, an alert and sit, signals her handler, Conservation Police Officer Frank Spuchesi, that she has recovered evidence. "It doesn't usually take her this long," Spuchesi says modestly. For a tiny pistol in unfamiliar terrain, it was an impressive demonstration.

Comet and CPO Spuchesi are part of the VDGIF canine taskforce, begun in 2011, and charged with enforcing the laws governing the state's fish and wildlife resources.

"I was trained at the Lynchburg Police Academy and certified through the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services," says Spuchesi. "Now VDGIF has its own training academy and teaches from the perspective of a woods cop and less a street cop. Where we differ from other state agencies is our focus on hunting, boating, and fishing."

VDGIF K9s are chosen for their affability. They are primarily sporting dogs, who take naturally to the woods,

fields, and waterways. Because they interact with the public on a regular basis, people-friendly dogs are a plus. Comet, a rescue dog, was selected for her strong play drive.

After an intensive ten-week training course, Comet and Spuchesi were qualified to begin work. The team is the sole K9 unit for region 1; a massive territory that covers Virginia counties east of I-95, including the Eastern Shore. The team logs several hundred miles a week, responding to a variety of incidences—trespassing, spotlighting game, hunting out of season, illegal weapons, and exceeding quotas.

On call 24/7, Spuchesi and Comet often work holidays, weekends, and nights when most hunters and fishermen take to the woods. Comet is trained in tracking, search/rescue, article and evidence recovery, and wildlife detection. She is specifically trained for deer, turkey, duck, and striped bass.

"In one case a hunter had mounted a trail cam and baited a deer stand with corn, which is illegal. Comet led me right to a baited deer stand and the hunter was cited," says Spuchesi proudly. What could have required hours of searching on foot took just minutes.

The greatest challenge is arriving at an unknown location and trying not to have tunnel vision and just let Comet do her job. Shotgun shells leave a debris field—shell casings, wadding, and pellets. A hunter may claim he shot in one direction only to have the evidence point in another. Comet's nose knows.

"During one muzzle loader season, a game warden called and reported someone trespassing on private property

with a high power rifle, which is an illegal hunting weapon in Virginia. Later, the hunter was spotted walking down the road without a weapon, so we were called in. It was dark by the time we arrived and I was stumbling around in unfamiliar woods. I could tell Comet was on to something by the bobbing of her reflective collar. I was about to give up when she alerted by smacking a pile of leaves. I couldn't see a thing, but she persisted. Sure enough, the hunter had hidden the rifle under piles of leaves."

These dogs and their handlers are having a positive impact in preventing and detecting crimes and violations, finding lost citizens, and representing their counties in the most positive ways. Donations are welcomed; a wagging tail is your reward. 

