The popular pastime of hunting for shed deer antlers takes a leap forward as trained dogs join the search party.

The Dog Shed

Story By Janee Cheek
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There are changes going on around us this time each year. Spring has not yet sprung, but it's near. Sap is rising in trees. That big buck you watched and longed for last season looks a bit different now. His massive rack—his claim to fame—is gone.

One by one, antlers have fallen by the wayside and lie in some fencerow, creek bed, or—the farmer's scourge—in the middle of a dormant field, ready to puncture expensive tractor tires.

Hunting for those cast-off sheds can be a great late-winter hobby, albeit a challenging one. Finding dropped antlers is rarely easy. The sought-after sheds seem to be everywhere you're not. Finding morels is easy compared with this prize. And, like morels, some people enjoy all of the luck.

West Frankfort antler hunters George Gass and Dallas Rumsey with Ace, a 2-year-old lab trained to sniff out shed deer antlers.

I'm not one of those lucky people.

Gracie, my black-and-tan coonhound, seems to have no problem locating them. She apparently sees antlers as a trophy to be carried home and does exactly that, dropping them in the driveway, yard or

Finding antlers in overgrown fields can be challenging without the trained nose of a good dog.

pasture for all to admire. I put them in the bird feeders, out of her reach.

With her natural ability, Gracie has the talent to be a deer-shed dog, a canine training specialty few people realize exists.

I've only recently discovered this hidden society—-dog trainers who train a dog to find and retrieve deer sheds. Up in Wisconsin, dog trainer Jerry Carlson has been training dogs for the past 50 years, and now trains antler hunters.

"Think about it," Carlson said. "No gun to carry, no license to buy and (it's) open season all year long. You get out into the woods, and it's good exercise for you and your dog."

The idea of training a dog to find specific items isn't new. Dogs are trained to find drugs, sniff out bombs, recover disaster victims or help track fugitives. It's not a giant leap to imagine training a dog for antlers.

How long does it take to train a dog? Carlson said it depends on the age. He started a year-old dog and it was working successfully in a mere six weeks. A 4-month-old pup took three months to train.

"Pups take a little longer to train because they have a shorter attention span," Carlson said. "I believe that any dog can be trained, and I actually prefer to train mixed breeds. But you have to keep in mind that older dogs might not have the stamina required for the job."

You also have to have some shed antlers so the dog can associate the word with the item.

Carlson recommends working with your dog about 20 minutes a day. Anyone who has trained a dog, even a house pet, knows the basic steps, and this begins with a special command word. This can be anything you want: bone, hunt, deer, fetch, etc. It'll become the word the dog learns to associate with the act you want it to perform.

The payoff for the dog is a reward, and unlike humans, praise and a pat on the back usually suffice.

Start your training in a small area, like your back yard. Scatter the sheds around the yard, and turn the dog loose. It will go to the sheds because they are something new and this will register the smell. This is the time to introduce the command word—before and during the dog's initial contact.

The next step is to get the dog to bring its new-found treasure to you. This can be the most frustrating part of the training process.

One sniff from a training antler is all it takes to remind a dog of its assignment outdoors.

Always obtain landowner permission before entering property for any reason.

For tips on training dogs to retrieve shed antlers, visit www.deersheddog.com.

As the dog progresses, widen your training area. Carlson likes to use six sheds when training in an open field, scattering them around for a natural trial hunt. One warning is necessary here: Antlers might be claimed by foxes or coyotes if sheds are left out in the trial area for an extended period of time as they make great chew toys for their pups.

Once the trainer and the dog are comfortable with the routine, it's time to give it a real test in the open woods. Carlson does some homework ahead of time, and begins by working along the trails and searching staging and bedding areas where shed antlers are more likely to be found.

The optimum weather is 32 degrees or above. Colder weather makes the scent area smaller and antlers harder to find.

Distractions are another thing you will have to deal with. An alarmed squirrel or bedded deer will be far more appealing than a dormant antler. This is to be expected, but you should be able to call off a well-trained dog and get it back to the task at hand by using the command word.

Carlson said you will know the dog is working when it is moving slowly with its nose to the ground. He has had days when his dog found eight to 10 shed antlers and days when they came up empty handed.

There's always more to training a dog than can be described in one article. These are just the basics. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get some sheds out of the bird feeder. Happy hunting.

Janee Cheek is a freelance writer residing in Macedonia in Hamilton County. She spends her free time outdoors, hunting wildlife with either a shotgun or camera and enjoying the spirit of the chase regardless of the instrument used.

Is it legal to collect shed antlers on state-owned land?

No. Section 6 of the State Parks Act (20 ILCS 835/6) prohibits the taking or removing of any natural object in any state park. While there are exceptions for hunting and fishing programs and for fossil collection (in designated areas by permit only), there is no exception to the law when it involves shed antlers in any state park. In state fish and wildlife areas, conservation areas, recreation areas, pheasant habitat areas and state forests it is unlawful to remove any animal or part thereof, except as otherwise provided by permit, law, regulation or by Department program activity under the direct supervision of an authorized employee.