

Shed Hunting Dogs

Text and Photos by Eric Fowler



For eons, man has been finding ways to put that cold wet thing on the end of his best friend's face to work. He uses dogs and their amazing noses to hunt and track game, for search and rescue, and to sniff out drugs, bombs – even bedbugs in homes and invasive quagga mussels on boats. Now hunters have found yet another way to utilize Fido's powerful sense of smell: finding shed antlers.

Don Leeding of Doniphan and his two-year-old black Lab Jackie are part of that new segment of a hobby that

was already experiencing significant popularity growth among hunters wanting to see what bucks made it through the season, artists who turn antlers into lamps or other items, and families who treat it like a big Easter egg hunt.

Leeding has only been shed hunting for five years, but has hunted waterfowl and upland game with Labrador retrievers for most of his life. He likes to take his dogs for walks in the woods in the off-season, but he'd never thought about teaching his dogs to find sheds

until he saw a television feature on Roger Sigler, a Smithville, Mo., dog trainer who was doing just that. When he got Jackie, he decided to give Sigler a call and before he knew it the dog was in Missouri enrolled in his Antler Dog training program.

Jackie was a natural and "she just keeps getting better each time she goes out," said Leeding, whose new hobby has gone from hunts in the woods and fields along the Platte River to trips to other states. "We walk the deer trails and stuff like that because that's normally where they're going to be, but if we find one drop on the trail, she might find the match [in thicker cover] when we're out scrounging around."

While sheds are sometimes easy to spot in the winter deer woods, bucks don't always cooperate and drop them there. They may shed in cornfields, where everything looks like an antler, or waist-high CRP or a cedar thicket, where they become the proverbial needle in a haystack. That's where a dog's nose comes in handy.

For scenting dogs, size is everything. Not the size of the dog, but the size of its nose, which is lined with millions of scent receptor cells. Bloodhounds are the champ, with about 300 million cells, but the much smaller beagle also has a big nose, with 225 million scent receptor cells. The human nose, by comparison, has just five million.

Sigler has trained dogs professionally for more than 40 years, teaching sporting dogs to hunt and German shepherds to bite or find drugs or bombs. He has found Labradors to be the best breed for shed hunting, but says others might be trainable, especially retrievers. Not every Lab, however, will be good at shed hunting, Sigler said, just like not every person is good at math. "It's harder to get an antler dog than a drug dog," he said. "[Drug dogs] all work in a controlled environment."

Sigler practices the science of participative training, the basics of which are traced to Pavlov and his

dogs. He uses only positive reinforcement: no force fetch training, choke chains or shock collars.

"If you've got the right dog," said Sigler, "then it's simply a matter of using that dog's natural talents to perform the behaviors that you want it to do, whether you're training bomb dogs, drug dogs, search and rescue dogs, or antler dogs. A bomb dog or drug dog doesn't go looking for bombs or drugs until they're taught what it is they're looking for. With antler dogs, you are doing exactly the same thing – you're taking their natural prey drive, their desire for that antler, and you're creating a series of games which allows the dog to go out and hunt all day long for that antler just exactly the same way bomb dogs and drug dogs do."

Those games start when the dog is a puppy, fetching a ball impaled with a small piece of antler. The dogs are soon retrieving antlers, and by the time they are five to nine months old, they are hunting for and retrieving antlers hidden in the grass or woods. From there, they are ready for real shed hunts in the deer woods.

Sigler said some dogs are naturally better at some things than others, so he focuses the training on where it is needed most. A common problem is a dog hunting for the trainer's scent rather than the antler's. "In that case, you have to work on scent discrimination, teaching the dog exactly what he's looking for," he said. "You have to continually use different antlers. If you use one antler and that's what you train on, that dog will look for that one and walk right past another."

Washing the antlers and using rubber gloves when hiding them, or even having someone else hide them, may be required in this process.

Dogs can be cross trained to hunt birds and sheds, Sigler said. "These dogs are really intuitive," he said. "It's the commands you set up, much like when I'm training bite dogs – there's a certain command I can give and that dog's going to bite you."

He prefers completing the shed hunting training before moving on to birds, but even then, if pheasants are around, a dog is likely to choose those over antlers. "They have more value," Sigler said. That's why beagles, while they have great noses, don't make good shed dogs – there are too many rabbit tracks in the deer woods.

The right dog, with the right training, however, will hunt all day for a shed, ignoring everything else. In his sport show seminars, Sigler will send his Lab after an antler he's hidden in the arena, some big enough to hold 80,000 people. "The only thing she can think about is finding that antler," he said. "She goes between people's legs and up over counters and whatever she's got to do to get to it."

When he started training dogs to find sheds, Sigler thought a dog might be able to double a handler's haul. "But they find five to your one," said Sigler, who takes shed hunting to a new level by traveling to Canada almost every spring to hunt sheds in areas where hundreds of deer yard up in the winter. One day last spring, one of his dogs found 27 of the 35 sheds they picked up.

Like most shed hunters, the hunt is what attracts Leeding, especially the hunt for big antlers. "You can really get hooked on that stuff," he said, but Leeding also enjoys the exercise, being outside, and watching his dogs work. His other Labs, six-year-old Kate and four-year-old Billie, have even learned a trick or two from Jackie, and will now find sheds on their own, although Kate refuses to retrieve them.

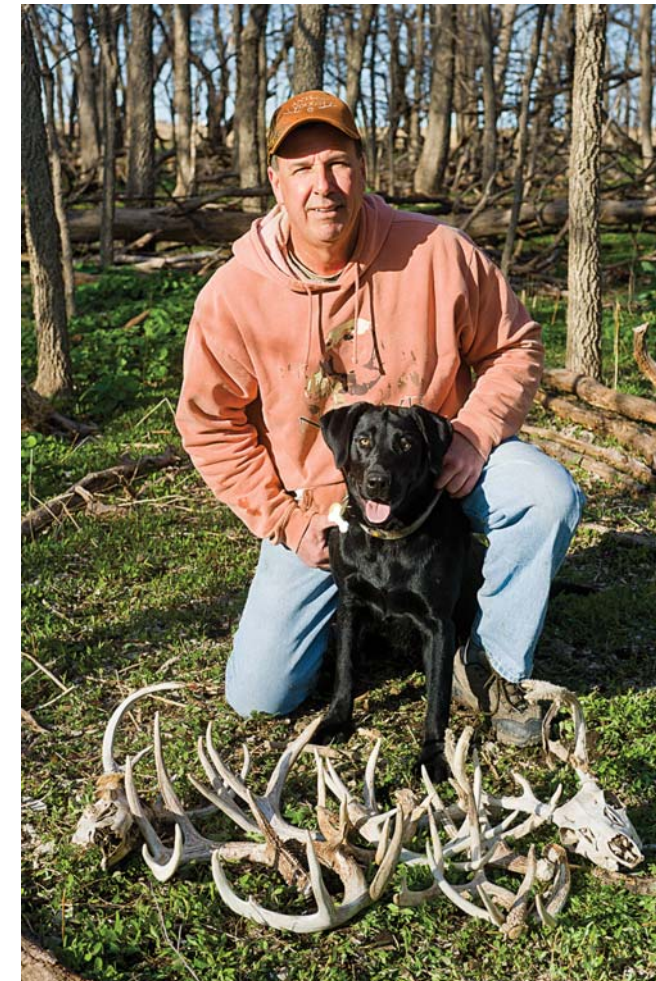
While some shed hunters are in it for the money that can come with finding a matched set from a trophy buck, Leeding just keeps his sheds, some of which serve as chew toys for the dogs in the house. "I even tell landowners that if I find one and it's quite nice, I'll bring it back to them," he said. "I'm still looking at it as getting more antlers in front of

Jackie."

Shed hunting season is short, starting when bucks drop in January and ending when farmers begin working their fields, spring growth starts concealing the sheds, or nature washes enough of the scent away that even dogs have a hard time finding them. So Leeding plants antlers in the woods year-round for his dogs to find on their walks. "It's still a game," he said. "They still like going out and finding them."

And they can be very good at it. "If you've got a dog, try it," Sigler said. "When they're right, they're extraordinary." ■

For more on training dogs to hunt sheds, visit Roger Sigler's web site at AntlerDogs.com. You might also want to check out ShedDogTrainer.com or ShedAntlers.org.



(Left) Don Leeding's black Lab, Jackie, retrieves a shed antler in a Platte River Valley woodland. (Above) Leeding and Jackie with the sheds and skulls they found in 2011.