

Arno's First Bear
By Andy Bensing

Monday morning I was driving north out of PA anxious for a week of bloodtracking in NY. I had just called the Deer Search dispatcher to let her know I would be available all week to take calls and within 5 minutes I got a call back from the dispatcher that a hunter needed help in locating a bear he had shot on Saturday with a bow. Wow! What a start to a week of tracking. I called the hunter, got the details, and arranged to meet him. Arno and I had never had a tracking call for a bear before. Although, last year Arno did have an opportunity to do a short hundred yard training line on a bear that had been shot and already located. The hunter reported this bear had been arrowed most likely in the liver on Saturday just before dark. The hunter and six helpers had tracked the bear six hundred yards on Sunday morning losing blood at a final wound bed and spent Sunday afternoon doing grid searches in a hemlock swamp where the trail was lost.

By the time Arno and I got the call we were forty five hours behind the bear. I started Arno at the original hit site and allowed him to work the first six hundred yards of the track that the hunter had already done. Working the first part of the line was not only necessary for Arno to lock into the correct bear, but it was a great training experience also. The hunter had well marked the blood trail the day before so allowing my dog to work out the one small loop and a backtrack and locate the 3 wound beds that the hunter had already figured out the day before was really beneficial to Arno's development as a blood tracking dog.

The point of loss was a large wound bed and from there we found no more blood. From the point of loss the rest of the track was mostly in a hemlock swamp. Being from Southeast PA, this terrain was new to me and it sure gave me an education fast. I found out quickly that you basically couldn't trust anywhere you put your feet. The water sucked you in and the nice, firm looking, clumps of moss were really roots and dead branches covered in moss that gave way under foot on a whim. At one point, shortly after the point of loss, Arno began to climb over this large mound of moss. The mound was about ten feet wide, 8 feet wide and 30 feet long. I thought it was a big rock. Surprise! As I was about half way up the first side, it broke through and I dropped down to water. It wasn't a rock, but a huge root ball from an uprooted tree covered in moss. Arno was already over the top and on the other side so I had the hunter hold the leash while I climbed out of the hole I was in and walked around the mound to grab the leash on the other side to continue. That is where things started to get scary. It took about a minute to get out of the hole and go around the mound. When I got there I could see the tracking line but not my dog. I followed the still, taught line and it dropped down into a one foot wide black hole. I jiggled the line to see where Arno was. I heard water slosh, felt dead wait, but no response from Arno. I began to panic. I jiggled it again, NOTHING. OH MY GOD! I yelled out, "I think my dog drowned!" I quickly pulled the line out of the hole feeling the gut wrenching, wet, dead weight on the end. What do I see but a soaking wet, except for his head, wire hair dachshund hanging from the leash oblivious to the terror I was experiencing. He had fallen or jumped into the hole for sure and was stuck there since the hunter was holding the end of the leash and he was just

waiting for me to let him continue. I sat him down on the ground and he continued tracking like nothing had even happened. It took me ten minutes to get my knees and stomach back!

With no visible sign from the wound bed at the point of loss, all I could do was trust my dog and watch for sign. Arno stopped at one point on a clump of moss and showed great interest in a specific spot on the ground. I told the hunter to examine the area closely and low and behold he found a yellowish-green-brown smear on it. Neither he nor I could readily identify the smear at the time but the hunter found a second similar smear following close behind me about 15 minutes later. When we would finally find the bear, we would find this smeared substance all over the bear's liver when we gutted him.

From the point of loss, Arno tracked the bear 600 more yards over a course that included another large loop that crossed itself and another backtrack. The total route the bear traveled, confirmed by GPS and sign was 1200 yards. There were two circles, and two backtracks. In all this circling and looping the dead bear lay only 200 yards from the original hit site and only 50 yards from the point of loss. It had taken us about 1¼ hours to find the bear from the point of loss. When Arno got to the bear; he gave it a couple of sniffs and started tugging. I can't tell you who was prouder, the hunter, Arno, or me. The bear was only about 100 pounds but the whole experience was huge to Arno and me. We will never forget it.