

NEK-9 SAR Wilderness Certification Testing Standards March 2009 Update

Although N.E. K-9 SAR is a volunteer organization, the nature of our work requires a professional level of performance. To this end, N.E. K-9 SAR places great emphasis on rigorous training and testing.

N.E. K-9 SAR may accept for training status some applicants who possess both outdoor skills (hiking; backpacking; orienteering) and some experience with dogs. If the trainee already owns a dog that they wish to train for search work, it is expected that the dog will display enough strength in the 4 drives needed to successfully train an airscent SAR dog. They are hunt, prey, food and pack drives. A dog that is people aggressive or dog aggressive will not be accepted.

If accepted for training, the applicant will be assigned a senior certified member of the unit as a mentor. The mentor will oversee training in basic search skills and strategy. Mentoring will, except in extraordinary circumstances, last a minimum of six months, depending on the training time invested.

When deemed ready by her/his mentor a trainee must work with the other five certified members of the unit (to include 3 senior handlers). The trainee will be responsible for scheduling these training sessions with the five handlers. Before the trainee can begin the certification testing, all 5 of the certified handlers must agree that the trainee and their dog are ready.

Recognizing that the unit as a whole has an interest in insuring that all members meet consensus standards at all levels of training, consensus opinion will be the determining factor in determining the trainee's readiness for advancement in the testing process. Testing for certification is not a right of membership. It is an earned opportunity to demonstrate in-the-field search skills. The privilege of becoming a certified handler with N.E. K-9 SAR will only be offered to teams who demonstrate the specific field skills required to work with a high probability of detection in real search situations. It is assumed that any handler committed to excellence welcomes the opportunity to work extensively with and learn from the senior and certified handlers before testing.

Trainees are required to pass 4 tests (finding clues, evidence, and/or victims) in 4 terrain/cover combinations. Two of the four tests will be night problems. The following conditions are those that will be encountered on searches in New England.

- Cover: Light woods, thick woods, thick brush, trail, open
- Terrain: Swamp, flat, rolling, steep

The four field tests will be held in the following order and will be evaluated by 2 **Senior Handlers**.

- I. Night, trail search. Minimum of 1 mile in length, not to exceed 3 miles. (One victim)
- II. Day, area search of 120-160 acres. The search must take at least 3 hours; if the victim(s) is/are found in less than 3 hours then, after properly rewarding the dog, the team will continue searching until 3 hours have passed. (0-2 victims)
- III. Night, area search 60-80 acres. (0-2 victims)

*Completion of these first three tests will qualify the trainee for limited use on real searches at the **discretion** of the Operational Leader for N.E. K-9 SAR.*

- IV. Day, two-area search (each area between 40-60 acres). The trainee will have two areas to search with the possibility of 0-2 victims (total between the two areas). The trainee handler must assign POD's to both areas searched.

The two certifying members will be responsible for setting up each test. They will determine if the test has been passed. Tests will mimic actual search situations, with variations in terrain, vegetation, weather, area, size, time and presence of evidence and victims. A search scenario will be given to the trainee describing the circumstances of this mock search. The trainee will be expected to understand how to use the search scenario information in their planning. The trainee will be required to perform as though the test was an actual search, demonstrating, as needed, skills in:

Map, compass, altimeter, GPS and whistle for voice contact work; search and rescue strategy and operations; radio protocol; weather and air movement knowledge; obstacle agility; how to recognize and secure clue evidence (including identifying the presence of human track); reading the dog; and human and canine first aid.

Testing for certification requires the team to demonstrate proficiency in ground search theory and find/recall/refind success. The certification evaluation form will be used for testing. All the skills listed on this form are desirable in a competent Airscent K-9 SAR team. The evaluators for each test have the right to pass or fail a team whose performance doesn't wholly match the test criteria. An evaluating team's decision is final. At any point during a certification test the evaluators may terminate the test for failure to meet minimum dog and/or handler skills. The trainee may retake this test; however, the certifying team must demonstrate improvement in the failed skill area to at least one of the certification evaluators of the failed test before testing again. The critical skills needed for a passed test are:

1. Can plan a search pattern well.
2. Changes search plan when a change in conditions occurs.
3. Uses map, compass, altimeter, GPS and whistle properly.
4. Covers the area efficiently and effectively for the weather and terrain conditions.
5. Handler recognizes and responds appropriately to their dog's behavioral changes when encountering human scent.
6. Able to plot area covered - including behavioral changes to human scent, victim location, wind direction, etc. on map.
7. Able to assign probability of detection (POD) for area searched.
8. Dog searches willingly throughout the problem.
9. Dog has a complete recall and refind.
10. Dog and handler are an effective team demonstrating mutual respect and understanding.

Upon successful completion of the four tests, the trainee will be a fully operational "certified" member. Teams may be assigned a status of '**limited operational**' because of identified skill deficiencies or physical limitations of either dog or handler. Teams with this designation may be used at searches at the OL's discretion.

The unit may consider for membership a fully qualified dog-handler team in good standing with another reputable K-9 unit after that individual works with 5 certified members of N.E. K-9 SAR and passes tests #III & #IV of N.E. K-9 SAR's certification tests. The decision to accept the team for certification will be made by a 2/3-majority vote of the unit's certified members.

A member of N.E. K-9 SAR who has achieved certified status will, when training a new dog, be required to pass two tests (# III & #IV) in order to certify their new dog. They must still secure the approval of 5 certified handlers before starting the testing process.

Currently Certified handler Certifying with another currently NEK9 SAR certified dog:

An active, currently certified NEK9 SAR dog handler may certify with another NEK9 SAR dog handler's currently certified dog by first securing the approval of 5 certified handlers and passing the Wilderness Certification test #III (night area).

Substandard performance and recertification:

- All trainee teams will maintain an approved training log.
- All teams must be training a minimum of 4 problems between each monthly unit meeting.
- Any certified handlers who observe a trainee or certified handler not maintaining the skills needed to effectively represent N.E K-9 SAR should report those actions in writing to the president. The president, with the counsel of the executive committee and the chair of the training committee will develop a plan of training to address the deficient skills. The plan will include a timetable within which the skill deficiency must be addressed. Proof of successful return to unit standards will be demonstrated in a testing format to be outlined in the training plan.
- Any handler who does not agree that their work is substandard may ask to recertify (using test #4) within one month of being notified that their work is deemed substandard. Until successful recertification this dog handler team will be considered limited operational. If the team does not pass recertification they will be lose their operational status in N.E. K-9 SAR.

Before any trainees can be considered for certification:

- Before the trainee can begin the certification testing, they will meet and train with 5 certified handlers (to include 3 senior handlers) in monthly training or at other training times and all 5 of the certified handlers must agree that the trainee and their dog are ready to begin certification.
- The trainee must demonstrate to the NEK9 OL and the Training Committee Chair that their dog will alert on large sources of human remains above ground.
- If a trainee (having passed 3 tests) makes a find on a search their find will be reviewed by the senior handlers to determine if it can be substituted for the remaining certification test.

Before field test certification can begin the trainee must complete assessments that demonstrate their understanding of:

1. Weather/wind as it affects SAR
2. Map/compass, GPS, altimeter
3. Radio skills and protocol
4. Crime scene preservation

Definitions:

The certified airscent SAR dog will do each of the following:

ALERT= clear demonstration by the dog that it has encountered human scent and strong attempt by the dog to find the source of that scent;

RECALL* = dog's return to handler & it's clear communication to handler that victim has been found;

REFIND = dog takes the handler directly to this found victim.

***Recall:** The communication method to the handler by the dog that it has found the victim is a training decision made by each team. Whether a handler chooses an obedience action by the dog (pulling on a ball carried by the handler) or whether the handler encourages the dog to consistently perform naturally occurring behaviors such as picking up a stick or whether the handler asks the dog after eye contact "Do you have him? Show me!" is a training choice based on the style of searching of each team. The success of any team's **recall / refind method** is result based: does the handler know when the dog has made the find and does the dog take the handler to the victim?

Certified Handler: any handler who has successfully completed the four certification tests.

Senior Handler: Must have been certified for 2 years and participated in a minimum of 20 searches.