



## ICAR 2025 Jackson Hole Subcommission Dog Handlers (SDH)



Written by Louise Burgoyne (SARDA Ireland) for Kate Hunter  
[louise.nicola@gmail.com](mailto:louise.nicola@gmail.com)

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## 1. Conference Practical Day Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2025

**Jackson Hole Resort:** Delegates travelled by bus to the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort (JHMR). JHMR is a ski resort in the Teton Range of the Rocky Mountains, located in Teton County, twelve miles (20 km) northwest of Jackson and due south of Grand Teton National Park. In the summer, the resort offers numerous activities such as mountain biking, hiking, paragliding, bungee trampoline, ropes course, rock climbing, and the Via ferrata in Casper bowl at the top of the Bridger gondola<sup>1</sup>.



Figure 1: From left to right Seán Tolan & Gerry Tobin (SARDA Ireland), Arva & John Reller (Summit County Colorado)

We were based near the gondola station in open country areas where we viewed avalanche dog teams from local groups including Jackson Hole Ski Patrol, Grand Targhee, Teton County Search and Rescue and Summit County Colorado. Dogs breeds included Working-Line Golden Retrievers, Labradors, Dutch Shepherd, Collie and Crossbreeds. In the heat of the morning, teams worked in shorts areas. Some of us participated as 'quarry' and had opportunity to see first-hand how the dogs worked and engaged in enthusiastic play at our quarry location. Lunch was held at the top of the mountain after a 10 minute gondola ride. Here we had opportunity to view the Teton County Search and Rescue Heli and team lift a casualty from a cliff side. in the afternoon the dog area was moved and extended to include a longer search. Discussion ensued on find sequences and how different teams work in different types of

terrain. Dog teams were shuttled to the top of the area so they could work back down towards base using the wind, offering us a really good vantage point.

## 2. Conference Day 1 Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2025

### 2.1: Welcome & Report on ICAR Dog Subcommittee Workshop 2024-2025

Marcel Meier welcomed all Dog Commission delegates and we introduced ourselves. Each delegate gave their name, team, length of time as a dog handler and breed/s of dog worked with. New ICAR attendees and regular delegates were present. Marcel briefed the delegates on the Dog Handler Subcommittee Workshop from 2nd to 6th of April 2025<sup>2</sup> which was held at Serre Chevalier Briancon. It was good to discover how the 20 handlers and dogs from different countries train and work. Meeting in the 'field' is very useful. On another matter, it will be very useful to have national statistics from

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackson\\_Hole\\_Mountain\\_Resort](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackson_Hole_Mountain_Resort)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.alpine-rescue.org/articles/1510--minutes-from-the-dog-handler-subcommissions-workshop-from-2nd-to-6th-of-april-2025>

ICAR Dog Subcommittee Members and Knut will collect these data for the full membership. Please send your data to Knut using the email on Figure 2.



Figure 2: Email Address for Data Gathering

## 2.2: Board Activities

Marcel briefed delegates on ICAR Board meetings and topics discussed. In summary there were five virtual meetings and the topics included the following items: new members, conflicts of interest, member survey, partner relations, strategic plans and general operations. There were three meetings of the Technical Commission where items such as the Jackson Hole Programme, Presidents job description, the interdisciplinary drone workshop, the

Budget Technical Committee 2026 and organisation of future Practical Days were deliberated.

**Action:** Minutes of the Thessaloniki 2024 Conference: Dog Subcommittee were approved.

**Action:** Marcel asked for a volunteer to compile the 2025 Dog Subcommittee Minutes. Louise Burgoyne (author of this document) offered to take the Minutes for this year as Kate Hunter who usually compiles this document was not in a position to attend ICAR 2025.

## 2.3: Future Goals

Goals for the future include a potential workshop on wilderness (air scenting and trailing) search dogs and another workshop on cadaver dog training and searching. Two countries have proposed a workshop for 2026 and these are a) Czech Republic and b) Romania. Marcel showed a brief presentation from Romania. More information will be requested about the proposed workshop in Czechia.

**Action:** Marcel will organize distribution of a survey to members in mid-November to decide which country will host the 2026 workshop.

## 2.4: Internal Topics: Avalanches, Accidents and Managing Risks.

- In the South Pyrenees where people collect mushrooms a dog team were tasked to search for a missing person. Working into the scent cone the search dog went over a cliff and perished.
- In Canada a dog also went over a cliff whilst searching.
- In Canada there was a snowmobile buried. All persons had transceivers but rescuers could not locate them. The avalanche dog indicated very quickly. It turned out that the people had not done a function check on the transceivers.
- In another incident the avalanche dog dug a foot from one of the skiers skis. Was this a dog find?
- In a snowmobile incident a gas tank ruptured. Although the dog indicated, does this kind of incident interfere with scenting ability?



- It was agreed that although the dogs sneeze a bit, they are still able to perform their work.
- In an aviation accident including a fuel spill, the search dogs still indicated on the two deceased humans and their dogs.
- What about risk assessment? In Ireland there was a missing person who was armed but the local police did an assessment and decided that the situation was low risk, thus the dog teams could proceed.
- In another tragedy, 19 people lost their lives when a whole village was wiped out. The dog teams found five of the people in very risky conditions.
- In Austria a young person went missing and the dog handlers searched for seven hours before the stand down. Back at the cars, one of the dogs ran into a scent cone finding the missing person sleeping in the hotel lobby.
- Around 6 months ago in Switzerland there was a despondent missing person. The trailing dog gave the direction of travel. Then there was 30-40cms of snow falling on the mountain. The teams did not have skis, just boots so they went back to base. 48 hours later the Heli was deployed. The missing person was found maybe 100 meters in front of where the dog teams and rescuers had been.

## 2.5: Avalanche Accident Zermatt: Imboden Philippe KWRO

Philippe briefed the group on procedures taken during a big avalanche where 10-12 people were buried. The First Response team included two dog teams and two rescue specialists as is always the case. During the course of the rescue there were 4 Heli's, 11 dog teams and around 65 rescuers in total. Despite many crevasses, all casualties survived and all had transceivers. However, the biggest



issue with this search operation was that there was no firm Incident Command in place and the communications were challenging as a result. All those involved survived the great disaster. This is almost a miracle!

Philippe went on to show the delegates a video of an avalanche dog being rescued. This dog had gone missing in a deep crevasse. He had disappeared from Ski Patrol but found and rescued 12 hours later.

Figure 3: Avalanche Accident Zermatt

## 2.6: Missing Man in Austria: Reinhardt Hirschmuggl.

Reinhardt presented a case in which a young person had gone missing in Bavaria. Reinhardt with his colleague and search dog formed part of the wider search team. Items belonging to the missing man were found on high ground (cliff like) over forestry and lowland but no sign of the missing person. To

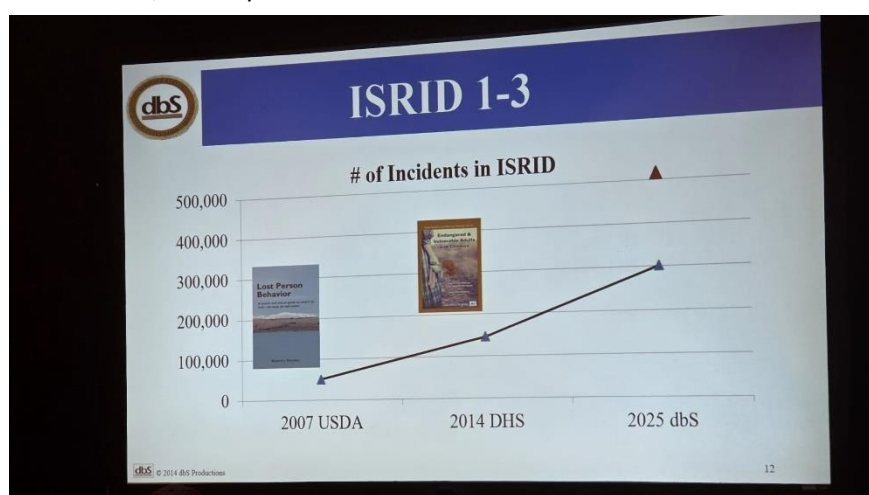
determine the trajectory of a possible fall, Reinhardt and colleague threw a ball from the height to check the lie of the land below. Then they searched left and right with their dog around where the ball had landed, making a find on the missing person.

## 2.7 Workshop: Impact of Global Warming on Search Operations

Marcel briefed delegates on how the discussion on the impact of global warming on search operations and dog handlers would proceed. We were divided into five groups looking at SAR operations in the first instance and this expanded into how dog handlers manage in such situations. Results of these discussions are in Section 2.14 and include the topics of extreme heat, flooding, sinkholes, permafrost, landslides and rockfalls. Is there a need for Disaster Training for SAR Teams? Also do we need more public education given that some areas which were traditionally safe for recreation have now become somewhat hazardous or even downright dangerous.

## 2.8: Lost Person Behavior – Update Dr Robert J. Koester

Delegates from the Dog Handler Sub-Commission attended the ICAR Terrestrial Commission Plenary by Dr Robert Koester for updates on Lost Person Behaviour. Robert is a world renowned lost person behaviorist, developer of the International Search and Rescue Incident Database (ISRID) and author of



'Lost Person Behavior'. Robert gave updates on ISRID 3.0 which includes new subject categories and discussed many topics including 'Scenario Lock' – a condition in which a search planner settles on one scenario (often the most likely) but does not consider scenarios or new information.

Figure 4: Dr Robert J Koester - Lost Person Behaviour

## 2.9: Avalanche search with five dogs: Fabrice Huot, Police Grenoble

Fabrice Huot from the Grenoble Police presented on an avalanche search. This was a situation in which the snow had melted and made an ice cocoon around the missing person and this may have interfered with the search. The discussion centred on how scent transfers in the snow and how quickly it dissipates. Of course, we can use periods of coarse search and then focus on fine searches. In France fine searches were not used before, but after finding out more about the technique they are now being used. Are there particular methods that work better in higher terrain avalanches compared to lower terrain?

## 2.10: 'As if the earth had swallowed him': Dr. Thóra J. Jónasdóttir Head of Dog Division, CE-SAR

Thóra presented on a situation in which a highly considered risk analysis was required by ICE-SAR and local authorities. This search was focused by a house located in a crevasse area after a person suddenly disappeared. There had also been a lot of volcanic activity locally. A deep crevasse had opened by the

house and after careful consideration, the decision was made that Thóra and her search dog would investigate. Although the missing persons body was not found, Thóra's dog and another search dog did indicate in a particular place. The risk as deemed too great to continue. Questions: When do we go or not go? When is a good time to stop? What is an acceptable risk and how can we calculate these?

## 2.11: Dog Finds in Utah: Greg Miller Wasatch Backcountry Rescue (WBR)

Note: This talk replaces the original talk scheduled for WBR. Greg presented a description of four

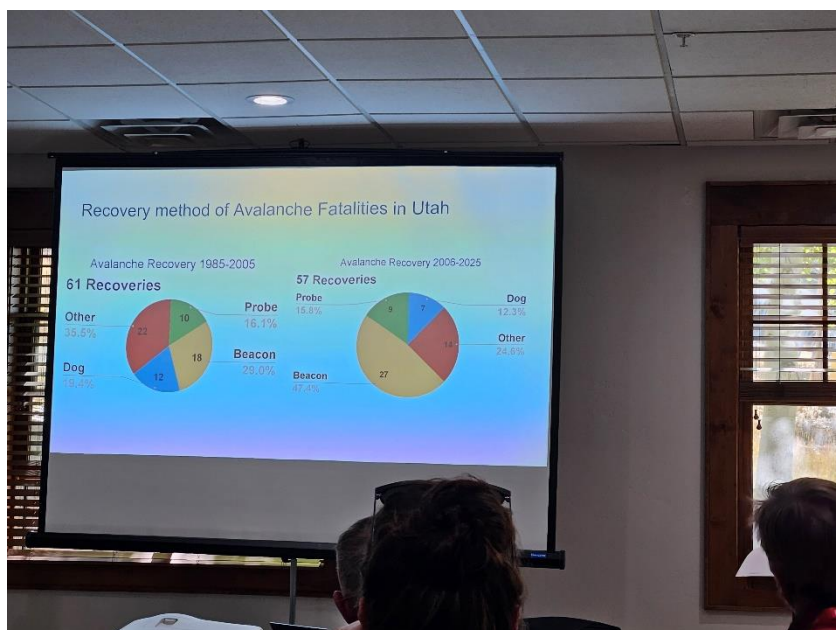


Figure 5: Avalanche Searches in Utah

avalanche searches in UTAH were dog teams were deployed. Each of these searches resulted in a dog find. Greg showcased statistics from his work in UTAH which show that recoveries made using dogs have changed very little in the past 40 years despite similar rates of missing people, a rise in the use of other technologies and advances in how those technologies are applied.

## 2.12: Accident Pfäfers Collaboration between Canyoning and Dog: Meier Marcel / ARS Switzerland

Marcel presented the case of a missing person with suicidal intentions in Tamina Gorge. An abandoned car was found on the Tamina Bridge with the engine still running. The ARS with two dog handlers were asked to assist the search over extremely difficult terrain. This was at night around the fall area and riverbank. One of the dogs indicated from the riverbank but this indication was not followed through by the handlers. And this was where the missing person was located thereafter in daylight. We have to be able to trust our dogs. Why was this not the case? A discussion then ensued on nighttime and safety issues for teams.

## 2.13: Training for Young Dogs: Guardia Di Finanza

Here we had a presentation on how the Guardia Di Finanza train their young dogs to 'hold and bark' at their quarry/persons acting as 'body'. This then transfers to real world situations in searches for missing people. The technique is adapted from the world of *International Gebrauchshund Prüfung* commonly known as IGP Dog Sport. It is particularly useful for the more intimidating breeds like Malinois, Dutch and German Shepherds. Essentially the dogs are trained to bark at the 'missing person, refraining from getting too close. A marker word 'Ja' and then 'Pack' releases the dog back to the handler for their toy/food reward. This style of training works very well for these types of dogs.

## 2.14: Workshop: Impact of global warming on Search Operations

Each Group involved in the earlier discussion (Section 2.7) presented their findings which are summarized in the bullet points. There were many overlaps between the groups in terms of their view and opinions.

### What is happening?

- Heat and hot summers are affecting dogs with respect to the time and duration of working. Also with respect to travelling in heat.
- With regard to rocks and snow we need to take more care of the distance dogs can walk.
- There are more and more unexpected conditions and rapid dramatic changes.
- There is a lot of water which is rapidly rising in Norway and a lot of local rain e.g., one valley fills fast and the next is dry.
- Mud slides and landslides are resulting in more and more call outs and longer searches.
- Events are also bigger than they were before.
- Hot weather means that more climbers and hikers are out because of good weather.
- Flooding is becoming a big issue.
- Urban searches increasing.
- Wildlife are now closer to tracks and walkers and predators.
- Ticks are more prevalent and whereas the snow used to kill them off, they are now around throughout the year.
- A rise in humidity is changing the searching time for dogs.
- Rock falls, glacial falls are more dangerous.
- Permafrost is more present.
- Rocks are moving and sink holes appearing.
- There is more volcanic activity.
- Extreme weather with bigger storms and multiple days leading to more calls and more responses.

### What can we do?

- Let us consider what time of day we are working dogs.
- Also, what time of day are we training them.
- Keeping more dogs in rotation on searches and making sure they have sufficient rest.
- Could we consider using different assets at different times of day?
- We need to focus on rescuer safety as well as the dogs.
- New safety conditions for rescuers must be considered for these totally new experiences. We do not have the experience.
- An interdisciplinary approach is useful.
- We need to introduce 'disaster training' for rescuers.
- Public education and awareness-raising amongst the public on areas which may have been safe before but are no longer safe.
- Can we take the 60 foot view and realise what places are changing before it happens



### 3.0: Conference Day 2 Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2025



Figure 6: Terrain around Casualty Location (Daytime)

#### 3.1 A nighttime woodland search in Ireland - Lessons learned: Louise Burgoyne, Gerry Tobin, Seán Tolan, SARDA Ireland.

Louise, Gerry and Seán presented on an incident where dog teams were tasked to a late night search in woodland. Five dog teams were deployed in addition to foot searchers from the local South Eastern MR Team. One of the dogs indicated very strongly but was not able to bring the handler and navigator to the exact source of the scent. Another dog was also showing a lot of interest in the terrain below the casualty site. The search was stood down until the following day and the missing person was located in the area where the dog had indicated. Communication between Dog Handler and Search Managers at 03:00? Night-time versus day-time searches for a despondent misper? When should a stand-down be issued?

#### 3.2 Workshop: Impact of Global Warming on the training of Dog Teams

This was a general discussion chaired by Marcel. What are the main challenges and what are the various teams doing to overcome them? A summary of the discussion follows.

- North Atlantic storm activities are affecting Ireland a lot. We are not used to it. As a team we have to decide whether to go out in a 'code red' weather warning.
- Very unpredictable weather conditions
- Getting a dog 'bark fit' can be useful for hot weather or building general resilience – ask the dog to bark repeatedly, increasing the amount of barks over time. Dog gets a reward for a series of strong barks.
- WBR take turns training in different ski resorts.
- Also electrolytes for dogs can be useful.
- Train at different times of the day including nighttime training.
- In Norway there are more storms and things changing very quickly. In a call out you cannot control the weather so you have to teach the dog to work in all kinds of conditions e.g., a rescuer who had dog in a warm room to acclimatize before going to Thailand
- We need to get out in bad weather to ensure that our dogs will work effectively in these conditions.
- WBR use the Ruff Wear 'Swamp Cooler' jacket for very warm days. It is designed to hold a cool layer of water against the dogs skin.
- Honey can act as a very good electrolyte.
- You can also plan a place for the dog to rest/cool down on a search e.g., look on the map for streams etc.

- Train during uncomfortable times. Start at different times for training.
- Dog pads can be compromised in hot weather.
- Why do the dogs lift their paws in the cold – is it snow crystals? It could be because the dog takes a while to get used to the temperature on their pad. Warm paws can acclimatize to the cold weather. We can learn from Sled Dogs.
- ‘Ruffwear mushers secret’ can be useful for pads.
- Also, if you clip the hair between the pads.
- Musher boots are a better cold weather bootie than the Ruffwear boots.
- Dog can overheat – then their brains do not work as well so they do not train the sled dogs in more than 13 degrees.
- The most important thing is water
- Sled dogs make a soup which contains watery stuff with ground meat.
- You can also give dogs a small bit of food occasionally through the training
- Paws can get a bit tougher – over time – you can prepare your dog to have tougher paws.
- Sometimes our own feelings about the weather can affect our dogs
- If you are happy out in the bad weather then your dog will be too.
- Asphalt is another case of getting used to the surface. Even in hotter conditions the dogs worked fine because they were used to it.
- Often the human brain is the biggest problem.
- Dogs can adapt.
- Other people playing with your dog can be a hazard – maybe throwing stuff wrong or onto a hard surface. Even when you are not searching you are still minding/working your dog.

### 3.3 Workshop: Dealing with Natural Hazards in Summer.



Figure 7: Dog searching on the Eiger

This discussion was opened by Marcel. Delegates were asked the following question. Do we search in hazardous areas? For example, in a rock fall accident in Switzerland Marcel may arrive with his dog. In Austria the police will decide for the team. In Norway the police cannot shut any area but they do a risk assessment. In floods in Texas there was a lot of pressure to go with dogs, and a lot of different agencies making decisions which is not easy. Marcel relayed a story about searching in a Tunnel on one occasion. Dog teams are deployed to more tricky situations because one dog can do the work of a lot of human searchers. **Debriefs.** Then the discussion moved to examining the benefits of a ‘hot debrief’ after a search. In Jackson Ski Patrol there is a ‘After Action Review (AAR)’. A ‘hot debrief’ is really useful but can be challenging if the team are exhausted so then we also consider the more extended debrief. However, if we do not do a ‘hot debrief’ we

risk having issues that fester amongst team members involved. Certainly, there can be challenges with getting volunteers to meet for a debrief but it is very important. Also, in certain instances even crucial e.g., after finding a child. If the debrief does not happen then challenges that team members are experiencing can grow into something less manageable. Chris from Jackson Ski patrol then mentioned a 'hot food debrief' after an incident. Knut mentioned a 'defuse' in the 17 call out regions in Norway. Critical Incident Stress Management is offered by all teams. A 'rule of three' was mentioned for checking in with team members: three days, three weeks and three months. A question was raised as to what happens if the dogs have been into an area and the person is subsequently found by someone else? Tracy from WBR commented that the SARDA Ireland presentation (Section 3.1) will have helped to give closure and learning, especially for those involved. Reinhardt said that in Austria there is always a big debrief.

### 3.4 Dealing with serious natural hazards in winter: Marcel Meier /ARS Switzerland

Marcel presented a case involving an avalanche accident on the Eiger a 3,967-metre (13,015 ft) mountain of the Bernese Alps. Eight people were in the area when the avalanche struck, seven of



Figure 8: Search on the Eiger

whom were swept away and buried. According to current information, there was a group of two and a group of five. Both groups were on a high-altitude ski tour. All rescuers were flown to the accident site by winch including dogs. People on site: 1 ELUP, 10 RSH, 4 rescuers, 2 dog handlers) Various triages were carried out on the avalanche field. One man died at the scene. A second man was resuscitated at the scene but died shortly afterwards in hospital. Four other men and one woman were flown to hospital with injuries. Another man who was in the area but had not been caught up in the avalanche was uninjured. At the time of this accident, Swiss mountain rescue services had not yet trained dog handlers to use winches with helicopters. Since this accident and another in eastern Switzerland, a training program for working with winches has been launched. Each dog handler receives a harness from the organization

**Scene Safety.** What do different teams do with regard to scene safety, size-up' and mitigation? In WGB the first dog teams on scene also help with scene safety. This can put pressure on first responders. 'Go or no go' calls are definitely an issue with possible extra risks for dog handlers.

## 4.0: Dog Handlers Recommendations

Marcel and Knut will gather the data from ICAR 2025 and make final recommendations.

The delegates appreciated learnings around how to deal with challenges, the group discussions and examining differences and similarities between teams. It was really good to see how others work around similar challenges in different countries and different terrain. A key theme emerging from this year is to 'Trust the Dog'. This is evident from the case studies presented. In general, the delegates appreciated the relaxed atmosphere, that there is no judgement from others and that the discussions were very open, which is good for building strong working relationships.

Knut made a brief presentation on statistics gathered from some of the different countries over the course of the conference.

Action: Please can everyone send their statistics to Knut (see Figure 2 for the email address).

## 5.0: Elections

Marcel Meier is happy to stand for election to lead the Dog Handler Subcommisson for the next four years. He has submitted his motivation in writing and welcomes support from the Dog Handler Subcommission.

### 5.1: 2026 Congress in Innsbruck and Rescue Conference Iceland

Reinhardt briefed the group on the next ICAR Conference which will be held in Innsbruck Austria.

Thóra briefed the group on an upcoming Rescue Conference in Iceland in 2026.