

# Dogs with jobs

By Corrie Cook



Reggie the explosives detector dog – just one of the many 'dogs with jobs' in New Zealand

Photo by Jo Moore Photographer

**Most of us associate 'working dogs' with a farm, as guide dogs for blind or partially sighted people, or as police dogs. But dogs are used in far more wide-ranging roles than these, particularly in detection roles.**

It's a mid-winter morning, still dank with fog as Zara waits patiently for handler Janet and the supervisor at the factory to finish talking. Finally,

Janet comes over, slips on Zara's harness and they're into the factory to see what they can find.

Zara's been trained to find drugs in the workplace, since the factory owner suspects some of his workers are using them on the job. Zara will be able to sort through the huge range of smells available to her and identify a range of drugs. It's also happening during normal working hours so everyone can see this is an impartial search.

Initially, she and Janet search the locker area where

Zara, the drug detection dog, with handler Janet, tracks down a small quantity of marijuana hidden inside a large spool

Photo courtesy of NZ Detector Dogs

workers store their belongings, and while Zara identifies some drug smells it's clear there are no drugs there today. So she progresses to the warehouse and soon sits beside a large spool, looking expectantly at Janet for a treat. Sure enough, a small quantity of marijuana is found within the central spindle itself. Further searches produce two more finds, all of which are confiscated.

Zara and Janet will be back in a couple of months to repeat the process. "I wish workers would learn they can't fool a dog's nose," sighs the business owner.

## Sensitive noses

Dogs have between 250 and 300 million olfactory receptors in their noses, compared to about six million in ours, so a dog's nose is more than 40 times more sensitive. While some dogs have been bred to enhance specific traits, any dog can use their nose – unless, like bulldogs or boxers, it has a genetic trait that inhibits it from doing this as successfully as other breeds.

The odour a dog is trained to detect makes no difference to the type of training it receives, be it search and rescue work, drug

detection or anything else. "The difference is the environment in which the dogs have to work, and how easy it is to detect the odour in the environment they're required to screen," says Janet Williams of NZ Detector Dogs, the only private company in New Zealand doing this role with professional dog handlers.

"A dog that checks parcels or suitcases at the airport has a much easier environment in which to find their target odour than perhaps a dog seeking drugs on a fishing vessel where hiding places, opposing and distracting odours, and access to and availability of the target odour can be very difficult."

## Reggie the explosives detector dog

It has been said that dogs like Reggie only come along once in every 60 dogs. Reggie was surrendered to the SPCA because his previous owner wasn't in a position to give him the stimulation he needed. He was quite shy and reserved initially and it took the team a while to get to know him. But as soon as Reggie got into the daily enrichment routine, he quickly adjusted to life at the SPCA.

Due to his obsession with tennis balls and ability to learn quickly, SPCA staff thought he may be a good candidate for Aviation Security Services (Avsec), the branch of the Civil Aviation Authority responsible for providing security services at New Zealand's six security-designated airports.

Avsec has a prestigious explosive detector dog (EDD) training programme which was officially recognised by the United States' Transportation Security Administration in 2014 – a world-first acknowledgement.

Reggie started formal training with his Avsec handler, Anke Claessen, in early July. Anke is the other half of Reggie's team – the half who drives, picks up after him, holds onto the lead and interprets his changes of behaviour.

"Reggie can be a bit of a clown, but the moment there is work to be done, he switches on and is extremely focused," Anke says. "He is a pleasure to work with." The two of them are looking forward to graduating in September and becoming operational at Wellington Airport.

## Training programme

Avsec's ten-week EDD training programme consists of an allocation course, where the teams are assessed for suitability, and a nine-week EDD training course at the Police Dog Training Centre in Upper Hutt. The course is delivered and supervised by two instructors – one from Avsec and one from the New Zealand Police – who train four teams (consisting of one Avsec handler and one dog per team) to search

Reggie started formal training as an EDD with his Avsec handler, Anke Claessen, in early July

Nine years ago Zara was a severely malnourished older pup, found wandering the streets of Auckland, who had been handed in to the SPCA. Janet remembers her as being just skin and bone, covered in sores and wounds. She'd already had a litter.

"I walked past the cage she was in and slipped her a biscuit," Janet says. "For the next 30 minutes as we looked at the other rehome dogs, Zara didn't leave the front of the cage and her eyes never left us for a second. Eventually, we took her out to assess her abilities, and despite never having a scrap of training, she was willing to do anything we asked." 🐾

and find explosives in different environments.

At the end of the course the teams are tested and certified by the New Zealand Police. A passing grade means the team graduates as 'operational'.

Avsec EDD national manager, Monique Masoe, says that Avsec has a strong relationship with animal rescue organisations because of their common interest in securing positive outcomes for both the dogs and the communities in which they live. Avsec is proud to be able to provide the dogs with a new chance at life, with caring and capable handlers, in the service of New Zealand.

"As an EDD, the dogs enjoy a great life and do an important job – not just for Avsec, but for the travelling public and airport community," Monique says.

The SPCA team are delighted that he has done so well. "Dogs like Reggie have amazing potential and are often too energetic for the average family home. We are delighted that Reggie has excelled in his training at airport security," they say.



Photo by Jo Moore Photographer

## Rhys the biosecurity dog



Rhys Jones - who is about to start training to detect the spores that cause kauri dieback disease - with his handler Brian Shields, an Auckland Council biosecurity advisor

Training will involve detection of spores from different species

of phytophthora, including phytophthora agathidicida, the species that causes kauri dieback. "Rhys will train using samples in a grain mix, samples on raw root, as well as live saplings. He will also do training to find the killer spores in soil samples," explains Brian.

Rhys has a good 'nose to the ground' style of hunting, which makes him perfect to sniff out pest like ants and, potentially, phytophthora spores in the soil. "Rhys will not necessarily be the dog who carries on to be certified, but we are aiming to test the method and prove the concept of the training regime with Rhys," Brian says.

Lee Hill, senior advisor for kauri dieback at Auckland Council, says that, if successful, a detection dog would assist agencies in managing the progress of the disease which is spread by soil movement. "They could identify infected soil before it heads to a disease-free area, or identify infected trees in a nursery before they're moved elsewhere," says Lee. "A detection dog could also save money and time, if they are able to identify the disease in a soil sample, as it would save having to test it in the lab."

Brian says Rhys will even clean his paws, or wear booties which are washed afterwards, to avoid spreading the disease.

Rhys is taking over the mantle left by Paddy, the ex-SPCA golden labrador who was originally being trained on kauri dieback disease, but

Zara was adopted by the company, put into training as a working drug dog, and has never looked back.

"I am a keen supporter of the SPCA, and wherever possible our company policy is to source and train rescue dogs," explains Janet.

### Exceeding expectations

NZ Detector Dogs is fortunate to have a company of experienced, professional dog handlers. "Most of us were trainers from large government dog programmes such as the New Zealand Police and the Ministry for Primary Industries," Janet adds.

The company has four full-time handlers and one part-time, covering all of New Zealand. This



has left Auckland with his handler.

Rhys is certified under the national Conservation Dog Programme, which boasts 25 pest detection dogs and 55 threatened species dogs working in New Zealand.

[www.kauridieback.co.nz](http://www.kauridieback.co.nz)

allows them to adopt dogs that other agencies and dog owners could never consider.

The company's aim is to take an individual dog and bring out the best in the animal. "Once you go in with this attitude and training thought process, the handlers/trainers are 100% invested in the wellbeing and development of the dog. So far, every dog has exceeded our expectations and they're every bit as good as the purpose-bred dogs, if not better," Janet says.

Dogs are worked for no longer than 30-50 minutes at a time, depending on the size of the site to be checked and the working conditions - for example, the ambient temperature or number of items to be searched. As a general rule, the amount of time a dog is worked in one session means an equal amount of time to rest, ensuring the dog is always working to their peak detection capability.

### Giving unwanted dogs a chance

NZ Detector Dogs' policy is to source their drug dogs from the SPCA, pounds or animal welfare agencies in an effort to give unwanted dogs a chance for a productive and happy future. While it may take a lot more expertise and patience to train such dogs, the company has the experience, knowledge, skills and facilities to undertake this. Four of their dogs have come from SPCAs in the North Island, while the remaining five have been rescued from other rehoming organisations.

"Because we take 'red light' dogs it usually means they have issues that don't usually come with being calm and trusting," Janet explains. "Instead of correcting bad or unwanted behaviour, we give the dog alternative choices, and direct and focus their drive into what we want them to do. Once we have them doing that, a lot of the unwanted behaviour naturally diminishes. The dogs also then look to their handlers for more direction, which results in a dog that is focused on working for their handler."

NZ Detector Dogs doesn't select

the dogs by breed, but by their level of drive for certain items - usually food. They use this drive to motivate the dogs to overcome issues and work for one of their primary needs - which also helps them overcome a lot of the issues they may face. Once

they achieve the desired result, food is used to reinforce the required behaviour.

### Success rates

Janet's own background includes 13 years with what is now the

narcotic detection work, and deployment with the Armed Offender Squad  
[www.police.govt.nz/about-us/structure/teams-units/dog-section](http://www.police.govt.nz/about-us/structure/teams-units/dog-section)

**NZ USAR Search Dog Association**  
USAR (urban search & rescue) search dogs are an incredibly valuable resource in the location of people who are trapped by the collapse of structures as a result of earthquakes, tornados, landslides and other natural and man-made disasters  
[www.usardogs.org.nz](http://www.usardogs.org.nz)

**Aviation Security Service (Avsec)**  
Avsec's explosive detector dogs (EDD) sniff for explosives and explosive materials at New Zealand's main airports (Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and Queenstown), protecting travellers, airline crew, airport workers and New Zealand by ensuring that no dangerous materials are present on aircraft or in airports  
[www.avsec.govt.nz/travellers/explosive-detector-dogs/](http://www.avsec.govt.nz/travellers/explosive-detector-dogs/)

## More dogs with jobs

### Department of Conservation

DoC's Conservation Dogs Programme uses highly trained dogs and their handlers to detect New Zealand's protected species and unwanted pests  
[www.doc.govt.nz/conservationdogs](http://www.doc.govt.nz/conservationdogs)

### Blind Foundation

The Blind Foundation's Guide Dog centre breeds its own labradors and golden retrievers to become guide dogs for those people who are blind or have low vision  
[www.blindfoundation.org.nz/guide-dogs/](http://www.blindfoundation.org.nz/guide-dogs/)

### NZ Police

Police patrol dogs (all german shepherds) are supplied by the police dog breeding programme that is based at the Dog Training Centre near Wellington. The dogs are mainly used to track and search for people, but many of them are also trained for search and rescue work, victim recovery,



The Conservation Dogs Programme uses highly trained dogs and handlers for conservation work, seeking out protected species and predators



Photo courtesy of Greenstone TV

Corrections detection dog Jesse at work with handler Karina Thomas – the teams play a huge role in not only detecting contraband, but deterring people from bringing it to prison

**NZ Customs Service**

Customs detector dogs play a vital role at New Zealand's border. They are used to help stop illegal drugs and explosives being smuggled into the country via freight, cargo, packages, mail and luggage  
[www.customs.govt.nz/features/detectordogs/](http://www.customs.govt.nz/features/detectordogs/)

**Ministry for Primary Industries**

MPI's Detector Dog Programme ensures that dogs are trained to detect and stop biosecurity risk items coming into New Zealand, including plant and animal material  
[www.mpi.govt.nz/protection-and-response/detector-dog-programme/](http://www.mpi.govt.nz/protection-and-response/detector-dog-programme/)

**Department of Corrections**

Corrections has 19 detection dogs and handlers across the country that search prison property, cells, buildings, visitors and their vehicles, as well as items posted

or couriered into the country's prisons. The teams also work with other agencies on tactical operations and play a huge role in not only detecting contraband, like drugs, cellphones and tobacco, but deterring people from bringing it to prisons  
[www.corrections.govt.nz](http://www.corrections.govt.nz)

**Hearing dogs**

Hearing dogs are specially trained to alert those who are deaf or severely hearing-impaired to everyday sounds such as the doorbell, text messages, baby monitors, timers or smoke alarms  
[www.hearingdogs.org.nz](http://www.hearingdogs.org.nz)

**Assistance dogs**

Assistance Dogs NZ breeds, raises and trains assistance dogs for adults and children with a broad range of disabilities, including autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and diabetes  
[www.assistedogstrust.org.nz](http://www.assistedogstrust.org.nz)

**Mobility assistance dogs**

Mobility assistance dogs are trained to assist people living with a physical disability with everyday tasks, such as retrieving and carrying items, opening/closing doors, and barking for help  
[www.mobilitydogs.co.nz](http://www.mobilitydogs.co.nz)

**Pet therapy dogs**

Canine Friends Pet Therapy is a New Zealand-wide network of people who share their friendly well-behaved dogs with other people, including patients in hospitals and residents in rest homes and hospices  
[www.caninefriends.org.nz](http://www.caninefriends.org.nz)

**Epilepsy assist dogs**

NZ Epilepsy Assist Dogs Trust is a charitable organisation that trains and places dogs free of charge with people who have severe epilepsy. The dogs assist their recipients to lead a happier and safer life both at home and in public places  
[www.epilepsyfoundation.org.nz/our-programmes/assist-dog-trust](http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org.nz/our-programmes/assist-dog-trust)

Ministry for Primary Industries' detector dog programme, initially as a handler and ultimately as the senior trainer responsible for the training of all dogs and handlers at airports across New Zealand.

She was trained by an American specialist contracted to help set up the local programme in 1995/6, based on the US 'Beagle Brigade' which had started in 1984.

Initially, only about 10-20% of dogs ended up being truly successful working dogs, and Janet's main aim was to increase that success rate. "By the time I left, we'd raised the rate to about 60-80%," she says. "I started a breeding enhancement project and travelled to the UK to source better and more suitable lines, and I understand this has continued to improve the success rate."

Currently, over 50 dog teams work across all major airports as well as Auckland's International Mail Centre, international cargo companies and even cruise ships

arriving from overseas. The dogs are trained to find plants and plant products, as well as animals and animal products. Internationally, beagles have become the most common breed of detector dog, although MPI has found labradors are also very good at such work.

"At NZ Detector Dogs, we aim to show the wider public and other agencies just what can be achieved with rescue dogs, and give those dogs that would otherwise not be rehomed a meaningful and valuable future," Janet says proudly. "It is our way of giving back to the animals that gave us our careers, and we want to make a difference and change attitudes towards rescue dogs."



Corrie Cook shares her west Auckland home with her husband, two cats and a dog (at the moment) and writes for a wide range of business organisations; she's especially interested in animal welfare and environmental issues



Dr. Alex Melrose  
Registered Veterinarian



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