

# A rescue dog is

*In a fascinating series this week, the Evening Echo highlights the working dogs of Cork. We start with a report by MARY HASSETT on the amazing canines involved in the Search and Rescue Dog Association (SARDA Ireland)*



ABOVE: Don Murphy from SARDA with Ben, an adorable black and white collie

Picture: Eddie O'Hare



RIGHT: Peter Desmond of SARDA during a training exercise in a forest near Watergrass-hill in 2006

Picture: Denis Minihane

**B**EN is a black and white border collie who would walk on water for his owner, Don Murphy, from Rochestown.

Given the nod from Don, Ben would chase up and down hills all day, cross streams, and plough his way through the thickest undergrowth in search of a missing person.

In theory, Ben should be an ideal candidate to qualify as a search and rescue dog. Physically fearless, he would be well able to cope with the harshest landscapes and weather conditions.

Ben's only flaw is that he gets very nervous around people he doesn't know.

Given that people who go missing are often disorientated and agitated, the chances are that the collie would become so distressed that he would hinder rather than help the rescue efforts. For this reason, Ben will never make a fully qualified rescue dog.

Don knows first hand what makes a good search dog as he has been a member of the Search and Rescue Dog Association (SARDA Ireland) since its inception in 1987.

"We operate to very high international standards and we are the only search and rescue association that is a member of Mountain Rescue Ireland," Don points out.

The importance of a well-trained dog in a search mission cannot be overstated. Don points out: "Fifty people wouldn't cover an area as thoroughly as one dog."

SARDA are normally notified of searches for missing persons by the Gardaí and they respond to call-outs all over the country.

A distressing aspect of the searches is that an increasing number are focused on people who have become so despondent that there is a fear they may try to harm themselves.

Searches are regularly carried out for people suffering with dementia who may have gone missing from their own house or a nursing home.

Sometimes, too, a person with mental health issues might become so confused and disorientated that they are unable to find their way home.

Don points out that there are less call-outs now for lost hikers and mountaineers as most people have mobile phones that they can use to get help and indicate their location.

SARDA is still actively involved, however, in locating and rescuing people who become injured while out hill-walking or hiking.

At present, SARDA have only five fully qualified search and rescue dogs and handlers in the country, two of whom are in the Cork and Kerry area. Training usually takes up to two years. The dogs and their owners have to undergo rigorous scrutiny by independent assessors from the UK before they can respond to emergency call-outs.

Catherine Kelly and her border collie cross, Lily, both achieved full search dog status in 2011. Now based in Killarney, Catherine

previously lived in East Cork and was a member of the Ballycotton Coast Guard Unit. Catherine is a member of the Kerry Mountain Rescue team, as is Don Murphy.

Finnish woman, Paulina Kauppi and her dog, Koiru, also achieved full search dog status with SARDA in 2011. Based in West Cork, Paulina is a member of the Castletownbere Coast Guard Unit.

The lack of national standards for search and rescue dogs and their owners is a matter of considerable disquiet for SARDA members.

"Anyone can put an orange jacket on their dog and say that he's a search dog," says Don Murphy. If an unqualified dog goes out on a search and proves to be useless then all search and rescue dogs get a bad name. This is particularly upsetting for SARDA members who know what a properly qualified search dog is capable of."

In past searches, SARDA have found that someone with dementia can often keep walking through brambles, thickets and dense undergrowth until they physically can't get any further. In such cases a good search dog can find a missing person in a wilderness area so overgrown that no searcher would even attempt to enter.

Most of the dogs used by SARDA are air scenting dogs that use the wind to hunt and find human airborne scent. "Air scenting dogs cover wide areas very fast. They are good for wilderness searching and in urban areas where there are lots of nooks and crannies," says Don.

Another dedicated SARDA member, Peter Desmond from Blarney, and his 13-year-old dog, Ramba, recently gave me a rescue demonstration when I met him in Garryduff Woods in Rochestown.

Through a combination of circumstances, Peter and Ramba never had the good fortune to achieve full search dog status. However, Peter feels that his nine-month-old collie pup, Dots, is already showing great potential.

Like all members of SARDA, Peter started off as a "dogs body", hiding for hours in woods and on hillsides until he was found by trainee search dogs. He and Don are loud in their praise of the many volunteers who go out, twice or three times a week, "bodying" in all weathers and conditions.

Although Don's two dogs, Ben, and the very sociable but easily distracted, Taffy, will never achieve full search dog grade, two of his previous dogs, Rizzo and another Ben, were fully qualified. In fact, Rizzo fell to his death on Mount Brandon in Kerry when responding to a hoax call.

No-one receives any payment for their work with SARDA and there is no call-out charge.

The charity receives a small grant from the Government but most costs are met through public donations and an annual collection in January. More information can be obtained at: [sardaireland.com](http://sardaireland.com). The SARDA PRO can be contacted at 087-1798462.

“

Like all members of SARDA, Peter started off as a "dogs body", hiding for hours in woods and on hillsides until he was found by trainee search dogs.



# worth fifty men



TOMORROW:  
Our series  
continues with  
a look at a  
remarkable  
guide dog  
called Murphy

SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAM: Don Murphy and Peter Desmond with dogs Ben, Ramba and Taffy from SARDA.

Picture: Eddie O'Hare