

How do I Know when my Dog is on Track?

This is the most important behaviour you need to recognise!

As soon as your dog begins to follow a track – maybe your first or second lesson – you must begin to watch what he does when he is actually ‘on track’.

What to look for:

1) Many dogs track in the classic ‘tracking dog’ posture i.e. nose almost on the ground, ears forward, back level, tail straight and still or slightly wagging. If you have one of these dogs, count yourself lucky because they are easy to read. If they are off-track, the first sign is that the tension on the lead decreases, the head comes up and the dog slows down. Often the tail will start to wag more, usually lower than the back (the “I’m not confident” wag). So now you can act appropriately – slow down and increase the tension on the lead or back up if you suspect that the track has turned a corner. (If you go on to track in urban areas, you may find that these dogs tend to track with noses much higher, maybe due to the amount of contamination on the track).

2) Some dogs track with the nose at mid-level, often with a furiously wagging tail. The ears are usually forward and the head is level with the body or slightly lower. Once again, when these dogs are off track, the head tends to come up a bit – some handlers say that they watch the ears and if they can see more than half the ear, the dog is probably off track. Often the tail wag also slows and the tail carriage drops.

These dogs are not as easy to read so that it is important to develop a mental picture of what *your* dog looks like when he is on track.

3) Some dogs track with ‘high nose’. This usually means that the tracking position and head carriage is very similar to a normal walking posture. These dogs **are** hard to read. They often “trail” so that they follow the edge of the scent because that is where it is highest above ground. This means that they can miss articles and have difficulty on corners.

If you have a dog like this, don’t despair. They can become good trackers but they do need more training to encourage them to follow the ground scent. Your communication via the lead becomes crucial also because this will help you feel when your dog begins to drift.

How can I learn to read that he is on track?

This is why we use flagged tracks. In training, the handler must know **exactly** where the track goes.

1) The tracklayer should put in the flags along the track so that the track goes directly from flag to flag. They should not be too close together (depends on the terrain – 20 to 30 m in scrub, 50m in the open). Articles and corners should be indicated. *As handler and dog become more experienced*, the actual article or corner can be placed up to 10 m past the indicating flag but it should always be marked.



- 2) The tracklayer should come with the handler and dog as they work the track and not just to pick up the flags! She can tell the handler if the dog is drifting off track or if the track deviates from a straight line between flags (to go around a bush?). She should be watching the dog as it works the track and can help the handler work out what the dog is doing. Being further away from the dog, a follower can often see things the handler can't and can point them out.
- 3) Don't tell the dog where the track is. The dog must work it out for himself. If you find yourself telling your dog where the track is, wear a cap and pull it down so that you can't see the next flag; let the person following up tell you if you are wrong or if your dog is drifting away from the track and let your dog do the work. If you do fall into the bad habit of showing your dog where the track goes at a start or a corner, your dog will expect you to indicate the track when there are no flags and **YOU WON'T KNOW**.
- 4) Tracking takes a lot of concentration from both dog and handler, so keep tracks short (300 – 400 metres, less for beginners). With the help of the person following up, build up a picture of *your* dog's behaviour.
- 5) ***How can I tell if my dog is following roos*** (or a fox or...?) Your dog's body image will change. Frequently, the head comes up very high and the dog begins to prance. He will look away from the track and can look as though it is a corner but ... the body posture is wrong. Learn what your dog does when there are roos about by not avoiding them – your tracklayer can point them out, often before you or your dog is aware of them. In training, don't be afraid to tell your dog NO, they are not allowed to follow roos and to get on with the track. Most dogs can learn that, even though it would be tremendously exciting to chase a roo, their job is to follow the track.