

THE SCENT OF A BEAR

A4 THE REPUBLICAN JOURNAL AUGUST 12, 1993

These hounds are trained to track bear

BY JASON JOHNSON

GREENBUSH — When the redbone hounds Ricochet and Ralph start barking, Steve Cole knows they have caught the scent of a passing black bear. Since 6 a.m., the two strike dogs have been riding atop the GMC pickup in Greenbush training for the upcoming bear season.

At this first "strike," Cole stops the pickup and points to a nearby log, torn apart by a black bear foraging for grubs.



"The dogs probably won't do much today," he apologizes as he gets out and releases Ricochet, who sniffs the ground for a brief moment before bounding into the woods barking. "This is the first time off their chains since last October."

As part-owner of a hunting lodge and Northeast Outfitters Guide Service in Forest City, the Thorndike resident spends most of September and October in the woods with his dogs from before dawn, often to after dusk looking for lost dogs or wounded bear.

From the start of bear-hunting season on Aug. 30 to Sept. 25, hunters can only use bait to attract bears. But after the three weeks, dogs are allowed until the season's end Oct. 30.

One-by-one, the other dogs are cut loose. First Ralph, known as much for his voracious appetite as his tracking skills, and then the walker hounds, Sam and Fred.

They immediately take off into the woods after Ricochet, with the exception of Sam, who begins to backtrack before turning around.

Soon, the woods echo with the hounds' deep-throated baying. For a while, Cole is content to listen quietly and call out each dog's name as it barks.

Then, "Get in!" he yells tersely to assistant Brenda Whittaker, as he

jumps into the pickup in hot pursuit.

After a quick run over the dirt, logging road, skidding around corners, and swerving around pot-holes, they spot Fred meandering down the tote road, having lost the bear's scent in the increasing summer heat.

Both Cole and Whittaker are amazed, as Fred is notoriously slow compared to the other hounds, which travel as fast as 20-25 mph.

Soon, the rest of the pack appears from a nearby clear-cut, but there is still no sign of the lead dog, Ricochet. Whittaker begins to worry, since the \$3,000 dog is going blind.

She takes out the \$1,200 tracking box, attaches the antenna, and dials Ricochet's tracking collar frequency. Within minutes, she has located the dog.

After a few more anxious minutes, the lead dog appears at the edge of the clear-cut.

"It takes a special dog to hunt bear," says Cole, who owns 10 hounds, each worth \$200 to \$3,000. "A good bear dog has to have the drive and the heart to go in after the game."

He has been a hunter for more than 30 years, but admits he has never killed a bear. Nevertheless, the registered Maine guide of eight years does respect Maine's premier big game, which can travel as fast as 35 mph and cover long distances in its search for food.

"I've never actually shot a bear myself . . . I don't dare to," says Cole, who has lost more than one dog to a bear. "You have to give the bear respect — it's an awfully powerful creature."

Over a cup of coffee, both Cole and Whittaker reminisce about old hunts with each story invariably coming back to their love of the dogs.

"I like to get out and be with the dogs when they're doing what they're supposed to be doing and they're doing it well," Cole says, as Ricochet and Fred start barking atop the strike box, signalling the day's second strike.

In a few short minutes, the dogs are out of the pickup and in the woods following the bear's scent. From the pickup, the hounds' chorus of baying slowly fades away. ■