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Earth Dogs

Terriers take on the dirty, frenzied job of dispatching critters to help working farms and ranches.

BY DARREN WARNER

“He’s not used to hunting with strangers,” said John Vesterburg, when I commented on the way his 3-year-old Jack Russell Terrier quizzically eyed me. “Midas is still learning field manners.”

Unlike many of his brethren, Midas isn’t a yapper. He’s uncharacteristically mum when we’re introduced. I can sense the dog isn’t sure what to make of me, evidenced by a stare that would burn a hole through steel. Maybe Midas

thinks I’m on equal footing with the groundhogs and opossums he and Vesterburg hunt in Hillsboro, Ohio.

Although Midas’ bloodlines run deep, the 13-inch-tall block of sinewy muscle and fur isn’t your typical hunting dog. The JRT and other “earth dogs” do their work below ground, entering holes and tunnels to locate pesky varmints that cause cattlemen and farmers so many headaches and sleepless nights. When a JRT finds the hole’s occupant, it barks its head off to let its human companion know it’s time to dig. A locator collar around the dog’s neck tells the digger where the dog is. (See “The Most Important Pieces of Equipment” on page 39.) It’s up to the digger to shovel away dirt and rocks to reveal the ferocious dog and the critter the dog has found.

Owners use their earth dogs to hunt varmints below ground for a variety of reasons. They do it for sport or as a free service to farmers who want to remove damage-causing animals like groundhogs and opossums from their property. Mostly, they do it because their dogs love to hunt, and it gives them the opportunity to use their instincts.

Let’s tag along with Vesterburg and his dog Midas as they help a farmer control varmints. However, before embarking on a hunt, we’ll examine the history of earth dogs to better understand that hunting below ground isn’t just something they will do, but something they were born to do.

Meet two earth breeds

Because of their size and hunting ability, two common breeds used for earth work are the Jack Russell Terrier and Miniature Dachshund. Both are fiery breeds that will run after groundhogs, opossums and raccoons underground.

Jack Russell Terriers are descendants of Fox Terriers,



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Swagger comes out of a hole (or sette) after checking it for varmints.



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which the British used to flush foxes from holes so foxhounds could chase them. Everything about the Jack Russell was, and still is, bred for hunting red and gray fox and other small animals. For example, coloring is predominantly white so humans and other dogs can easily distinguish the JRT from a fox. Jack Russells are assertive, energetic and highly intelligent working dogs that make wonderful family companions, provided they receive enough exercise.

Dachshunds. Dachshunds were originally bred in Germany in the 1600s for use as hunting dogs. In fact, their name means “badger dog” because they were used by foresters to hunt badgers underground. At about 8 inches tall, Miniature Dachshunds are built to maneuver inside narrow burrows and bred for courage to face off against vicious badgers. In the United States, badgers are protected, so Miniature Dachshunds hunt opossums, rabbits, groundhogs and other varmints.



COURTESY OF JOE SMITH

Above: Several Jack Russell Terriers inspect a hole. You never know what type of critter is underground until you dig down.

Left: Rocket, a large Jack Russell Terrier, goes head to head with a raccoon.



Hanna and Joe Smith, a working judge for the Jack Russell Terrier Club of America. Dogs and their owners earn certificates for hunting and locating different species underground.

Like JRTs, Dachshunds are exuberant, keen hunters that make loving family members. Miniature Dachshunds tend to be more reserved, but they won't shy away when they confront a varmint.

Born to hunt

"A lot of people don't like Dachshunds because they think the breed is yappy and mean," says Teddy Moritz of Mahwah, N.J., who breeds and hunts with longhaired Miniature Dachshunds. "Well, that's because they want to hunt."

One of Moritz's best dogs, 3-year-old Bane, is focused

and gets down to business right away. The 8-pound dog hunts groundhogs and rabbits with equal aplomb.

Moritz partners with Bane and her other Miniature Dachshunds to get rid of groundhogs that damage farmers' fields. Groundhogs dig extensive networks of underground tunnels that wreak havoc on agricultural fields and equipment. Farmers often have to pay thousands for equipment repairs after driving over ground that collapses due to groundhog tunnels. Worst of all, the handiwork of groundhogs often injures livestock. Running cattle and horses can break their legs if they step in woodchuck hole. Earth dogs like Bane are a godsend to farmers, who often can't use poison or traps to control varmints because of their close proximity to livestock.

Before borrowing your friend's JRT and heading to a fresh groundhog den (called a sette), check your state's hunting regulations. Many states have established hunting season for some animals (such as raccoons), prohibit the hunting of varmints in their dens or have other restrictions.

The hunt

It's 5:30 a.m. when we load Midas and his protégé Docker into dog crates in the back of Vesterburg's truck. Hot and humid July weather dictates we start early.

Like Midas, Docker is a Jack Russell. But at 14 months old, he's too young for dirty earth duty, so he'll play the role of student on the hunt.

"I like to take a young dog out with an older dog to teach the young one the ropes," Vesterburg explains.

Take notice that Vesterburg didn't say he provides instruction. You can show a JRT a sette, but it's up to the dog to decide whether it wants to search for the varmints hiding inside.

However, it's up to the owner protect his hunting buddy.

"It's all about safety for the dog," says Debra Calloway, D.V.M., of Knoxville, Tenn., a veterinarian and working judge for the Jack Russell Terrier Club of America. "You don't want to be digging if it's dry or the ground is really rocky because the tunnel can collapse."

Earth Dog Clubs

A number of organizations promote what terriers and Dachshunds were bred to do: hunt.

The **Jack Russell Terrier Club of America** is a national breed club and a Jack Russell Terrier registry. The JRTCA breed registry is designed to maintain the JRT as a healthy working breed. The organization also sanctions trials throughout the United States, where Jack Russell Terriers and their owners compete in several categories, including conformation, agility, obedience and go-to-ground. During go-to-ground competitions, terriers traverse a tunnel and attempt

to find quarry at the end. Want to learn more? Go to www.terrier.com.

Founded in 1971, the **American Working Terrier Association's** mission is to encourage and promote terriers and Dachshunds of correct size, conformation and character to perform as working breeds. The AWTA also holds trials, where dogs and their owners can earn certificates of gameness, hunting certificates and working certificates. The AWTA promotes both earth work and above-ground hunting to encourage breeders to maintain each breed's hunting characteristics

and instincts. For more information, visit www.awta.org.

The **American Kennel Club** also offers earthdog trials, giving Dachshunds and 25 recognized terrier breeds an opportunity to demonstrate their hunting prowess. Participating dogs must follow a scent to find the quarry, usually a caged rat, underground. Participation levels include introduction to quarry, junior earth dog, senior earth dog and master earth dog. To learn more, go to www.akc.org/events/earthdog/index.cfm.

— D. W.

Human earth hunters steer clear of dens underneath barns or concrete because of the risk of collapsing. They don't hunt in the spring because it's considered unethical to pursue varmints when they are giving birth.

Many judges like Calloway do earth work with their dogs for sport. When one of Calloway's dogs finds a groundhog, she captures and relocates the animal. "One summer we relocated 32 groundhogs to a friend's property," Calloway recalls. "We named her land 'Groundhog heaven.'"

Although Jack Russells hunt any animal underground, groundhogs are their most formidable foe.

"Groundhogs will dig to get away and drop a wall of dirt between them and the dog," Calloway says. "If you're a dog and you encounter this, do you have enough nose to know the animal's on the other side, or do you leave it?"

We head to the first hole, our arms full of shovels, spades and other hunting equipment. I begin to suspect that this is the real reason why Vesterburg invited me.

Before we drop our gear, Midas is at the sette's entrance, thoroughly sniffing it. Midas doesn't appear particularly interested. His body language is easy to read: *Nothing to see here. Let's move on.*

As we walk, I throw a tough question at Vesterburg: "What would you say to those who think this is unethical?"

A long pause hangs in the morning air as Vesterburg considers the inquiry.

"I'd say it's necessary if you're going to save a farmer's field and put food on people's tables," he says. "These dogs are meant to do this."

A quarter-mile away we reach the next hole. Midas sniffs and without warning, slips into the hole. Vesterburg places a pitch fork at the entrance and unleashes Docker. The black-and-white Jack starts investigating, and suddenly, his muscles grow taut, the hair on his back rises and his nose goes to town over whatever lies below. Right now, it's



Don Gaskell digs down to help his dog Hanna. Human hunters do just about as much work as the dogs.



The Most Important Pieces of Equipment

Responsible hunters attach a locator collar around their dogs' necks before doing earth work. A tunnel can run for 30 or 40 feet, and go as far down as about 10 or 12 feet. If you don't have a locator collar on your dog, you can easily lose it.

The collar sends a signal to a hand-held finder that shows not only how far away a dog is, but how far down. A popular model is the Deben Long-Range Terrier Finder, which has a range of 40 feet and can detect a dog 12 feet below ground. It's literally a lifeline to a hard-working earth dog.

\$145.96; +44 (0)1394 387762; www.deben.com

anyone's guess what critter is taking residence in the hole.

Suddenly, deep beneath the surface we hear a series of muffled barks. Midas is in business.

After locating Midas with an electronic finder, we sling shovelfuls of dirt and rock at a frenzied pace, with the goal of reaching Midas and whatever he's cornered. I suddenly realize just how out of shape I am. I stop to take a few pictures with my point-and-shoot camera, only to find it's missing, buried somewhere in the mess.

Four feet down, the top of Vesterburg's shovel pierces the tunnel and it sounds like someone put a microphone under Midas's muzzle. The barks and snarls are deafening. I barely recognize the coal-colored terrier frantically yelping, dancing and jabbing like a featherweight boxer. Good underdogs don't make contact with their foe, but detain it until a hunter can get to it. This time an opossum takes center stage, but it's Midas that steals the show. Although opossums aren't as much of a nuisance as groundhogs, they carry disease, eat farmers' seed and grain, and generally leave a huge mess wherever they roam.

This is hunting with an earth dog. It's a little grimy and more than a little politically incorrect. For the dogs and their proud owners, however, it's a little slice of heaven. **DW**

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