

September 2012

Making Sense of Scents?

"What an amazing coincidence!" Kathy bubbled. "I just had to call and tell you." Kathy's mail was delivered through a slot in her front door and the stack was usually ignored by Higgins, her Beardie. But on this particular day, Kathy had walked in to find Higgins had taken just one envelope out of the pile and was relaxing on the sofa with his chin on that lone piece of mail. The "amazing" part to Kathy was that the letter was from me, Higgin's breeder. A coincidence, we agreed.....

Until the next time I wrote Kathy a note. (This was obviously before the days of email.) Once again she returned home to find Higgins had extracted my letter from the rest and was guarding it on the sofa again. And I began to wonder. Could my scent have lingered on those letters through the machinations of Canada Post and the U.S. Postal Service on their way from Toronto to Buffalo? Would Higgins actually remember my scent if that was the case?

The thoughts brought a stream of questions flowing over the rocks in my head. Do dogs recognize people by scent more than by sight? If so, how long do they remember that scent? Does a person's scent change over the years, not by superficial things like perfume and shampoo, but by medications or sickness or just age? Or do people have a basic scent that stays with them all their lives? In the years since, I believe some of those questions have been answered.

I'm looking forward to seeing Maddy this weekend. A pup of my breeding, I sold her to the Brookers some 13 years ago. I get to see her two times a year at our twice-yearly Beardie Bounces. Each time, she greets me like a wealthy relative, welcoming me with squeaks and wiggles and kisses after a quick sniff to be sure it's really me. It's become a ritual.

Six months isn't such a long time, but it was much longer in Trudy's case. As a pup, she went to live with a couple in Chicago. We met up again when she was two. She had finished her AKC championship and had a number of points on her Canadian championship. The owners brought her to our area for some shows and I had the privilege of handling her to her final points for her Canadian championship. Then I didn't see her again for five or six years. We met at a specialty and I asked the folks if they had brought Trudy along. Yes, she was in their motorhome and they opened the door. Trudy came out, trotted right past me without even a glance and then suddenly stopped. It was like one of those 'Omgosh!' moments. Then she turned and bounded into my arms, licking my face and wagging her whole body. It was pretty evident I was someone she knew and liked.

The three aforementioned Beardies were pups I had bred so they really only had about eight weeks to get to know me before going to new homes. Six, if you consider they were incommunicado for the first couple of weeks due to eyes and ears not being operational. And they weren't individuals who received all of my attention but just one pup out of a litter. So it seems rather remarkable they'd remember me. Perhaps that's why Skipper's story is all the more remarkable.

Allan, an Old English Sheepdog breeder and exhibitor, approached me at a show about a Beardie for his parents. They were especially fond of shaggy dogs but felt OES grooming was too labor intensive for them so they debated and decided on a Beardie for their next pet. After passing on information on our bouncing buddies, I let Allan know when I had a litter. Together we picked out a pup for his parents and since they lived quite a distance away, he delivered it to them. They phoned from time to time and occasionally wrote to tell me how Skipper was getting along. Allan gave me updates when we met at

shows. The years passed. Allan married an OES breeder and exhibitor who lived near me. Then one day I got a phone call. Allan's parents were visiting and had brought Skipper, now 12-years-old, with them. Did I want to see him? You bet! The family was outside in front of the house when I arrived and Skipper meandered over to check me out. Suddenly his tail wagged so furiously it was only a furry blur. The enthusiasm of his greeting left no doubt that he recognized me. "He remembers you!" Allan's mother exclaimed in amazement. And yes, I did find it amazing that a Beardie I had last seen as an eight-week-old puppy would remember me 12 years later. Skipper velcroed himself to my leg and kept looking up at me with a happy grin while I talked with his owners. And when I opened the door of my van to leave, he hopped in, ready to leave with me. Flattering but somewhat embarrassing.

Then again, maybe 12 years isn't all that long if you believe the part in the Odyssey where Odysseus' hound, Argos, recognizes him after 20 years.

Admittedly, these experiences have left me with one question unanswered. If dogs can detect familiar scents days, months or even years later, why do utility exhibitors spend so much time putting their scents on articles to be retrieved? - Alice Bixler, Summerfield, Florida