

# For Creative Minds

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## Critically Endangered Pacific Pocket Mouse

The Pacific pocket mouse lives in sandy scrub areas along the coast in California. They used to be found from Tijuana, Mexico to Los Angeles. It was believed that these mice were extinct for over 20 years before a few were found in isolated locations along the coast. Development along the coast and resulting habitat loss is considered the major contributor to these animals being so endangered.

Using information about the Pacific pocket mouse that you have learned, see if you can determine whether the statements below are true or false.



- 1 Pacific pocket mice are extinct.
- 2 Pacific pocket mice are the smallest mouse species in the United States.
- 3 A Pacific pocket mouse would make a great pet.
- 4 The pockets of these mice are located on their bellies, like kangaroo pouches.
- 5 Pacific pocket mice are a keystone species.

Answers: 1: False (they are endangered), 2: True, 3: False, 4: False (the pockets are in their cheeks), 5: True

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## The Dog's Nose Knows

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A dog's sense of smell is much better than ours. Dogs even know their humans by smell.

Did you know that dogs can “talk” to each other through their pee and smells? Dogs mark their territories with pee, as if saying, “I’ve been here.”

Because dogs have such an incredible sense of smell, they are often trained to help us find things—just like the Pacific pocket mouse poop in this story. Some dogs can help police officers find drugs or warn soldiers of bombs. Other dogs might even use their sensitive noses to alert them to a human's health issues.

Not only is Phyllis Saroff the illustrator of *Pooper Snooper*, but she is also a certified dog trainer. Like Julie and the Conservation Canine handlers, Phyllis understands the importance of helping dogs enjoy training as games or puzzles to be solved. And, she says, even old dogs can learn new tricks! Try playing a nose game with your dog, like Phyllis does with her pup, Spud:

First, make sure your dog knows he needs to pay attention to you by rewarding him for looking up at you. Drop a treat on the ground in front of him. Your dog will eat it and look up at you. When your dog looks up at you, throw the treat off to the side. He will run to find it and come back so you can throw another one in the opposite direction. Make sure you always have a treat ready to reward him.

Let your dog use his wonderful, powerful sense of smell by tossing kibble (dog food) into the yard like she does for Spud. A dog uses a lot of energy when he searches with his nose. Spud searches in the grass for each tiny piece. He finds each one using only his nose. It takes him about 20 minutes to eat breakfast. He comes inside and flops into his bed to relax until it is time for their morning walk. Some people tell me their dog doesn't have a good sense of smell because they can't find the kibble in the grass. This is not true. All dogs are born with the ability to search with their noses. Given a chance to practice, they can learn nose games very quickly.



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## Q&A with Scientist Julianne Ubigau

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Julianne (Julie) Ubigau is a Research Scientist & Outreach Coordinator at the Conservation Canines Center for Conservation Biology, University of Washington.

### **How did you become a canine handler?**

Rather awkwardly! I interviewed for a job that involved training detection dogs to track moose and wolf scat in Northern Alberta. I was young and had no experience, but I knew I could do it. As part of the interview, I was introduced to a dog named Orion. He was a maniacal lab who lunged at me and quickly robbed

a ball from my hand. I was supposed to play fetch. Instead, the interviewers watched Orion run giddy circles around me. I wrestled that dog in the mud for what felt like hours. I never won the ball back. It felt like the worst interview ever. Surprisingly, I got the job. I was hired because I handled the difficult situation with a positive attitude. I didn't get mad, cry, or lose my temper. These dogs are high-energy rescues. If you think you can do something perfectly the first time, this isn't the job for you.

### **What was your first experience in the field like?**

Challenging! There was a lot of snow. I was partnered with Tucker, a black lab mix who didn't like getting his feet wet. I had to teach him to jump off the icy road into deep powder. We would take turns tunneling a path through the snow. We made a good team because we were patient with each other.

### **How do you describe your work with the dogs?**

I think of myself as an interpreter rather than a trainer. This job is all about communication. I'm using my knowledge to help guide them, but my main job is to watch the dog closely, so I know when they have sniffed out a target. It's important to understand your dog's unique personality. For example, Tucker was quiet and needed a cheerleader. I'd dance and sing when he found the target scent. It was exaggerated, but he was motivated by my enthusiasm. With Sampson, I changed the way I worked. He was excitable, so I had to keep him calm enough to concentrate. I muted my enthusiasm and taught him to rest. He was surprisingly sensitive, too. If I appeared frustrated, he'd crawl behind me. When he shut down, I knew I wasn't being a positive co-worker. We'd take a break, play ball, and reset. It was a good reminder for both of us.

## What is the most difficult aspect of training?

Our inability to understand the dog's incredible sense of smell. It's a superpower. They're capable of detecting things we don't even know are there so it's difficult to confirm what they are showing us.

## What's your favorite part of working with the dogs?

Borrowing their superpowers! It's exciting to explore the forest with a dog who has been trained to detect different scents. It's like putting on special X-ray glasses! I feel privileged to work with someone who is willing to show me what I am unable to see on my own.

## Are you working with a dog now?

Yes! Jasper, a giant black lab mix that I rescued. I chose him because he is jovial, easygoing, and great with kids. He is a bundle of energy. The first time I rewarded him for finding scat, he was so excited that he galloped all around the yard like a small pony! He is going to be great at this job.

## Do you have advice for our readers who would love to have a job like yours?

Yes! Read a lot and be open, curious, and interested. I enjoy this job because I'm intensely curious. When I was 12, I would come home from school, go outside with Soo, my grandpa's dog, and explore. I'd climb trees, build forts, and save potato bugs. At 37, I'm doing the exact same thing but with purpose! When I was a girl, I didn't know that my hobbies could lead me to a career that I love.

