

Smell!

A NOSE FOR DANGER

by our news reporter

Lost hiking family led to safety by a super pet with a super sense of smell

'Sniffy', a small dog with an exceptional nose, was given a special pat on the back today by his owner, Mr Sid Wilson, after he had led the Wilson family to safety.

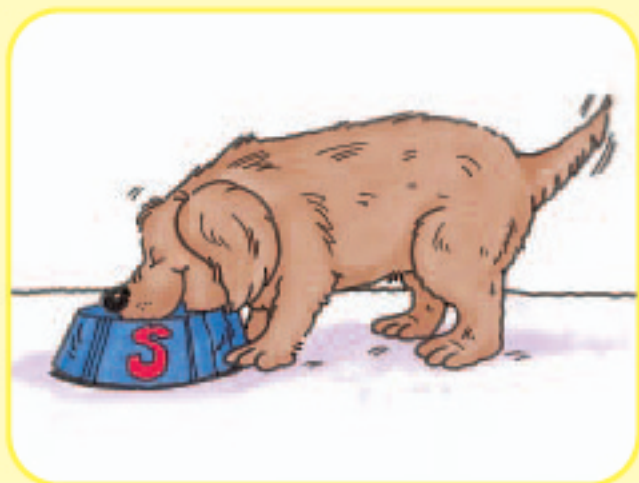
On Saturday morning the Wilsons - Edith, Sid and their son Mark - set out for a day's walk on Blackbridge Moors. Luckily for them, their dog Sniffy came too!

The outing could have ended in disaster when there was a sudden change in the weather.

"One moment it was bright sunshine, the next there was pouring rain and thick mist," Mrs Wilson told me. The family endeavoured to make their way back to their car, but somehow they got lost. They started to wander deeper and deeper into the moor.

"They were genuinely in danger," explained Lucy Arnold, leader of the Blackbridge Rescue Volunteer Team. "There are treacherous bogs on the moor. In the mist, people have been known to stray over the edge of cliffs and fall down rocky gullies."

The family wandered on the moor for some time and it was starting to get dark.



Sniffy enjoying a well-earned reward

"We couldn't see much beyond the end of our noses at times," said Mr Wilson.

Fortunately Sniffy could smell well beyond the end of his nose! The Wilsons had been keeping Sniffy on his lead all this time. "We were worried he might chase sheep if we let him off," said Mrs Wilson. But Sniffy soon seemed to be the only one who knew where he was going. By now desperate, the Wilsons let him off his lead and started to follow him. Sure enough, in less than an hour they were back at their car. It was dark, they were soaking wet, but they were safe.

"We called him Sniffy because he was always getting his nose into things he shouldn't, like the rubbish bin," explained Mrs Wilson. "But on Saturday his nose really did come into its own. I'm certain he was smelling his way back to the car."

Scents of life and death

As humans, we are not good smellers. We rely mostly on our sight and our hearing. But for many animals, a good sense of smell is a matter of life and death. It is vital for finding food, for finding a mate, and for avoiding predators.

Even tiny animals have a strong sense of smell. Insects mostly use small pits in their antennae for smelling. When an ant's antennae are damaged it cannot use smell to recognise its relatives, and it starts to attack them.

Many insects use the scent of flowers to guide them to the nectar they feed on, and a bee will leave a drop of scent on a newly discovered source of food to guide other bees to it.

Not all insects use smell in this way. For example, the male silkworm moth can use its antennae to detect the smell of a mate more than three kilometres away. Another sort of moth also detects its mate by smell. The caterpillar of this moth, the pink bollworm, is a pest that damages cotton crops. So when it is time for the moths to mate, farmers put threads smelling of the female moth in their fields. The males become confused, cannot find mates, no eggs are laid, and no pink bollworms hatch out to destroy the cotton.



Larger animals, of course, use their noses for smelling. For these it is often a case of smell or be smelled, kill or be killed. Deer, for instance, are always sniffing the air to detect whatever might be about to attack them. Hunters, also, often rely on smell. Norwegian elkhounds are said to be able to scent quarry as much as five kilometres away. Similarly, sharks can detect one drop of blood in a million drops of water. The kiwi, whose nostrils are in the tip of its long beak, can use it to sniff out worms by probing holes in the ground.

Even a human, whose nose is a million times less sensitive to certain smells than a dog's, can smell one drop of artificial musk in a building the size of a concert hall.



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