

Dog search has happy ending

By: Colin Slark

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Last month, a visitor to Souris got more than she bargained for on a holiday to visit her sister-in-law.

Shortly after arriving at her destination, Shirley Klassen of Abbotsford, B.C., had her purebred rough collie Sienna run away.



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All nine of Sienna the rough collie's puppies are safe and sound after being born in the woods.

After days of searching by dozens of people in the town, a couple walking near the Souris River saw a sight they didn't expect: Sienna lying under a tree with the extendable lead attached to her collar wrapped around a tree and nine newborn puppies wriggling nearby on the ground.

With the dog mom and her babies now back at home safe and sound, Klassen is thanking the people of Souris for their assistance in giving her stressful vacation a happy ending.

Speaking to the Sun over the phone last week, Klassen said she had taken Sienna with her and her husband on their trip because she was pregnant and they wanted to be around if she gave birth.

What they didn't expect was for the dog, who belongs to the same breed as Lassie, to bolt away while the family exchanged greetings minutes after arrival on Aug. 15.

Sienna barked and poked Klassen with her nose, seemingly asking to be let into their pickup truck, but the owner didn't clue in that something was wrong quickly enough. The dog was put on an extendible lead and very soon Klassen felt a tug as Sienna bolted, pulling the lead out of her owner's hand and dragging it along the ground.

No one saw the dog again for four days.

"We started searching immediately and nothing, absolutely nothing," Klassen said. "It was like she disappeared into thin air."

Looking for help, she was advised to make a post in a local Souris Facebook group and reach out to Brandon and Area Lost Animals for assistance.

In response, she said dozens of people came out to search the town for her missing dog. Some kids visiting from out of town reported that they'd seen a brown dog wandering around with a lead attached to its neck in Victoria Park, which straddles both sides of the river.

The tip didn't lead to any immediate discovery, but the searchers started to focus their efforts looking through the park.

"We put out flyers, stopped everyone we saw, asked them to keep an eye out," she said. "Some people were out there at five in the morning."

Except for five women who were involved in the search, Klassen made the decision not to tell anyone Sienna was pregnant out of concern it could make the dog a target for theft.

On Aug. 17, someone sent in a tip that they'd found brown fur along on a trail. It looked like Sienna's, but again, no one could find her.

Klassen and her husband actually spent the night in the park in hopes they might find her, to no avail.

On Aug. 18, Klassen received some assistance from Toni Gramiak, the founder of the BALA Facebook page, who has experience in missing animal response.

"With a dog in survival or flight mode, the most important thing for owners to remember is that they're no longer behaving like their pet," Gramiak said in a phone interview. "They're behaving more like a wild animal, like a deer or a fox. If a strategy isn't going to work to catch a fox or a deer ... it's not going to work to catch their dog."

In a case like this, Gramiak says searchers should avoid calling out their lost dog's name because, in survival mode, it causes them to bolt.

"Even if the owner calls the dog ... it's like you've just exposed the dog to predators. It's like you've shone a light on them and they run for their lives. What we see is the dog look back, tuck their tail and bolt. I've seen it so many times. Of course, you never know if a dog is in full flight or survival mode, but it's always best to err on the side of caution."

Instead of calling their name, she recommends searchers ask the dog if they want a treat or say positive things. She said she'd told Klassen to search the bush to make sure she wasn't tangled around a tree.

That night around 8 p.m., Klassen finally got the call she'd been waiting for: a couple said they'd found her dog.

They came racing over and revealed that they not only had Sienna with them, but nine puppies. They'd been on the other side of the river when they heard the puppies whining.

At first, Sienna was still in survival mode, but after she was led to her crate and her puppies were set aside, she relaxed within five minutes.

Almost as soon as they got home, Klassen got even busier.

One of her other collies gave birth to a litter of eight.

Less than a week later, a third dog gave birth another seven puppies born from a third litter. They now have 23 puppies.

Last year, they only had a few puppies and there was a long waiting list claiming pups from future litters. Now they have enough to satisfy the entire waiting list and have a few left up for grabs for loving homes.

"It's amazing, simply amazing, that these people went all the way across the river to find them," Klassen said.

"Not very far from when they'd found them ... there's a cliff that goes straight down to the dam. It's a miraculous story."

In honour of the efforts of the people of Souris, the Klassens are buying a concrete bench to be placed near the dam for people walking along the park trail.

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