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Tracey is a senior healthcare nurse at Feldon Veterinary Centre. Her spare time is spent supporting her local dog-rescue centre, where she volunteers as an on-site nurse once a week and is also one of the charity's fundraisers.

Tracey is also a keen writer, and her first book *For the Love of Hounds - A Story of Life, Love, Loss and Licks* has recently been published.

## Rehabilitation of a blind rescue dog

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**ABSTRACT:** Veterinary nurses are often the first port of call for owners wanting advice on their dogs' behaviour or needing help and advice on training techniques, whether that be for a new puppy or a rescue dog. Every dog can provide its own set of challenges that can often be successfully managed with the correct support and guidance. We may also be called upon to help with those clients who own a dog with a disability. Providing sensible, easy to follow training techniques, as well as being able to give personal accounts and experiences where possible, can help to inspire and build confidence in those helping to look after a disabled dog.

As veterinary nurses, we can often develop a special interest in one particular aspect of our job. My passion is doing voluntary work at a local dog-rescue centre. As well as utilising my nursing skills, I also enjoy providing potential new owners with support and advice about how to help their rescue dog to settle in to a new home and how to help them to work through some of the common problems that can be encountered when rehoming a dog.

Working at a dog rescue centre is a risky business for a dog-lover and I suppose it was inevitable that eventually my heart would be stolen by a dog in need of help. Prior to owning Scout, I had little experience with blind or partially-sighted dogs and so taking him on was a bit of a journey into the unknown.

Scout came into the rescue centre as a four-month-old puppy. He was found wandering the streets as a stray in County Durham and was taken to a local pound. At first he was thought to be blind and deaf, he had sarcoptic mange and had contracted a bad case of kennel cough. He was going to be euthanised because of his multiple problems, but due to the efforts of three amazing charity organisations – GALA (Greyhound and Lurcher Aid), Lancky Dogs and East Midlands Dog Rescue, he was saved, (Figure 1). Although not deaf, Scout is almost totally blind. Both my husband and myself fell head over heels in love with Scout and the rest, as they say, was history!

Scout had several veterinary examinations during his recovery from his sarcoptic

mange and kennel cough and his vision was assessed each time. It was confirmed that his left eye was affected by a condition called microphthalmia, this eye is small in size, malformed and is sightless. His right eye was found to have a 'starburst pupil' whereby the pupil in the eye has multiple spiky projections radiating out into the iris (Figures 1 and 2). Both of these ocular conditions are genetic abnormalities and have been present since birth. Scout has no pupillary light reflex in the right eye and no menace response is present either. However, it was noted that whenever Scout responded to his name being called, he would turn his head to the right towards where the sound was coming which seemed to indicate that he was trying to look towards the source of the sound. However as Scout seems unable to see anything at close range it is thought that the vision in his right eye is extremely limited.

Before we brought him home, we spent some time on our back garden, clearing any obvious obstacles and cutting back any low-hanging branches from our trees. We reviewed the layout of our house and again removed any obvious obstacles or trip hazards. We also ensured that all of our furniture was moved to the edges of the rooms to allow wide access throughout the areas that he was going to be allowed into. We employed the use of a child's stair-gate to prevent him from gaining access to the first floor, as we were unsure how he would cope with stair-climbing.

To help Scout during his first weeks with us we also used pheromone products - a

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Figure 1. Scout being transported from the pound to the rescue centre



Figure 2. Scout at home

plug in diffuser (Adaptil, Ceva) was used in the room where his crate was placed, in order to enhance his feelings of safety and security. Scout also wore an Adaptil collar during his first few months with us (the collar was changed monthly) to help him to cope with all the new experiences that he was facing and also as an aid to his general training. Studies have shown that the wearing of an Adaptil collar can help dogs with

general learning processes (Denenberg & Landsberg, 2008).

We already owned two dogs, whippets Izzy and Misty, and it was important to us that Scout was accepted by them both. We took them both over to visit Scout before we brought him home and spent time walking them together, (Figure 3). Scout was (and still is) a very clumsy dog and our two whippets sustained a few

bumps and knocks whilst getting used to walking with him on a lead.

We did walk Scout, both by himself, and alongside the other two dogs initially. Although walking him solo enabled us to work on his lead-training skills, he was a lot more confident when walking with the other two dogs. We attached metal discs to Izzy and Misty's collars so they made a little extra noise when they walked. This helped Scout to maintain a forward walking motion as he tried to keep up with them. Scout was also walked using a harness with a double-ended lead attached to provide us with extra help when guiding him around obstacles, (Figure 4). A double ended lead is a long lead with clips at each end. Scouts harness had several d-ring attachments, we clipped one end of the lead to the d-ring that was positioned mid-way down his back and the other clip was attached to the d-ring that was positioned in front of his chest. This gave us the ability to "steer" Scout as he walked by applying different tensions on the lead, i.e. by applying gentle tension to the portion of lead that was attached to the d-ring clipped to the chest attachment of the harness to the right, meant that Scout would automatically turn to the right and vice versa. The section of lead that was clipped to the d-ring on his back helped to maintain a forward movement.

We do need to be Scouts 'eyes' when out walking: he cannot see obstacles that are directly in front of him, and so he needs to be directed around objects such as wheelie bins, lamp posts and cars that are parked across pavements. He cannot see puddles or other dogs' faeces that have not been picked up and has to be guided around them.

On the day that we brought Scout home, we let him into the house to do his own exploring. We were amazed at how he did this. He slowly worked his way around the whole of the downstairs, keeping to the edges of the room as if forming what we call his 'mind map' of the layout. He only needed to do this once before being able to find his way around with ease. He did exactly the same in the back garden.

From day one with Scout, we decided to try and treat him in exactly the same way as we had treated our other dogs. We used positive, reward-based training techniques to train Scout to follow basic commands such as 'sit', 'down' and 'wait'. As we could not use visual cues we used tasty titbits to 'lure' Scout into the desired position. Keeping the titbit close to his



▲ Figure 3. Izzy, Misty and Scout on our sofa



▲ Figure 4. Scout wearing his harness

nose ensured that we kept him very focused on the task in hand.

Using the same lure method, we also taught Scout how to climb up and down stairs safely. We held a titbit close to Scout's nose whilst he was positioned

at the bottom of a flight of stairs and then slowly moved the titbit away from him. As Scout moved forwards to try to take the titbit, his front feet would make contact with the step in front of him and he would lift each foot upwards and place it onto the next step. Each time he did

this, we coupled it with the word 'step' and gave him a titbit. Eventually Scout would learn that the word 'step' meant that he had to lift his feet up in order to climb. He also climbs steps with his head held quite low and uses his whiskers to help to guide him.

Scout was taught the word 'jump' in the same way, although this was broken down into stages. Scout was initially rewarded for placing both of his front feet onto a raised surface. Once he had mastered this, the titbits that we used to lure him into this position were moved further away from him on top of the raised surface and so he had to jump onto the surface to reach them. The jumping action was coupled with the word 'jump' and Scout was rewarded for each successful jump that he made. This command enabled Scout to jump in and out of the car with ease.

Scout has also been taught a very reliable recall. We cannot use visual cues with Scout but he is very responsive to the sound of our voices and also to the noises made by Izzy's and Misty's collars. We practiced his recall for many months with Scout on a long-line before finally letting him off his lead.

Owning Scout has been a big challenge for our family but he has taught us to have a lot of confidence in his abilities. We are there to guide him and to allow him to live a normal life. By using consistent, positive, reward-based training methods, we feel that we have achieved many goals with Scout and that he has matured into a happy and well-balanced dog who is a pleasure to own.

#### Reference & Further Reading

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