



OZARK HIGHLANDS TRAIL/JIM WARROCK PHOTO

# Skills to Train for Trails

by Cindy Howle

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Sometimes the best hiking and trail companion lives under your roof and is only a paw's width away. Just when you think a Lab has exhausted its possibilities, the inherent trainability of the breed lends itself to great trail assistance. "Labs are the perfect adventure dogs," says Mike Stewart, trainer and owner of world-renown Wildrose Kennels in Oxford, Mississippi. "They are interdependent and want to work with people, unlike other breeds that are more independent by nature."

Wildrose is home to some of the finest trained British Labs in the country. Through training numerous gundogs and adventure dogs, they have developed their own Adventure Dog Certification Program, which includes trail assistance.

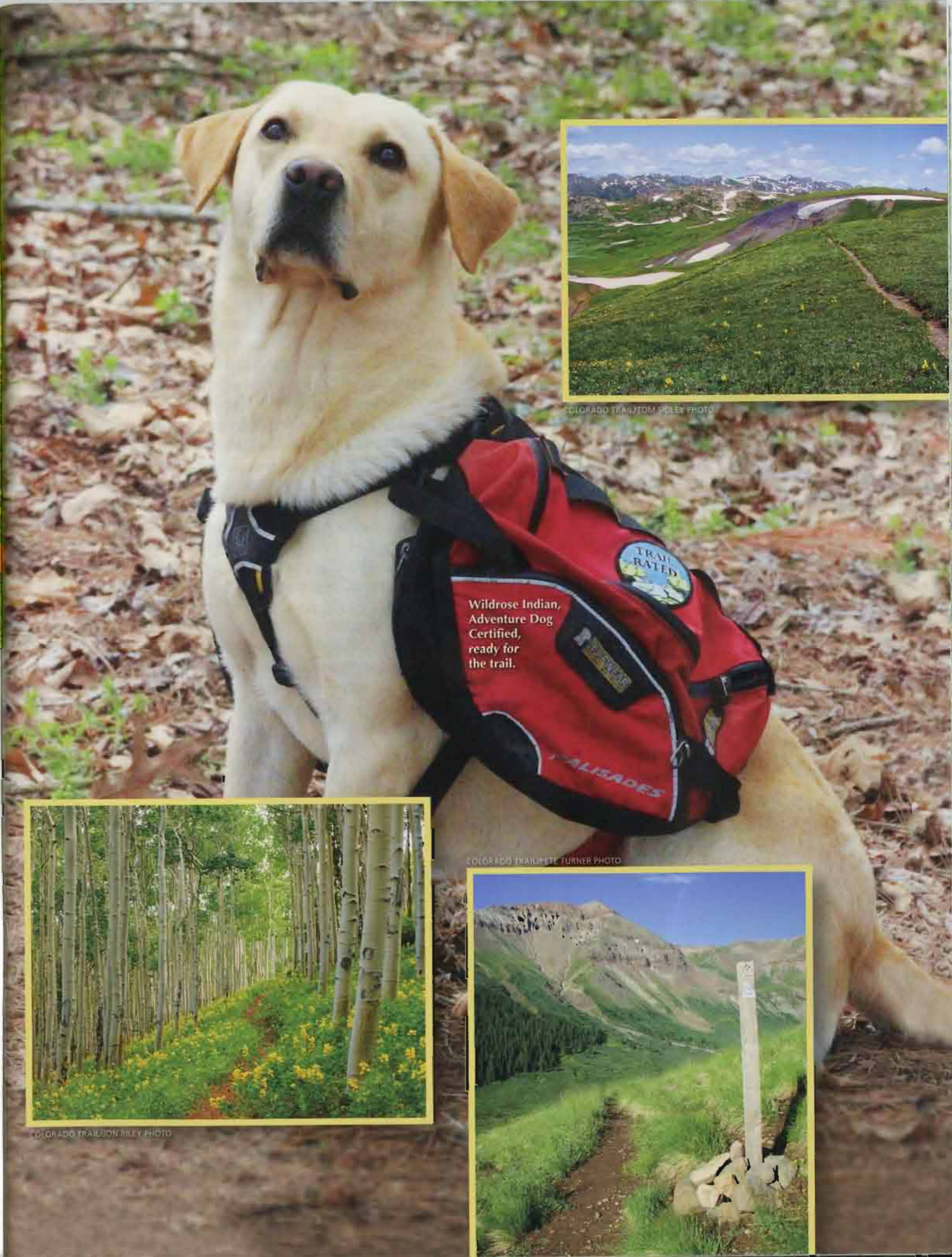
Training time is a wise investment for you and your companion. It is an act of responsible dog ownership and will help keep public trails open to dogs. The good news about dogs and hiking: The skills needed for a terrific trail assistant also make for a well-behaved, take-anywhere dog. And training can be integrated into around-the-town daily routines.

### Three Essential Skills

"There are essential obedience behaviors you have to have for great trail work. These include both on and off the lead heel work," says Stewart. While many areas typically require hiking with the dog on a leash, off the lead is still a skill to train for any trail. "What if you drop or lose your lead and your dog runs off?" Stewart says. "You still want that skill set there."

Practice makes perfect while on loose-leash power walks. The proper heel position is with the dog's shoulder aligned with the handler's leg without the dog pulling or lunging forward on the lead. Train with lots of walks in the neighborhood, then in more congested areas like parking lots and malls before soloing off-lead.

"Sit" and "stay," including a remote stay, are obedience skills needed for steady trail work. A remote stay is an extension of place training and means the dog will not



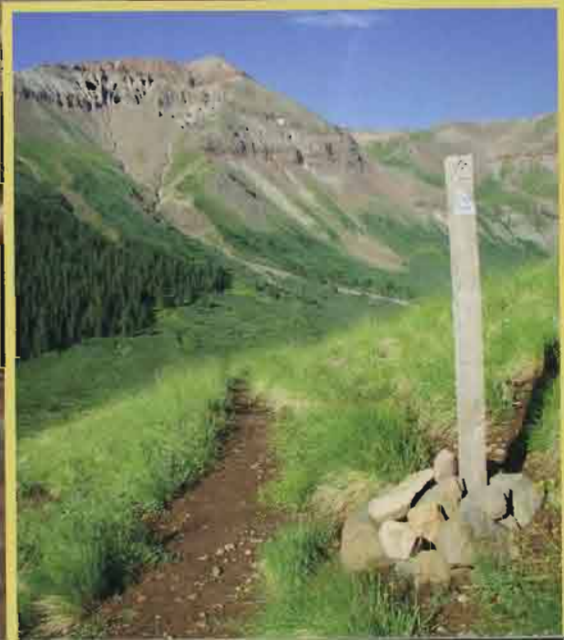
Wildrose Indian, Adventure Dog Certified, ready for the trail.



COLORADO TRAIL/TOM RILEY PHOTO



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COLORADO TRAIL/PETE TURNER PHOTO



Mike Stewart calls Indian to cross.

OZARK HIGHLANDS/JIM WARNOCK PHOTO

move unless told to move while on a given place. Stewart's training tip is to do lots of place training at home with the dog on a mat, and never calling him off the mat. Calling a dog off place can create a "creeper." Always go and get the dog off place.

Recall. You won't want to leave home without it. A responsible dog owner will insist a dog return on command. A trail offers many scents, sights, and movement that can catch a dog's eye. Given a Lab's keen senses, obedience must override instinct.

How do you train for recall? Stewart starts by having the dog heel forward, then while heeling, he turns around facing the dog backing away, and uses the "here" command. A whistle is also a valuable trail tool, with a high pitch that carries distance. Add whistle recall after your dog understands the vocal command. Remember to reward with lots of praise for jobs well performed, and you'll be amazed at how fast your dog learns.

Now the really fun part begins. When your dog is solid, "You have to accomplish all three of these in the face of distractions," Stewart says. Distractions include birds, squirrels, deer, other dogs, bicycles, and other forms of movement you might encounter. Throwing Frisbees, tennis balls, and riding a bike around the dog in training in your backyard are terrific distractions to help gain consistency.

Public parks are an ideal spot to train after working in the backyard. They are packed with people, other dogs, kids, bikes, and often a few squirrels. Can the dog heel with you through movement and meeting other dogs? Or sit calmly among the noise without lunging for squirrels and while others pass through without interfering?



Indian retrieves a dropped water bottle from a lake on command.

Next, add complexity. Footing can be tricky with hikes, especially in wilderness areas, and unless you want to carry the dog, exposing him to bridges, streams, logs and uneven terrain beforehand is sound advice. While you're out and about, heel across park bridges or up and down bleachers at baseball games. Playgrounds can provide a mecca of opportunities. Practice heeling on and across landscaping cross ties or logs on the ground. Place the dog on sit as you cross a log or shallow stream, then call the dog to you. There's no end to the resources and fun to be had around home that will allow your dog to train.

Stewart's big training tip: *Remember to add distractions first, then complexity – but never both together.* In doing so, your dog will end up with a predictable behavior.

### Retrieve

Why not use a Lab's natural desire to retrieve? To let the good times roll, be prepared for unpredictable moments on hikes. Personal items, such as water bottles, hats, and gloves can be dropped on land and in water. Stuff happens.

"Indian, Cathy, Deke, and I are crossing the Buffalo River, and its shallow, and its rocky, and I have mistakenly wore a pair of clogs and slip on a rock. It's floating away, and I send Indian for it. He catches it before it goes over the falls," Stewart says, who requires

retrieval of five different personal items, including two from water for a Trail Assistant merit in the Adventure Dog Program. Be prepared.

Train through a backyard game. Pick an object your dog enjoys, and toss it for the dog to retrieve. Then, place the dog on sit, place the object several feet away from the dog, and send him after it using different objects that would be used on your hike. Your Lab will enjoy lots of "Good dog!" praise when it delivers the objects to hand.

## Kurgo First Aid

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There is no way to prep for every situation, but be prepared for what any adventure might throw at you.

Please contact Kurgo directly at 877-847-3868; send an e-mail to [info@kurgo.com](mailto:info@kurgo.com); or visit [www.kurgo.com](http://www.kurgo.com). This kit retails for \$30; 50-piece refills are available for \$15.





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### “Brace” – For “Oops” Moments

It’s bound to happen. You fall or slip on a rotten log and need a leg up. The Lab at your side can help. Brace is used when the dog stands rigid and allows you to pull on the pack harness or push down on the dog’s shoulder blades to steady yourself. This is not recommended for dogs with structural problems such as arthritis or hip dysplasia. Brace can easily be conditioned at home by pushing down

across the shoulder blades, never the center of the back, then standing up. Push down and stand up, and say, “Brace.” Dogs will quickly learn to push back as they are geared to work or pull against resistance.

Whether on the trail or around the house, “Dogs are better behaved when they have a job, Stewart says. “They need structure, and it puts you in a leadership position.” Find those windows of opportunities to train in everyday living. Labs are always learning.



### A Span of Hiking Opportunities

“One of the biggest challenges is to find a hike based on the dog’s needs” says Linda Mullally, author of *Best Hikes in Northern California* (available in June 2014). “Fit the hike to the type of dog, the dog’s coat, and the dog’s fitness level.”

Always pack plenty of water and plenty of dog waste disposal bags to leave no trace behind in public areas. One of Mullally’s top recommended hikes in the west is Horseshoe Lake in Eastern Sierra, California. As a part of Mammoth Caves, the scenery is spectacular with hauntingly beautiful, woody areas and crystal lakes.

It’s the second most dog-friendly place in the U.S. according to Mullally for hikes, including a shuttle that allows muzzled dogs. With foot bridges and minimal elevation changes, there are several options for short one-way hikes perfect for eye-catching views at elevation levels of 9,000 feet.

Mission Trail Loop in Carmel, California, ranks high on her list with a 1.43 mile loop that is soft on dog paws. It is year-round, dog-friendly with off-leash hiking, including scenic Carmel Beach. Mission Trail is an easy level hike



on a well-maintained path beginning from downtown Carmel to Carmel Mission. A network of more rugged trails can be found on the eastern side of the trail. Both you and your trail assistant will enjoy the streams, summer wildflowers, and dog-friendly area of Carmel-by-the-Sea.

The rugged Colorado Trail offers 500-mile stretches of off-leash hiking on most sections. The trail intertwines with seven national forests, six wilderness areas, and eight mountain ranges. While the trail is marked, it is moderately difficult and ideal for an experienced, physically fit team with navigational skills and tough paws. The elevation ranges from 5,000 feet to over 13,000 feet and offers spectacular views.

Be prepared to meet mountain bikers and horseback riders; June through October is the optimal time for Colorado Trail hiking as sections are covered with snow during winter. The trail area is maintained by volunteers of The Colorado Trail Foundation, and it is important to always leave no trace behind.

Often rated as one of the top 10 hiking trails in the U.S., the Ozark Highlands Trail in northwest Arkansas offers 218 miles of constructed trail sections. The area is maintained by the Ozark Highlands Trail Association, and dogs are allowed except in posted areas and areas near the Buffalo River Trail. Leashing is recommended.

The trail crosses a variety of terrain: creeks, streams, boulders, waterfalls, and nine established campground areas. It’s ideal for both day hikes or longer backpacking outings with your trained adventure companion. You can put those trail skills to work with camping allowed along the trail. No fees or permits are required, but pack plenty of food and water for longer hikes as there are no available groceries around the corner. For terrain info and trail rating specifics, visit [www.ozarkhighlandstrail.com](http://www.ozarkhighlandstrail.com).

Acadia National Park, located on the coastal area of Maine, has 100 miles of hiking trails and 45 miles of historic carriage roads where dogs are allowed on leash (maximum six-foot lead). The Blackwoods and Seawall Campgrounds also allow dogs for overnight adventures. Acadia, considered a national treasure by many, is an amazing spread of biodiversity from ocean beaches to glassy lakes and deep forests including the many creatures that call the park home. Numerous hiking trails are often interconnected and range from easy to strenuous. They provide many options of different terrain for you and your trail companion.

### A Final Thought for Trails and Dogs

“The biggest complaint I hear are trail users who do not pick up dog waste. People who don’t like dogs are looking for an excuse for dogs not to be welcome. The best way to assure that we continue to be welcome with our dogs is to be ambassadors, responsible dog owners,” says hiking trail expert Mullally.

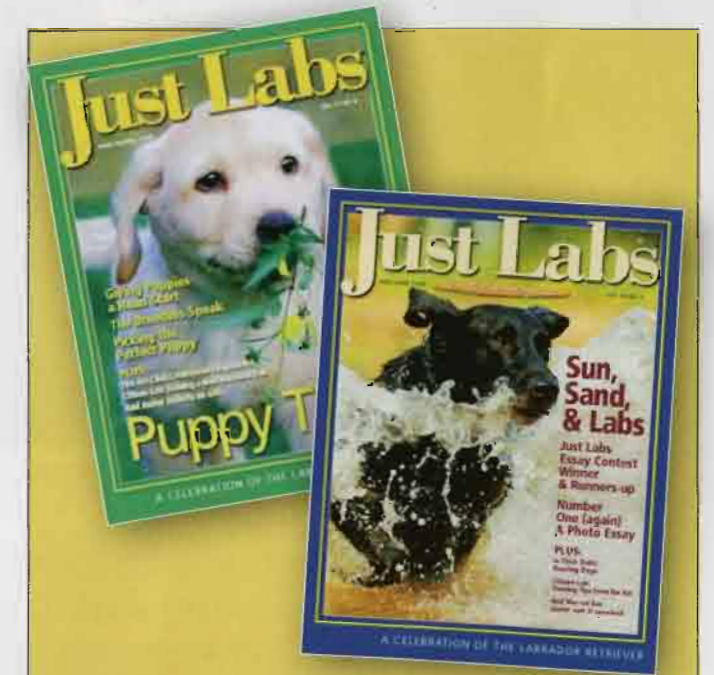
“We pave the way for either being welcome with dogs or with no dogs.”

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### Resources

Wildrose Kennels The Adventure Dog Program [www.uklabs.com](http://www.uklabs.com), (662) 234-5788

Backpacker magazine’s *Hiking and Backpacking with Dogs* by Linda B. Mullally

*Best Hikes in Northern California* by Linda B. Mullally

For tail-friendly hiking trails across the U.S. [www.hikewithyourdog.com](http://www.hikewithyourdog.com)

Leave No Trace, the Center for Outdoor Ethics [www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)