

Wildlife Detector Dogs at Work

In 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Law Enforcement created the Wildlife Detector Dog program in response to the toll that wildlife trafficking is taking on elephants, rhinos, tigers, and other species worldwide. In the spring of 2016, the Service deployed its second cadre of professionally trained K-9 teams. These four cadet K-9s joined the three veteran K-9 teams to sniff out illegal wildlife products at the Anchorage, Chicago, Honolulu, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, and Puerto Rico ports of entry.

These dogs, and their wildlife inspector handlers, graduated from a comprehensive training where they were trained to detect wildlife product scents (such as elephant ivory, rhino horn, and snakeskin) and exposed to work environments such as air cargo warehouses, ocean containers, international mail facilities, and U.S./Mexico border crossings. In addition, the dogs are individually trained for the most common wildlife trafficked items that are seized at their duty station.

What have they found? Here are a few examples they have sniffed out:

- A cargo shipment of live birds, including CITES-listed species, exported from Miami.
- An elephant skin discovered being imported into Los Angeles.
- A commercial shipment of shark cartilage powder imported from South America into Miami.
- In Chicago, many shipments of elephant ivory statues that were being exported from the country.
- In Miami, two shipments of handbags made from Russell's viper skins, a CITES Appendix III species.
- In Los Angeles, numerous boxes of python skin shoes that were concealed between layers of shoes made from domestic leathers.
- In Chicago, a shipment of antiques contained an elephant ivory handled cane.
- In Anchorage, an undeclared alligator handbag shipped internationally via FedEx.
- In Honolulu, CITES listed giant clam meat and stony coral.



K-9 Lockett discovered 12 live box turtles concealed in socks and destined for Asia.

Other Facts about the FWS Wildlife Detector Dog Program:

- The use of dogs to sniff out hidden wildlife products expands the Service's inspection capabilities.
- The seven dogs, and their inspector handlers, completed a 13-week training course at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Detector Dog Training Center in Newnan, Georgia, before reporting for duty.
- OLE's dogs were "recruited" from shelters, and a breeder, and all are Labrador retrievers or Lab mixes.
- For detector work, the "ideal" dog is between one and three years old, has a high food drive, and is energetic, nonaggressive, and outgoing.
- A detector dog's career typically lasts until they are nine years old; however, they can continue to work as long as they are healthy and productive.
- The dogs sometimes alert on "animal" scents that are not wildlife (and thus not regulated by the Service). For example, in Miami, K-9 Viper responded to bovine gallstones (a high-priced and highly prized Asian medicinal).