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PHOTO BY VINCENZO PENTERIANI

BHALU

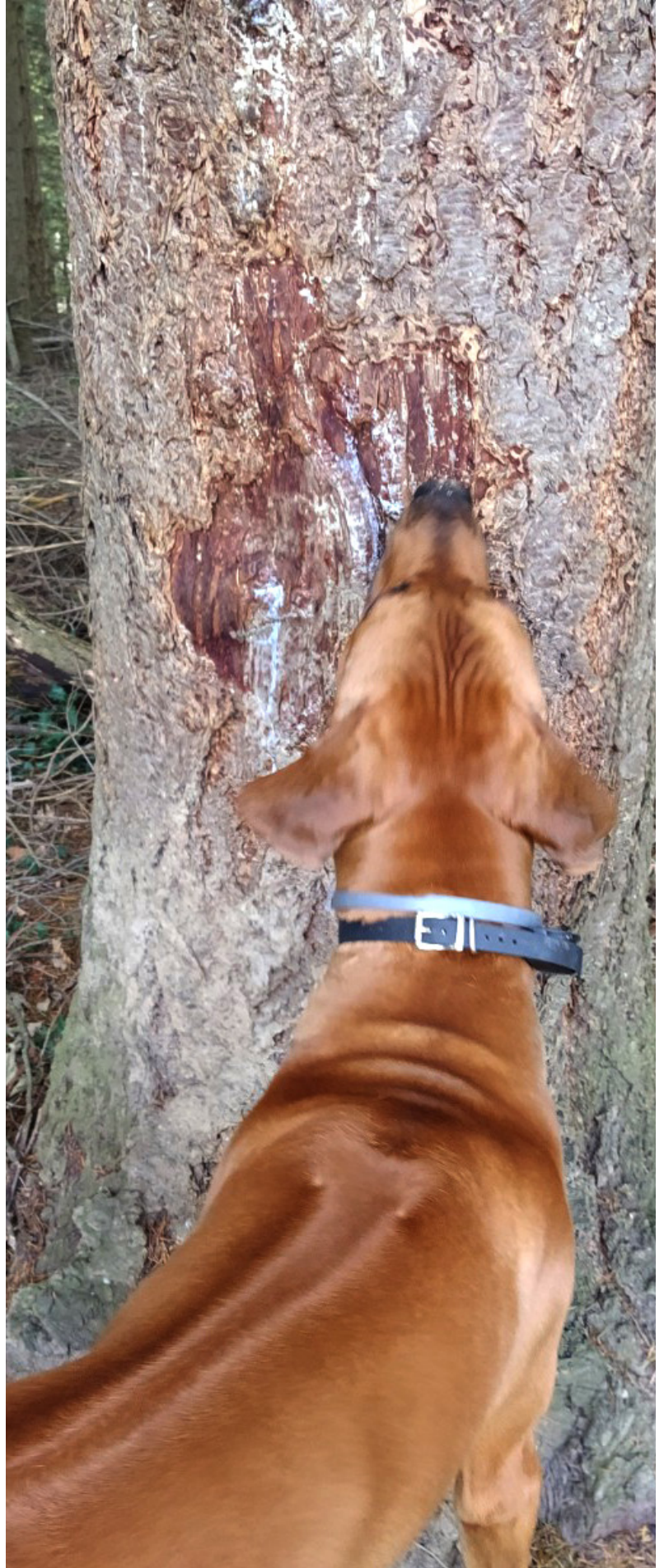
THE BEAR DOG OF THE CANTABRIAN MOUNTAINS

RHODESIAN RIDGEBACK EU MAGAZINE

I got Bhalu just 10 days before the 2020 COVID-19 confinement in Spain from The Algarve Lion Hunters (<https://es.algarvelionhunters.com/>), owned and operated by Deborah Lee Marlow and Pat Creagh. They breed Rhodesian Ridgebacks in Portugal (The Algarve Lion Hunters is an accredited kennel by the Clube Português de Canicultura—CPC) with careful consideration for temperament, grace and form, only breeding from Rhodesian Ridgebacks that have 'soft' natures. I would say that Bhalu's destiny was probably already been determined by his name. In fact, Bhalu means brown bear in the Hindu language. Similar to that of my first Rhodesian Ridgeback male, Karhu, which I got from Marianne Gellin in Finland (see RR EU Magazine Issue 1-2019) ten years ago and whose name means brown bear in Finnish. Why this 'innocent obsession' with giving the name 'brown bear' to my Rhodesian Ridgebacks? It is because brown bears



have been a lifelong passion of mine, as have Rhodesian Ridgebacks. I am a researcher of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) working on the ecology, behaviour and conservation of brown bears in the Cantabrian Mountains (north-western Spain), and during the long days of COVID confinement I have found a way to combine my two passions, bears and Rhodesian Ridgebacks. Bhalu and I are currently living in a very small village in the Cantabrian Mountains, only five people more than 80 years old live here, and confinement was very different from the one in towns and apartments. Every day, during the more than two months of confinement in Spain, puppy Bhalu and I spent every minute of the day together, just him and me, many times alone in the forest surrounding the house. This was a perfect opportunity to develop innate Rhodesian Ridgeback hunting skills and teach him how to channel his senses into the finding of brown bears tracks and signs. By specifically focusing Bhalu on bears, I was also hoping to reduce those typical 'collateral issues' that come when you have a Rhodesian Ridgeback in the countryside. Actually, my first male, Karhu, was passionate about big mammals such as cows, horses, roe deer and red deer. The rule of his life was 'the bigger the animal, the more exciting the chase'. And my female, Kuu (Moon in Finnish), is rabbit, cat and partridge obsessed. Honestly, I was very surprised when I discovered how quickly a Rhodesian Ridgeback could learn to use its natural hunting abilities, which undoubtedly compensates for the quick loss of interest in and focus on repeated tasks that is frequently characteristic of this pig-headed, independent breed. Brown bears are around the house, and so I started Bhalu's training when he was just two months old by collecting some scat to bring home and gently encouraging him, through play, to find it. No more than ten minutes a day, but this was largely enough, and in less





than a week he became an excellent 'bearshit hunter'. Many of you are probably now thinking ...what degeneration for such a powerful lion hunter! But he was so happy to just walk in the forest finding bear scats with me that he quickly forgot about lions. However, bear scat is big and relatively visible and, thus, limiting Bhalu's training to droppings would not have really helped me and my research team (www.cantabrianbrownbear.com) during our studies on brown bears in the Cantabrian Mountains. Some other less conspicuous signals are left by bears, and it is on these that I decided to specifically focus Bhalu's attention. Here, I am talking mainly about those 'hidden' and more subtle signals of bear presence that are commonly called rubbing trees. Brown bears exhibit a set of marking behaviours, including urination, biting, scratching and stripping bark, as well as rubbing their back, shoulders and head on trees, which serve a vital function in intraspecific communication in their species. Except when the marks left by bears on trees are very conspicuous, such as extensive biting or large areas of debarking, the only evidence that may indicate the presence of a bear on rubbing trees is the smell left by the glandular secretion of its odoriferous glands. Actually, scent-mediated signalling is considered the main channel of communication in many mammalian species. To this aim, I have started to visit many different places where my research group and I have localised rubbing trees thanks to camera traps and the sometimes huge amount of fur that bears leave when rubbing up against tree bark. Bhalu was extremely excited when he discovered this new

smell on rubbing trees. It was always amazing to see how fast Bhalu was and how easy it was for him to identify the presence of a bear only by following the invisible trace of the bear's scent. But, the most remarkable thing of his bear training was that I did not really need to train him to understand the importance that the finding of such a signal represented for me. Indeed, for Bhalu to understand the importance that the finding of such bear trees plays in my research, specific training was not necessary. Having started a new line of research on brown bear social communication, we urged him to find as many rubbing trees as possible, especially those where bear marks were not very conspicuous and, thus, visible to the human eye. Or to find new trees where we were not accustomed to looking for bear presence, because bears had not been previously detected there. Bhalu just quickly associated the peculiar smell of the trees where we continuously stopped when working in the field. After having seen that we often spend a lot of time at these trees, looking at them and, eventually, collecting fur, he just decided that a great game to play in the field is to find and show me these trees. No need for treats, I just need to inform him that we are walking in a bear area by saying 'busca el oso!' ('find the bear!'), and he starts to focus on smelling trees. And when he finds a bear tree, the signal is always the same: he runs back to me, or he just turns to me if he is close or on a leash, jumps on me, puts his long paws on my shoulder, and kisses me, happy to have found this peculiar treasure deep in the forest. How magical, thrilling and astonishing it is to see Bhalu following what is for



us a totally invisible trail, the smell of a bear! And Bhalu has thus become a crucial member of our bear team, not only due to the fact that thanks to his big, black nose he is able to find remote and inconspicuous rubbing trees, but also because he discovers bears in unexpected places, where the presence of bears of this expanding but still small population inhabiting the Cantabrian Mountains have still been undetected! However, it is imperative to point out here that when using a dog in a bear country it is extremely important to have a very good control on the dog. Actually, among the most prevalent scenarios of brown bear attacks on people in both Europe and North America is walking an unleashed dog with little or no control over it, a frequently inappropriate and risk-enhancing human behaviour. Evidently, it is better for a Rhodesian Ridgeback to walk and run unleashed in a forest, but this is only possible if you are sure that, if a sudden bear encounter happens (e.g., when walking along a forest trail), you will be able to call the dog to your side immediately. This also means that your dog should al-



ways be visible to you and it cannot be allowed to roam far. For this reason, when walking in areas where bear density is high, Bhalu is always on a leash. A fairly long leash still allows him to check for signs of bear presence close to me. When the situation is safer, that is, when I am working in an area where the presence of bears is not certain or where bear encounters may be rare, Bhalu is allowed to be off the leash but only at a close distance where he is always visible to me, and with the confidence that he will respond quickly and positively if I need to recall him to my side. All these precautions also help if Bhalu encounters a wild boar or a pack of wolves. Rhodesian Ridgebacks have long legs, which greatly expose them to a wild boar charge, this being easily able to severely injure their belly. And wolves are very efficient hunters that may kill your dog if it encounters them alone and far from you. After just one year, Bhalu has become my best friend and an 'official' member of the bear team. He is a great companion with which to share carefree walks in the mountains or along a river, a packed lunch in the forest, or an intense brown bear search during fieldwork. When at home, we share breakfasts, we lie down on the same sofa, we sit together on the soft carpet in front of the chimney, and we sleep in the same bed. Evidently, when at home, Bhalu would seem like a nice, sleepy and calm house pet, but it is in the forest when the most primitive facets of the Rhodesian Ridgeback come out, and I am happy to see him enjoying a really wild life, the life which Ridgebacks have been selected for.