

Man's best friend sniffs out one of man's tiny enemies

Contributed by John Kovach
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Dogs can find missing people.

Dogs can sniff out bombs.

Dogs can detect drugs hidden in packages.

So it may not be a surprise that dogs can alert people to the presence of bedbugs.

"You can train a dog to detect anything," said Michael Morin of Stratford, partner with Donald Frey of Monroe in Stratford-based Bed Bug Finders.

"I was searching the Web," said Frey, who previously worked in the restaurant business. "I started seeing news articles, one thing led to another, and the interest started growing. Before I know it I'm doing it."

Busy amid an increase of reports of bedbugs in hotels and apartment buildings, and made busier by a recent profile in The New York Times, Bed Bug Finders uses dogs to determine if the tiny pests are present.

"It's the same protocol for training for bombs or drugs or arson investigation," Morin said. "In the pest industry dogs are trained for termites, house mold — which is becoming a bigger part of the picture right now — and bedbugs, with the resurgence of the problem in North America, especially pockets of the U.S., New York City being one of them, with the problem becoming more and more widespread."

Morin said bedbug complaints in New York City for 2008 jumped 35% from the previous year, based solely on one part of the equation.

"There were 9,200 calls to 311 [New York's information line]," Morin said, adding that not all who find the pests call that line. "I'd venture to say that number — I don't know what the multiplier is — has to be massive. Hotels don't call 311. Apartment, co-op owners are not going to report to 311."

Dogs are not part of solving the problem, just locating it.

"It's one of the tools in the toolbox exterminators use to find these pests, which are extremely difficult to look for," Morin said.

Bed Bug Finders does not do any exterminating or remediation. The company works independently to locate bedbugs, once hired by exterminators, landlords, hotel owners and co-op boards.

"When there's a suspicion that there is a bedbug problem, dogs don't only verify the problem, they can pinpoint as to how severe it is," Morin said.

"We go into a hotel, and they want to protect their good name," Frey said. "They just want to protect themselves. They're trying to do a proactive effort."

Rather than expose every portion of a multi-unit building to pesticide, the use of dogs can limit use of toxins to a single room or apartment.

"When you give information to the property management company, who gives it to the exterminator, the

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exterminator is not guessing where the problem is," Morin explained. "They're able to focus on the remediation effort."

"I can tell what rooms are contaminated with bedbugs, and pest control can come in and take care of the rooms," Frey said. "We get control of a situation real quick."



In the event that people pursue legal action against hotels, Frey said, Bed Bug Finders shows an effort to address the problem.

"You have a pest control company. What else are you doing?" Frey said. "I'm the what else."

Hotels are now checking semi-annually or quarterly.

Using dogs to sniff out bedbugs can accurately determine how many units are affected and where they are. That way, rather than treat the entire building, an exterminator can use pesticide in the rooms where the pests are found, and prevent their spread to abutting areas.

"If you go to one apartment and treat it, the bugs flee to other apartments," Morin said.

That saves the owners money, and reduces the amount of chemicals released into the atmosphere.

"Without a dog you're throwing away thousands and thousands of dollars of household goods," Morin said. "You don't have to do it. That's why you get the dog. Let the dog pinpoint it."

Morin said he's seen dogs alert to a tiny bedbug eight feet up on a wall, six or seven feet from where the dog is holding position.

While many — because of the name — think bedbugs are exclusive to bedding, Morin said, they've been found in night stands, on headboards, inside alarm clocks, even in the ubiquitous hotel Bible.

"We did an inspection in a four-star hotel in New York City two weeks ago. They're really on top of their game," Morin said. "We found them in two rooms, one in a Bible, one in magazines. They love the glue binding."

Heating systems, especially as they're shut down upon the arrival of warmer weather, can also become hatcheries for bedbugs.

"After they host on you, they go down the heating system," Morin said. "They don't have to eat for nine to 18 months after they host on you. What they do in transition is mate, and heating systems at 90 degrees-plus are ideal to mate in. When the dogs go into apartments or co-ops, they hit heavily on heating systems this time of year."

Ruby and Pasha, Bed Bug Finders' dogs, underwent five months of training in Alabama. Morin and Frey attended the last 35 hours to learn how to work with their canine partners.

"I've always been fascinated with dogs and what they can do," Frey said.

"We both have a passion for these animals," Morin said, adding that he knew "what dogs do for bombs and drugs. They're really quite amazing partners."

The dogs, although more commonly seen as pets, must be viewed as business partners in their careers.

"You've got to use the word pet cautiously," Morin said. "They have all the markings to be a pet if you allow them to

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be. We view them as a working partner. We give them all kinds of love and respect, but balance that they can't acquiesce to being a pet. It would risk the working relationship."

More information may be found at www.bed-bug.us.