

Moreton Island declared cane toad free by sniffer dog



Bolt with his trainer Steve Austin. *Photo: Supplied*

He's a little dog who shouldered a big responsibility.

Bolt, an English springer spaniel whose trainer says would never win a beauty contest, spent the Easter break combing Moreton Island for cane toads.

In the end the super-intelligent three-year-old, a specialist in detecting the scent of the amphibian pest, emerged without a lead, reassuring island authorities one of the few toad-free Queensland land masses remains that way.

Bolt's Sydney-based trainer Steve Austin said he had full confidence in his "little mate".

"I honestly believe if there was a toad around we would have found it for sure," he said.

"We had three hits, one really good one but I would say by the way he responded, it was more to do with residue odour.

"We did a fair bit of work, between 7am and 3pm each day, so to not find anything is a really good sign."

Mr Austin rescues dogs from pounds and then trains them in a variety of detection methods.

Bolt's specialty is conservation, with the scents of foxes, feral cats and rabbits also in his repertoire.

"He's a working English springer spaniel, which is a highly bred dog in the hunting field," he said.

"Bolt is not the best looking animal in the world but he's specifically bred to hunt.

"His breed was originally trained in England to spring pheasant and grouse and partridge into nets and now they are useful in narcotics. The British Army uses them for explosive detection.

“He’s a good little working dog with a big heart and he’s very clever.”

Bolt and Mr Austin were commissioned to search for toads on Moreton Island by Brisbane City Council, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, Tangalooma Island Resort, Moreton Island Adventures and the Moreton Island Protection Committee.

Brisbane Lord Mayor Graham Quirk said in addition to searching for toads, Bolt and Mr Austin’s role was also to educate island visitors.

“They also educated local residents on a range of cane toad issues, including correct identification, safe handling, and about alerting the relevant authorities to their presence,” he said.

“This really was a vital part of the campaign and we are pleased Bolt’s visit generated a lot of interest among the community, so they will continue to be proactive about stopping any invasion from the species.”

Mr Austin has had Bolt since he was an eight-week-old pup and spent a year training him in different detection methods of a variety of environmental pests.

“He’s a dog very willing to work, he has a great attitude to work, he’s a spaniel, he sniffs and runs around and goes to exotic places,” he said.

“If they [cane toads] were there he would have found them, but we didn’t.

“We covered all the spots where people would be coming in and even randomly checked the cars coming off the ferry.”

Source: Brisbane Times. April 30, 2014