

Laws of Attraction

Do dogs have a sixth sense or is it just animal magnetism?

Several years ago, I was visiting the laboratory of a colleague who studies the behavior of birds when I noticed something I considered to be spooky.

There were two banks of cages in the lab, containing about a dozen and a half white birds. We were discussing an academic issue when I noticed that almost all of the birds

were standing in their individual cages with their heads and bodies pointed in the same direction.

The birds were not drawn by something they found interesting in the room, since they were facing slantwise away from the open-mesh cage door, which gave a clear view of the laboratory.

I asked my colleague what was going on. “It’s fall, and if these birds were out in the wild, they would be preparing to migrate back to the south,” he said. “A bunch of researchers has been able to show that these birds, and many others, have a magnetic sense so that they can tell where north

and south is. So the reason they are all oriented in the same direction is that they are attuned to that magnetic information and are responding to it by facing south.”

I asked if mammals, like dogs, have this sixth sense.

“There are people working on that question,” he replied, “and they’ve already uncovered some suggestive evidence that foxes, rats, and some kinds of deer may be sensitive to magnetic fields in subtle ways, so it may be possible. But as far as I know, there is no data yet on dogs.”

The answer to my question just appeared in a report published by a team of research-

ers headed by Sabine Martini of the Department of General Zoology at the University of Duisburg-Essen, in Essen, Germany. They reasoned that if dogs were consciously aware of magnetic fields, this perception could be used to train dogs to make specific discriminations, just like one might train them to respond to a particular shape or sound.

If dogs were consciously aware of magnetic fields, this could be used to train them.

The setup sounds a bit strange at first, but it does make sense. The researchers took three large brown glass jars, placed a bar magnet in one, and an unmagnetized brass bar in each of the others. Lids were then placed on the jars to block any potential odor cues. The idea was that the magnetic fields would easily pass through the glass; if dogs perceive these fields, then they could use that information to select the jar containing the magnetized target.

As a control condition, three jars were used again, but this time, one of the jars contained a food treat. Once more the jars were sealed and, since no odors

could escape, it seemed unlikely that the dogs would ever detect the presence of the food contained within.

The positions of the jars were randomly varied from trial to trial, and standard clicker-training procedures were used. Specifically, the dogs were rewarded with treats when they found the jar with the magnet (or on control trials when they found the jar with the food).

In the phase of the study where the target was food, as expected, none of the dogs learned to detect the jar containing the food at an above-chance level. This makes sense since no clues could escape the sealed jar. However, when the dogs were trained to detect the

magnetic field, 13 out of 16 dogs identified the magnet at an above-chance level. This shows that the dogs consciously perceived something associated with the magnetic field and used it to guide their behavior.

These experiments support the existence of a magnetic sense in dogs and, furthermore, seem to prove that something about the magnetic field is registering in the dogs' conscious perception of the world. Why this ability evolved in dogs, and whether this magnetic sense is used in helpful or adaptive ways to guide behavior, remain unanswered.

Nonetheless, when someone asks, "Do dogs have a sixth sense?" we can certainly answer yes, and that extra sense is one that detects variations in magnetic fields. **FD**

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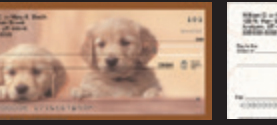

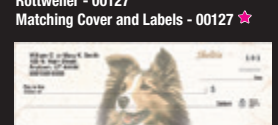
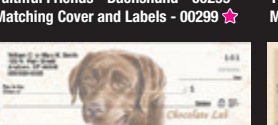
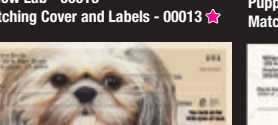

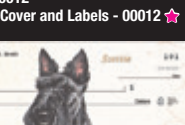
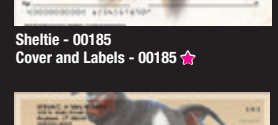
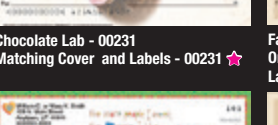
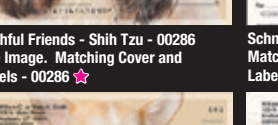
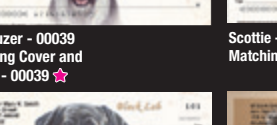
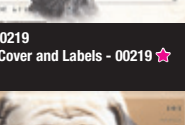
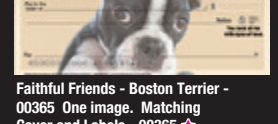


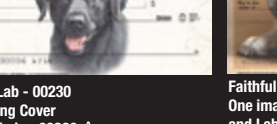
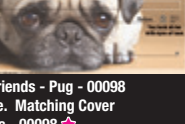
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