

The last word

Live and learn

WE ALL KNOW DOGS ARE CLEVER,
BUT YOU CAN'T TEACH AN OLD
DOG NEW TRICKS, RIGHT? WELL,
ACTUALLY, WRONG, SORTA.
STEVE HOLDEN EXPLAINS.

Go past your local park on a Saturday and you'll see any number of dogs and their owners being rewarded, punished and otherwise conditioned by some dog trainer – more likely, these days, to be known as a dog behavioural therapist. Dog training, you see, is big business and draws heavily on psychological research.

Most of the stuff we know about the way we learn or change our behaviour goes back to that research in psychology, a lot of it on dogs or rats, but even on humans. Remember Ivan Pavlov and his salivating dogs?

What we know about learning – reinforcement and punishment, classical conditioning and extinction, which sounds ominous but is really just the extinction of a response when a stimulus is removed – all goes back to the psychological research of Pavlov and co.

Psychology just tries to explain how we learn or why we change our behaviour. So far as dogs are concerned, though, all the stuff on reinforcement and punishment, and conditioning is about training: finding

ways to increase desirable behaviours and decrease undesirable ones, training dogs to heel, sit, roll over and – in the best of all possible worlds – quit biting people.

The truth is, though, dogs don't just learn because some salivating Pavlov type wants to get them to do something. They also learn because they're good learners.

A handful of Moscow's wild dogs are showing how, and they may be the smartest learners of all. As Moscow-based writer Susanne Sternthal explains in the *Financial Times*, the 30,000 or so wild dogs in Moscow have been thriving because they've learned how to maximise the resources and opportunities available in the city's newly commercialised heart.

As Andrei Poyarkov, a biologist specialising in wolves, explains, Moscow's wild dogs in the Soviet era typically found a niche as foragers or hunters but more commonly in post-Soviet Russia, they're also occupying more human-friendly niches as guard dogs or beggars.

The beggars, Poyarkov says, are excellent psychologists and know how to recognise a soft-touch passerby. 'The dog will come to a little old lady,' he told Sternthal, 'start smiling and wagging his tail, and sure enough, he'll get food.'

Wild dogs have even learned to cross Moscow's now busy streets with pedestrians. Being colour blind, they wait for the walking-man signal at traffic lights. They've also learned how to ambush people eating fastfood – they really like shawarma – by sneaking up behind and barking at them.

According to Andrei Neuronov, an author and specialist in animal behaviour and psychology, though, there's another, if tiny, specialist sub-group of 500 super-learners, called metro dogs, that now live in the Moskovskiy metropolitan stations and have learned to negotiate their way underground.

An even smaller sub-sub-group of about 20 fast learners now actually commutes using the metro. How on earth, or more to the point under it, have these 20 elite wild dogs learned how to ride the metro?

'They figure out where they are by smell, by recognising the name of the station from the recorded announcer's voice and by time intervals,' Neuronov told Sternthal, but also ride only a few stops.

Typically, they take a seat, but sit on the floor if the carriage is crowded, which is why they usually go for the less crowded first or last carriage.

They also know how to avoid the station officials at the metro's electronic turnstiles.

Who taught these dogs? Well, they did, and whether they have a ticket or not, Muscovites kinda like them, and post photos at www.metrodog.ru **T**

This month's Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, and last year's highly commended winner in the Best Columnist category of the Melbourne Press Club Quill Awards for the Last Word, following advice from Max, Jake, Buddy, Rocky, Buster, Duke, Maggie, Molly, Lady, Sadie and Missy.