

Pick of the Litter

"Eco Dog" Scruff is cleaning up England, one plastic bottle at a time.

By Jen Reeder





When Yvonne Faulkner-Grant gave her dog, Scruff, permission to play with a plastic bottle he found on a walk, she had no idea that he'd go on to fetch over 1,000 in a single year—and that he'd become known as the “Eco Dog” to fans around the world.

She just knew the discarded bottle was safer than a stick.

Yvonne's veterinarian had recently told her about how sticks splintered and pierced the mouths of some of the canine patients. So Yvonne had started telling Scruff “no” as he'd move to pick up a stick.

The smart, obedient dog began “asking” before picking up objects on walks—like the pivotal moment with the plastic bottle.

“He looks at me: ‘Can I pick that up?’ So that was a yes—that's not going to hurt him,” she recalls. “And it went from there, really. He thought, *I found a new toy that will do.*”

On daily 5-mile walks around Nuneaton, England with Yvonne and her husband, David, Scruff proved adept at nosing out discarded soda, juice, and water bottles and turning it into a game.

“When Scruff would pick a bottle up, he'd drop it and let me kick it for a while until he'd get bored of it,” David says. “Then we started to feel, ‘Oh, we look like we're litter dropping now.’ So towards the end of 2021, we came up with the idea—let's collect [the bottles] in 2022 and see how many he collects.”

The couple started carrying a cloth bag on outings to bring home any bottles Scruff offered them. On one windy day, he found a whopping 35 bottles, which they added to the growing pile in their garden.

David began sharing pictures and daily counts on his Facebook page with the hashtag #scruffsbottlepatrol. Soon, friends, relatives, and “litter-picking” (cleanup) groups were congratulating Scruff and hailing him as an “Eco Dog.”

“People say, ‘You should get Scruff on the local council. Give him a job litter picking,’” Yvonne says. “You think, ‘Scruff's done a great job,’ and then you see the other side of it and think, ‘But it's such a shame it's even there for him to do.’”

It's a big job, to be sure. In 2022, Scruff collected a grand total of 1,334 plastic bottles.

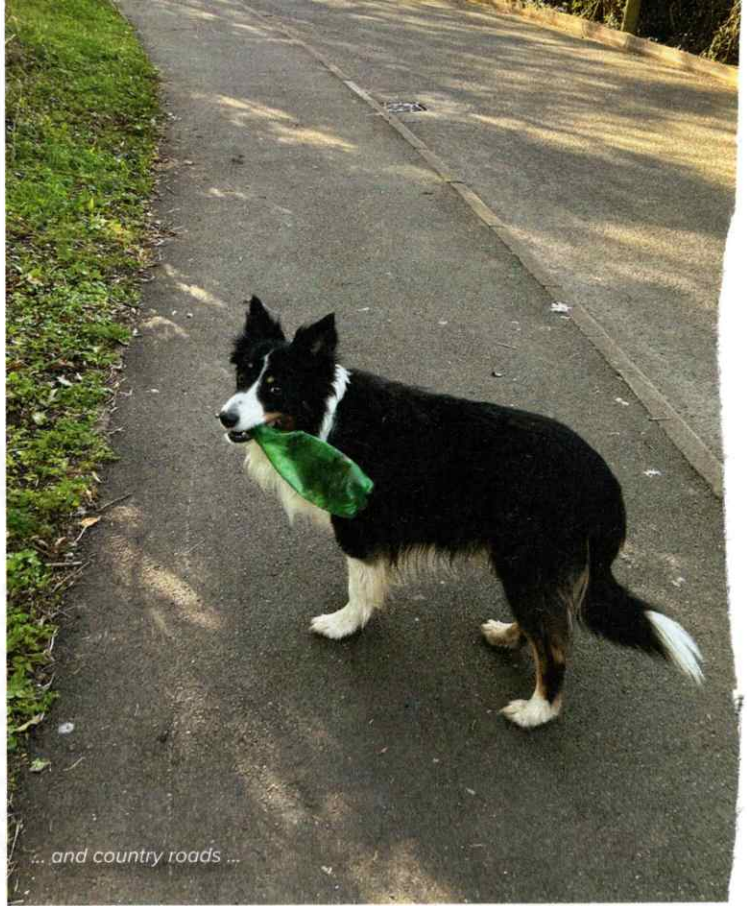
When David lugged them to the recycling center in early January 2023, he was met with disbelief by employees.

“I said to the man at the tip, ‘Where do I put the bottles?’ He said, ‘Just over there.’ I said, ‘Not going to fit.’ He said, ‘What do you mean?’ I went, ‘I've got 1,334,’ and he said to us, ‘What did you guzzle them for?’ They thought I was crazy.”

This year, Scuff is still collecting bottles with his usual focus and vigor (in fact, he found 17 on the morning of the interview for this article). However, his family keeps them only for a month before recycling them. Now they garner smiles of recognition when they drop off recyclables.



Making the world "nicer, cleaner, greener," one bottle at a time, on city streets ...



... and country roads ...

Planet Fitness

It's quite possible that all the exercise helps keep the 13-year-old Border Collie young. David credits an active lifestyle, healthy diet ("He doesn't have any human food or rubbish"), and luck with the loving dog's longevity.

While the family's parrot, Silver, rules

the roost at home, Scruff is diligent about reminding his parents when it's time to head outside for his morning and evening walks—which helps them stay fit, too.

"I love the fact that a dog makes you go out," Yvonne says. "You can have a day when you think, 'Oh, the weather's

terrible. I don't want to go out.' But you never regret it after you've been."

She got Scruff as a puppy in 2009, years before she met her husband. Her older Border Collie, Murphy, acted as a father figure who helped potty train Scruff, while Yvonne dedicated herself to training the clever pup in obedience and



... and near houses of worship. Anywhere anyone can't figure out why there are trash cans, Scruff is there.

making sure he got the exercise he wanted and needed.

That dedication paid off. Scruff has a solid recall—handy for all the time he spends off-leash on walks—and never crosses a road on his own. David marvels at the outstanding job she did and was happy to meet them, and start participating in their excursions since he's active, too.

"Yvonne's trained him so well over the years that he'll just stand and wait at every curb he finds. He won't even try to cross until he's told," he says. "I can often be out walking when I'm on my own and people will say, 'Can you train my dog?' And I'll say, 'I can't. My wife trained him.'"

Litter Letters

They're touched by the outpouring of support from fans around the world who appreciate Scruff's efforts to clean up litter and beautify his corner of the planet. They've received messages and articles from dog lovers in Germany, New Zealand, America, and Taiwan.

One woman in Australia mailed a postcard simply with their names, town, and country—no street address. But



Saving the planet is nice, but Scruff's hobby has had an added benefit at home: Bottle hunting keeps everyone fit.

Scruff is so famous that the mail carrier delivered it to their home in a municipality with nearly 100,000 residents.

"It was from a lady named Mary

West, who had been litter picking for 50 years, and she'd been reading about Scruff. All the way from the Gold Coast of Australia," David says. "It put a lump in our throat."

The couple hopes Scruff's example inspires people to pick up their litter and take better care of the environment. They're particularly encouraged when they hear stories of children learning about Scruff in school, such as classrooms in New York City.

"If he's inspiring children, hopefully it'll make society turn a little better again, because once upon a time it was a lot nicer—cleaner, greener," David says.

In the meantime, they're grateful for all the experiences they get to share with a very special dog.

"He's such a loving dog," Yvonne says. "I just look at him and I think, 'I'm so lucky to have you.'" **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is the former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

