



Ballarat 3352

Meet Raasay the border collie. She's three years old, intelligent and affectionate, steady, hard-working and possessed of a nose that can detect *Spartina anglica*, an invasive weed, among thousands of other interesting outdoor smells. When she detects that target scent she'll lie down and point with her nose, and is tossed a tennis ball as a reward.

Raasay is pictured with her owner Tracy Lyten, who worked for Parks Victoria for 14 years, and trained as a dog handler in urban search-and-rescue, before founding the detection-dog firm Skylos Ecology four years ago with her partner Fiona. They and their team of six animals specialise in conservation work, gathering field data on pests and threatened species for clients including landowners and big organisations such as Melbourne Water and Agriculture Victoria. Other dogs in the Skylos team are trained to detect the regurgitated pellets of

powerful owls and the scat of tiger quolls and koalas, which yield a goldmine of data on the diet, health and distribution of these animals. Raasay specialises in sniffing out incursions of *Spartina anglica* in wetlands, so that this vigorous weed can be eliminated before it gains a foothold. She's also trained to detect the carcasses of bats and birds at windfarms; gathering data on the environmental impacts of the giant turbines is a burgeoning area of business for Skylos Ecology, Lyten says.

Raasay, the only female in the team of six dogs, is "a very clever, beautiful girl – and such a sweetheart, too," says the 47-year-old. "All of our dogs are companion animals for Fiona and me, as well as being working dogs." Sounds like Raasay is a favourite child, though? There's a long pause, a laugh, and then: "Oh, are you allowed to say that? Ummm... they're all so different, and I love them all. She's definitely my favourite girl, though. How about that? That's a diplomatic answer."