

HUNTING SEASON - LATE

Let's hope by now you and your dog have been out hunting many days. You have worked out the minor glitches and things are running like a well-oiled machine. Or are they? You can still train your dog and hunt at the same time. I have hunted with friends with their dog and the dog makes a big mistake. I'll say, "Are you going to correct that?" and they say, "Oh no, we're not training now we're hunting." In the words of the great Delmar Smith, "**YOU ARE ALWAYS TRAINING!**"

When I see this behavior on our training grounds or while out hunting I ask, "Why did you teach the dog to do that?" The reply, "I didn't teach him to do that." And I am telling you now as I tell them at the time, if you don't discourage the behavior then you are training your dog to do it. Remember, you are always training.

Obviously there are things you cannot or should not train in the field. That's where yard work, that boring thing that none of us want to do, comes into place. We teach *whoa*, *heel*, *come* or *here*, and *sit* for retrievers and flushers in the yard. We teach it over and over. When people leave a dog with me for training, I tell them a dog starts to grasp things after 100 repetitions. Yard work is a necessity to keeping your dog well trained.

In the field when you are hunting, you can make corrections if the dog knows what to do and is choosing not to do it. Your upland dog that was so good at heel in your yard or at obedience class is now pulling you through the cover like a Tasmanian Devil. Is this behavior acceptable or excusable in the field? No, stop, put a sling on your shotgun or hand it to your partner. Cut a switch or stick, and proceed to tap your dog on the nose every time it pulls on the leash while you are commanding heel. If your dog has been taught heel properly in the yard and understands what you expect of it, then it usually only takes a few sessions of this heeling exercise to have the dog behave safely and appropriately in the hunting situation.

Another situation is when you're sitting in a duck blind and your young, over-zealous and inexperienced retriever goes ballistic every time you call, stand up, or shoot. Put your shot gun down, tie your dog to a stout post and again tap your dog with the stick commanding, "quiet, sit." Don't yell and don't let his dangerous and disrespectful (to others) behavior to continue. Remember that tolerating this behavior is training your dog to behave in this way.

The biggest problem for people with untrained dogs is that the dogs are barely started in training with the handlers' expectations. No, you can't have it all. Having a dog in the field and in the blind that is not clear on what it needs to do will only produce a confused, untrained dog. You are better off to leave your dog at home and go with a friend and his trained dog. The experience of having the untrained dog in the field with you is for you and is not a productive experience for your dog.

Instead, call your friends (who know what they are doing), explain your program for training and ask them to shoot for you so that you can focus on handling the dog and have a positive experience in the field or blind. In this situation you can focus on your dog, his behavior, and training him for your future together. Most friends who don't have a dog or can't use theirs (for whatever reasons) will be glad to have the shooting experience in the field. But remember, you are giving them a privilege to hunt with you and your dog so you set the ground rules and then they can help you continue your positive training methods and get positive training results.

In the field as the season changes so does the cover and habits of the birds we hunt. You need to be aware of this in training your dog. By now many of the Woodcock have migrated

south, the not so smart, young grouse and ducks are in your freezer, and it is time for the mean season that is anything but easy. The Wooducks and most of the Teal have flown south. The Mallards and black ducks that you are seeing have been shot at since mid September in the Hudson Bay, your ROBO Duck decoys and expensive gear that worked like magic on opening day now seem to be like signs, "Hunters here, Beware." To change with the season, I find at this point I need to ditch the ROBO Duck, call less, and most importantly, scout to see where the ducks want to go. Put out just a few decoys, blend in with your surroundings and be still.

As far as a Rover goes, a neoprene vest is not the end all, but it is a help. I use a propane heater in the late season and it works like a charm for both the humans and the dogs in the blind. I find that these strategies in the field and the blind can help to make a better late season experience.

One of my biggest pet peeves with people handling their dogs is constant yelling at the dog. If you had a practical quartering dog and one that comes to the whistle, you don't need to say anything to your dog. When I was a guide and when I hunt with friends, a common comment is "you never say anything to your dog." It is not by magic, mind reading, or telepathy that my dogs know what to do. They are trained to know what to do and to follow my instructions. The best analogy of this would be a person screaming at someone who speaks a different language as though an elevated voice makes the communication understandable. If the dog doesn't understand the request, all the screaming in the world is not going to help. Don't train the dog to be immune to your yelling. Your words mean nothing if the dog doesn't understand what you are asking it to do.

I would like to mention Deer Season in talking about late season hunting. We are all hunters with likes and dislikes. Be respectful of somebody in a tree stand or hunting a hillside. Deer season is very short. Go duck hunting if you don't deer hunt, you wouldn't believe how quiet the waters are in November.

And finally, safety is the number one priority. Many people don't believe that dogs get shot during deer season and I'm not talking about packs of strays. I am talking about your prized and loved hunting dog. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Keep your dog under control, you (and he) could wear blaze orange so that you are easily distinguished from game and be aware and respectful of both land owners and other hunters around you.

Enjoy the season, before long it will be 20 degrees below zero and all we can do is dream of next year.

Good luck and great hunting,

John

at Kirby Mountain Kennels
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