

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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How to introduce a young dog to birds.

There are probably as many approaches to this task as there are dog owners. Introduction to birds is critical to the development of a hunting dog or hunt test dog, so it needs to be an overall positive experience.

One camp says that you should introduce your pup to feathers as early as possible and let it play with wings or a dead bird daily from about seven weeks old. This may not be possible for a lot of dog owners—not everyone has access to training birds, and not everyone is willing to keep dead birds in the freezer. More than one spouse has been “grossed out” by finding whole, dead birds next to the ice cream!

This camp also says it is ok if the pup chews on or eats the dead bird—that you just want the pup to be “birdy” and love feathers. As you can imagine, this might result in some training issues later if the pup has been allowed to chew and eat the birds, so I am not real keen on this approach. It could result in “hard mouth” where the dog crunches the bird, or the dog could just decide to run out, get the bird and lie down to eat it. There will always be some dogs that never miss a stride, and will make the transition from playing with a bird to retrieving it undamaged, but there is just as likely a chance that the dog will develop a problem that the average amateur won’t know how to fix.

I have seen pups that retrieve birds from the very beginning—at seven or eight weeks—with no issues before force-fetch. For example, when I was at a Mike Lardy workshop, he was running a 6-month old pup on field marks. She had not been through force-fetch, but retrieved the birds without hesitation and delivered to hand all with the basic commands she knew so far. I have also seen pups that start out great with birds, and then hit a phase where they play with the bird or won’t return with the bird. Then there are pups that just can’t make the transition from bumpers to birds without force-fetch.

I will introduce a litter of pups to dead birds at about six weeks, letting them approach it, poke it and drag it around if they want. When possible, I use a pigeon or chukar or quail so the pup could actually pick it up or drag it by a foot or wing. A duck is a bit much for a young pup to tackle.

As soon as any of the pups start chewing on the bird, I remove the bird. I don’t really want them to figure out that the birds taste good! I want them to be willing to approach a bird and pick it up, so playing with a bird allows the pup to get used to the smell, textures, and figure out how to pick it up,

Some pups will shy from a bird the first time—after all, it is a foreign object in its environment and its full smells that it hasn't encountered previously. These pups should just be given a little more time to play, and time to watch the littermates approach without trepidation. The jealousy factor or competition factor has gotten a lot of pups past initial hesitation. However, a six- or seven-week old pup that won't pick up a bird does NOT mean that the pup is a washout. All dogs are different and achieve accomplishments at different times in their development.

Another theory is that the basic retrieving instinct is the critical factor. You cultivate the retrieving and then introduce birds after the force-fetch, when the dog already understands "hold" and "drop." There are some advantages to this approach. For one thing, some pups will play keep-away with a bird, when they may not do that with a bumper. If the "keep-away" game starts, then you either have to do some serious reinforcement of the "come" or "here" command or move directly into force-fetch. If your pup is younger than six months when this problem develops, you really can't proceed with force-fetch because the pup's adult teeth aren't completely in yet. Pups will often refuse to hold a bumper when they are teething, so it is best to start force-fetch only when you know the adult teeth are in and the mouth is no longer sore.

Some pups may bring the bird back to you but refuse to drop it—then a tug-of-war ensues which is never a good thing for a retriever to do with a bird! If you introduce birds after basic obedience, basic retrieves with a bumper and after force-fetch, you have the tools to teach the dog "hold" and "here" when the prize is a bird instead of a bumper. Remember, any transition like this should be done in the yard, not in the field. The pup should already understand the command solidly before you can enforce it in the field. That often means repeating the "fetch," "hold" and "here" commands when birds are first used. It is natural for the dog to savor the feel of the bird in its mouth, to put the bird down for further examination which might include licking it and playing with it. If you already have the tools for the basics in place, then you can piece it together for the pup or young dog and they will be fetching and delivering birds to hand in just a few sessions.

After you have reviewed these commands in the yard, then you can start throwing marks with the birds and reinforce the commands in the field.

You also need to introduce your pup or young dog to live birds. A hunting dog must be able to chase down and retrieve a wounded bird as readily as it retrieves the clean kills. This can be done with a wing-clipped pigeon or with a duck that has been hooded or shackled. It should be done in a confined space where the bird cannot escape from the pup and where you can control the outcome. Again, when you do this depends on the school of thought you are following or the individual dog. The same approach may not work with every dog. You must learn to read the dog and adapt your training program to the dog.

Even if you have been training with dead birds, have introduced live birds and your dog is doing well, you need to make sure that your dog also gets a freshly shot bird. The birds smell of gunpowder, are often bloody and are warm. This is all very different from the thawed freezer ducks we use for most of our training. One of the ways to get birds for your dog if you do not have a readily supply is to get involved with your local retriever club. Most clubs have “picnic trials” or “fun trials” that simulate actual test situations with birds and gunners. They often have a puppy class that uses pigeons and where you will find lots of assistance and patience. This is a great way to help you and your dog put the pieces together.

There is another school of thought on introduction to birds. This is the “my dog retrieves great, so I will run him in JH even though he has never had a bird.” NOT a good idea!! Not only will you be frustrated and embarrassed, but also you will be in a situation where you cannot correct the dog. You are also wasting the time of the judges and the other participants. As I have stated before A HUNT TEST IS NOT A TRAINING SESSION!

Like obedience training, you must master the basics before you move ahead. You use each new concept as a building block for your dog. Whether you have easy access to birds, or only occasional access, you must train the basics. When you introduce birds—as a young pup, or after force-fetch—isn’t as critical as having a dog that understands the task. Having a dog solid on the commands will make the transition to birds an easy one.

Happy training!

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