

Drills to Improve Marking Ability

By Kim Moses
Hunters Marsh Retrievers

I know a sure-fire way to get rich. All you have to do is invent an ingredient that when added to a dog's food would improve his marking ability. Too bad it couldn't be that simple. Very few retrievers are exceptional markers. Some dogs hunt short, others overrun a mark by a country mile. You cannot make a great marking dog out of a poor marker. But there are a lot of things you can do to help improve the overall marking ability of your retriever.

It is very important that when you start your dog retrieving you teach him to use his eyes and not just his nose. Eyes first, nose second. There is a good reason why dogs depend on their noses more than their eyes. When pups are born, their eyes are closed and so are their ear canals; but their noses work just fine. They put them to immediate use by locating the milk supply. For the first two weeks of their lives, they depend solely on their noses. Then their eyes open and they start to hear noises.

When you start your pup retrieving, it is important to start him on a program that will help him develop good marking skills. You need to teach your pup how to use his eyes so that he will not depend on just his nose. To start your pup on a sound-marking program, take your bumpers and flag them. Cut a white plastic bag into two-inch strips the length of the bumper. Run the strips through the rope holder on the bumper. Tie a knot in each flag to secure it to the bumper. These flagged bumpers will really help not only a pup, but any dog, to mark better. When these bumpers are thrown in the air, the white flags will also help your dog locate the bumper when he hunts the area of the fall. He will soon learn to go into an area using his eyes to locate the bumper. We flag our bumpers whenever we get new dogs in for training that are not marking well.

When starting a pup retrieving, you should double-throw all bumpers for him. If the pup picks up on bumper and drops it for another, and it looks like this is going to be a problem, you may have to throw just one bumper. We always double-throw our memory bird on a double retrieve. Throw one bumper, count to two and throw the second bumper as close to the first bumper thrown as possible. We throw...shoot...and throw the second bumper. If you have a problem with a dog not looking at the gunner, have the gunner shoot...then double-throw. Throwing the second bumper really keeps a dog glued on that gunner and watching the falls. This is a good way to prevent a dog from having a head-swinging problem.

For the Dog that Runs Short

Have the gunner watch you, and on your signal, he double-throws the bumpers. If the pup starts to slow down even a little on his way to the bumper, signal the gunner by raising your arm and have him throw a third bumper. You want to keep the pup driving all the way out. Do not allow

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him to hunt short and then have the gunner throw another bumper. If you have the gunner yell or shoot the gun to get the pup into the area after he has stopped to hunt short, you are correcting a problem that need not have happened if you had the gunner throw another bumper before the dog stopped to hunt short.

For the Dog that Overruns Marks

Again, double-throw and have the area salted with four, five, or even six bumpers. Lay the bumpers in a line four feet apart so that dog has to run into a bumper as he goes through the area. You want him to learn to slow down when he reaches the area of the gunner. After you have correct the dog's overrunning problem, and he has learned to slow down and hunt the area of the fall, you can go back to just single or double-throwing the bumper. If the problem returns, go back to salting the area with extra bumpers.

Pups First Gunner

We like to introduce the gunner to a pup by having the gunner stand four or five feet in front of the handler and pup. We have the handler throw the bumper past the gunner while the gunner just stands there. The pup gets the bumper and returns to the handler. When the pup has learned not to pay attention to the gunner and is delivering to hand with no problems, have the gunner holler, "Hey-hey," and throw the bumper. If no problems arise, have the gunner move out another five feet in front of the dog and handler. Keep extending the gunner like this over a three-to-four day period, throwing only three or four retrieved for the pup each time. You always want to put a pup away wanting more retrievers. With pups, we like to use downwind marks. We want the pup to learn to drive past the gunner using his eyes to locate the flagged bumper. With crosswind marks, the pup will start depending on his nose and not his eyes.

Dogs Not Using Their Noses

For the dog that just does not seem to use his nose, we take it out at night and have it retrieve bumpers from an area with light cover. We do this until we see the dog has started using his nose in training. Every once in awhile, you will find a dog that just does not have a good nose. In this case, there is really not much you can do to help him.

Marking Drills

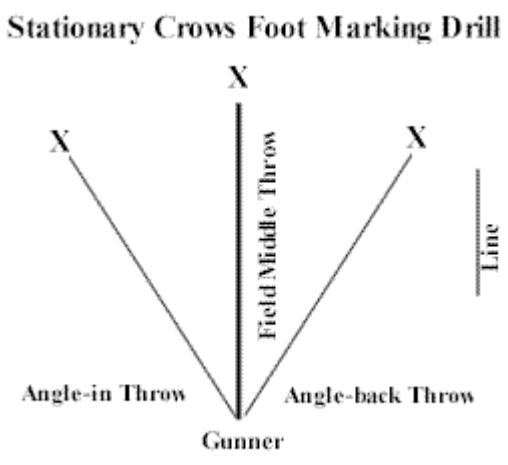
We do marking drills with all our dogs regardless of their ages or where they are at in training. We do these at least three times a week. Our drills consist of three different throws. They are the only type of throw you will ever get at a trial or hunt test. They are the angle-back, the flat-middle throw, and the angle-in. This last throw you will not see as often, but you still need to teach your dog this throw. Every dog has one type of throw that causes him to have to hunt more. By doing these drills, you will find out if the angle-in, angle-back or flat-middle throw is what you need to work on most.

Crows Foot Marking Drill

Do this drill starting out using it downwind, and then add in crosswind. If the dog's marking is really off, you can double-throw marks, being sure gunner picks up the other bumper as soon as the dog has left the area.

Stationary Crows Foot Marking Drill

In stationary crows foot, the gunner stands in the same spot and throws a flat middle throw. With gunner still standing in same spot, he turns his body facing the next throw, and throws the angle-back, turns and faces the next throw and does the angle-in throw.

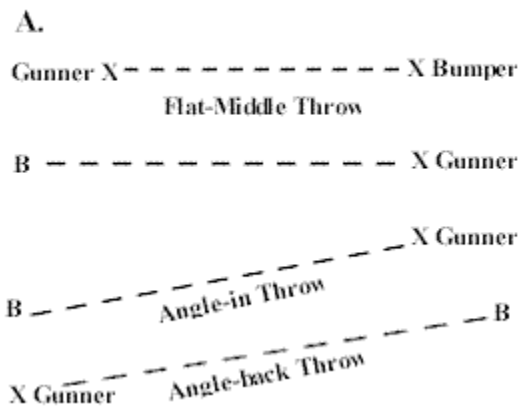


The diagram, titled "Stationary Crows Foot Marking Drill", shows a central point labeled "Gunner". Three lines radiate from this point to three "X" marks representing bumper locations. The top line is labeled "Field/Middle Throw". The line to the left is labeled "Angle-in Throw". The line to the right is labeled "Angle-back Throw". To the right of the diagram is a vertical dashed line labeled "Line".

Crows Foot Walking Marking Drill

This may be used with one, two or three gunners. To do this drill using one gunner, do it as a walking marking drill. Using two gunners, have one gunner stationary, while the second gunner is walking. Using three gunners, have one gunner stationary, with two gunners walking. With young pups, set up gunners so marks that are downwind and wide. With older dogs, have gunners in a tighter pattern. These drills will improve the marking ability of a dog. They are also great for teaching the double and triple concept. For teaching in-line fountains, over and under, etc., I prefer to do these drills as singles, because a dog picks up one, then another, and it helps to build memory. It teaches the dog to go past where he has just been. I have never had any problems teaching doubles, triples, or even quads with any dog that has been worked on the three-man walking marking drill done as singles. This drill seems to give them the concept of multiple marks and the confidence to do them well. For the person who has just one gunner to work with, do both the walking and stationary crows foot

Crows Foot Walking Marking Drill



Each time the dog picks up throws, the gunner moves in where the bumper had been thrown, stands in that spot and throws the next throw, then again moves to where that bumper had been and throws the last throw.

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marking drills. You can do an off-line which will simulate a double. If there are two people and they each have a dog, each person goes out at the same time with their dog. Set up the marking drill, with gunners being one hundred yards apart. Each person has bumpers and their dogs with them. For hunt test dogs, I like to use no voice, just tell the dog to watch. One gunner throws the crows foot for the other--throwing first the flat middle throw using two bumpers. The working dog retrieves the bumper. As the working dog returns to this handler, the thrower's dog, which has just honored, is allowed to pick up the second bumper. The other gun then throws the same throw and allows his dog to retrieve the remaining bumper. You then repeat the process using the angle-in and angle-back throw.

This is a great drill to teach your dog to be steady to shot and to honor another working dog. We like to do this drill using wing-clipped pigeons. This is a good way to get a lot of dog work done when you are short of throwers or do not have a lot of time to train. Remember to always balance your training. Give your dog tough demanding marks as well as easier marks. You want your dog to be successful. When you are training, teach, don't always test! I welcome your training questions or comments.