

Retrievers: Upland Experts



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Retrievers can be taught to quarter and can become as valuable in the field as they are in a duck blind. The natural hunting instincts of pups can be, and should be, awakened and developed early. To accomplish this, take them for a romp in the field or around the duck club where their curious snooping will reward them with some wonderful smells and maybe even flushed birds.

Retrievers usually do not have the stamina of pointers and setters, especially in warm weather. They will function much better on cooler days and in areas where they have access to an irrigation ditch or stream in which they can cool off. If you plan to hunt the longer seasons offered by pheasant and game bird clubs, it's important to select a club that has access to water throughout to refresh your retriever in warm weather.

Dogs should be obedient and well schooled in retrieving on both land and water before you start upland work. Upland hunting can be very frustrating with dogs that do not come when they are called. To begin your flushing training, you will need half a dozen live or dead pigeons and a field of 10 acres or more. Plant the birds in the grass approximately 50 to 75 yards apart, remembering where you put them. To plant live birds, tie their feet together with surveyor's ribbon so they cannot walk and clip the flight feathers on one wing. They will flutter up when your dog finds them but they will not fly away.

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If you plan to actually shoot the birds over the dog when they flush, do not tie the feet or clip a wing. Instead, dizzy the birds slightly by holding them in your hand with the wings against the body and move them around gently in a small horizontal circle. The heads will wiggle a little and the birds will go temporarily to sleep. Place them in the long grass with their heads tucked under a wing. They should stay put until flushed.

Walk your dog to the downwind end of the field and command, "Find the bird" in an encouraging tone. He will soon learn what this means and will launch into action. Teach the dog to hunt 20 to 30 yards in front of the gun, back and forth like a windshield wiper. This is called "quartering." It's important to get the dog snooping about. You may have to actually walk him right in on a bird. Walk slowly. Most people hunt too fast, not giving the dog enough time to work out a scent. Make these sessions short since a young dog tires quickly.

Work the dog in a zig-zag pattern to the birds from the downwind side. When the dog gets out to, the end of the desirable range to the right (30 yards), quickly change direction and walk to the left, calling him if he doesn't see you. He'll soon learn to keep an eye on which way you are going. When the dog makes a find, shoot the gun and have him retrieve the bird to hand. Put it in your hunting vest and move on commanding, "Find the bird." If the dog gets too far away and pays no attention to your direction, call him into heel for a few minutes before you release him again. Get him back under control.

Most dogs will catch on in five or six sessions spread over a couple of weeks. It is very beneficial for a young pup to hunt a pheasant club or game preserve his first season out. Birds are more plentiful, and he can make several finds and retrieves before he tires. Flushing training is one of the few aspects of retriever training where a young dog can learn from working side by side with a more experienced dog. When the veteran gets a bird up and retrieves it, you should throw the bird into the cover and allow the younger dog to find and retrieve it a couple of times.

Sooner or later, however, most good bird retrievers are going to get out of control and too aggressive in their upland hunting. This is especially true on hunting clubs where there are many birds and hunters working in close proximity to each other. Dogs begin chasing missed birds, only returning after actually catching them or exhausting every possibility of doing so. At this point, a professional trainer can help you introduce the dog to the electronic collar for longer range control. Whether your retriever is young or old, there is a good possibility he can become an upland expert, given proper training.