

Upland Hunting with a Flushing Dog: Part III, Beginning Trailing

By Jim and Phyllis Dobbs

A dog can learn to trail just from the experience he gets while pursuing running birds. However, he will become much more proficient at trailing if you teach him to track first.

If you allow the dog to learn how to trail while hunting, he will have a tendency to run with his head up. This causes him to overrun many turns because he is moving too fast. Also, having his head up means he is using air scent to locate the trail, causing him to lose the track when the scenting conditions become weak. The scent will remain stronger close to the ground in the grass and weeds.

Giving the dog tracking lessons will teach him to move slower and concentrate on the ground scent. With this knowledge he will be better equipped to handle the many turns that a bird makes as it tries to escape.

You can begin giving tracking lessons at an early age. A ten-week-old pup will learn to track in very few lessons and it will be a lot of fun for both of you.

At first, we like to use small hot dog slices (about 1/8 inch thick) placed in each footstep. Place about 4 or 5 slices at the end as a reward. These tasty morsels are quickly swallowed and are very palatable to the pup. Cut the round slices in half for the small pup so that he does not have to stop and chew them.

To lay the track, walk in a straight line for about 20 to 30 yards. Keep your back to the wind so that when the dog follows the track he will be moving with the wind and not into it. This set up will help to keep the dog's head down, as scent from the hot dog slices will not be blown toward the dog.

To put bird scent on the track, we use felt pads attached with elastic bands slipped over our boots. The pads are scented with artificial bird training scent or you can scent them with water that a bird has been soaked in. (We use rubber overshoes over our boots so that the bird scent does not get on the boots. Then when we lay a cross track we can take the pads and overshoes off and lay the cross tracks without changing boots.)

It is sometimes helpful to start tracking with an assistant so that the beginning dog can watch the track being laid. He will usually be curious about what the assistant is putting in the grass and will start right off by putting his head down to investigate.

If you do not have an assistant, you may need to help the beginning dog by using your hand to point out the hot dogs on the ground. You do not want him to watch your hand thinking it produces hot dogs. So keep your hand out of the picture except for giving occasional help.

Start tracking with the dog on a short leash. Allow him to pull but do not allow him to run. He will go much faster when he is off leash later but going fast now would be detrimental to learning how to work the bird scent.

Speed

The purpose of a hot dog slice in each footstep is to cause the dog to go slow. After several lessons, we will use a hot dog slice every third step, then every fifth, then every seventh and so on. If the pup is going too fast, use hot dog slices more frequently. This slows him down because he won't want to miss any of them. However, if he does miss a slice, it's okay. It is more important that he keeps working the track forward. So just skip the ones he goes over and keep him going forward to the "reward" at the end of the track.

You will know when the pup has learned to track. It is obvious. He will sound like a little vacuum cleaner as he follows the track with his nose close to the ground.

Wind

When giving a dog his first tracking lesson, always be sure the wind direction is coming from the rear of the dog. If the wind comes from the front, it will cause him to smell the hot dogs out in front and he will tend to keep his head up high (not what you want). A crosswind will cause him to drift to the downwind side of the track. Only practice tracking in a crosswind after he is good at keeping his nose down, concentrating on the ground scent.

Cover

One to two-inch high grass makes ideal cover to begin tracking lessons. The grass is tall enough so that the pup won't acquire the habit of looking for the hot dog slices rather than finding them with his nose. Cover that is over six inches high will discourage the beginning dog and cause him to track with his head up. So wait until the dog has learned to keep his nose close to the ground before tracking him in taller cover.

The ideal situation to begin tracking lessons is on a lawn that needs mowing. Generally, dew on the ground that is vaporizing will make scenting easier as does cool humid weather. Bare dry ground, on the other hand, does not hold scent well and hot, dry or windy conditions will also cause scent to dissipate more quickly.

In the next issue we will advance the dog's trailing ability.