

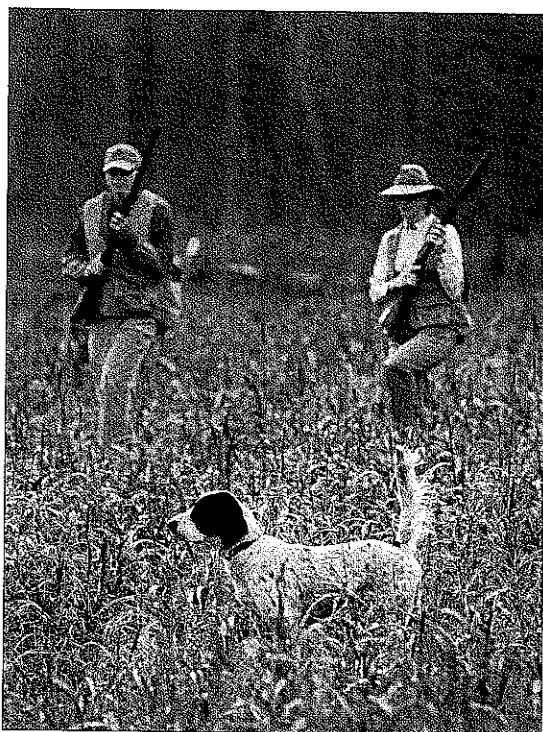
Gun Paranoia

There are two possible outcomes in bird dog training that I avoid with a caution bordering on paranoia: If a dog develops a fear of either guns or birds, we don't have a gundog. It doesn't matter if the dog heels and comes on command and otherwise exhibits exceptional obedience; your hunting partner will spend its days chasing tennis balls and snoozing on the couch if it is gun-shy or has a bird problem.

Gun-shyness is serious and can be permanent. Dogs are not born with this condition. A dog's phobia of a shotgun report is created either through an owner's ignorance or Murphy's Law. Certainly there are lines within various breeds that may be more prone to developing a problem with the sound of gunfire, but gun-shyness is environmentally produced. If an owner is paranoid that a dog will develop a problem with the gun and therefore super-cautious when introducing the dog to the "big bang," then it is unlikely the dog will become gun-shy. But if the owner believes the dog is born a "gundog" and therefore cannot become gun-shy—and as a result does not take the proper introductory steps—the dog certainly might develop an incurable fear of the sound of the gun.

In our training schools and clinics, I seldom see dogs that are 100-percent gun-shy. However, I do see dogs that are sensitive to the sound of gunfire, and it's likely that they will develop full-blown problems if the owners don't change their training strategy.

One of the most common mistakes I see amateurs make is the "Let's see what happens if..." approach. "Let's see what happens if the dog goes to the sporting clays course for his initial introduction to the gun" or "Let's see what happens if I fire the shotgun while the pup is running around in the field." The pitfall of the



Cautious training eases a dog into birds and guns using benchmarks to ensure confidence.

"Let's see what happens if..." approach is what to do when what happens is not what you had hoped for.

Last summer I saw a very talented young English setter. The dog had heard the sound of numerous .22 crimps and had had about 20 pigeons shot over her. She was reliable on point and well on her way to becoming steady to wing & shot. The owner then scheduled the dog to return to us in January to gain experience on wild quail. In the early fall, however, the owner called and said the dog had stopped hunting and had begun plodding apprehensively in the field. The next time afield she stuck by the truck and refused to go into the cover.

The change from being aggressive in the field to becoming a non-hunter had begun on the opening day of pheasant season in South Dakota. The owner had taken four of his hunting buddies with

him. A pheasant had volunteered, and several of the hunters had fired at it repeatedly. The dog never saw the bird. The sudden explosion of eight to 10 blasts from 12-gauge shotguns was nerve-racking to the young setter. The scenario was repeated a few more times that day, and *vàilà*: The dog had a severe gun problem. She had not been brought along through gradual, rigorously observed exposure to the gun, and she simply was not ready for repeated blasts, especially with no bird being visible as a distraction.

The owner told me that he had a friend who was pretty good with dogs and that his buddy was going to take a look at the dog. I told the owner that the situation was serious and that the dog should not be subjected to more gunfire without going through a program of rehabilitation. My advice fell on deaf ears. The owner called the following week and informed me that his buddy agreed: The dog had a gun problem. How had the friend deter-

mined this? He had discharged a gun out of the blue, with no bird involved, in an attempt to duplicate the circumstances of the hunt. Guess what? The dog ran back to the vehicle! One more repetition of something perceived by the dog as very bad is not a solution to the problem—it's reinforcement. Today the dog exhibits no problems with gunfire, but a lot of time and money were spent to fix a problem that never would have cropped up had the owner followed a better program.

We use benchmarks that tell us when to advance—in small increments—in our training and in the dog's exposure to new and noteworthy phenomena. Our benchmark for introducing a dog to the gun is that the dog must be purposefully questing for and confident around birds. Therefore we first introduce the dog to birds. If the dog shows apprehension with a clipped-wing pigeon or a flushing

bird, we know the dog is not ready to be exposed to the sound of gunfire. As an introduction, I first toss a locked-wing pigeon on the ground for the dog. The bird cannot flap and therefore is unlikely to spook the dog on initial contact. Once the dog is bold and confident with the locked-wing and will pick it up, I move on to a clipped-wing pigeon. This bird will flap but cannot fly because I've pulled out a bunch of primary feathers.

If the dog is apprehensive with a flapping bird in plain sight on the ground, I don't recommend finding out what it will do if exposed to a flushing bird. *Every* repetition of something perceived by the dog as a negative can be imprinted. Once I determine that the dog is confident with the clip-wing and will pick it up, I progress to a flushing bird. I will plant a dizzied pigeon or toss a quail on the ground in full sight of the dog. I want the dog to see the bird released, eliminating any chance that the dog will run around and flush the bird from underneath it that it did not know was there. That scenario is more likely to scare the dog and result in a negative association with the flush.

Once the dog sees the bird, I release the dog. I want to see the dog charge to the bird. When the bird flushes, I am intently watching the dog. I want to see zero apprehension on the dog's part when the bird takes flight. I want to see the dog chase the bird purposefully as a predator chases its prey.

Once the dog has shown that it has absolutely no apprehension with a flapping or flushing bird, I plant six or more quail in short cover and turn the dog loose. I want to plant enough birds to ensure that the dog will find some of them. With just a few repetitions of this exercise, the dog will associate the field with finding birds and should start hunting with a purpose. Dogs learn by association, and regardless of whether a dog has a blue-ribbon pedigree, it does not know that there are birds in the field until it finds them. Once the dog quests for birds and demonstrates that it is fully confident in the field, I am ready to introduce gunfire.

The introduction to the gun takes place in very short grass. A mowed area is ideal. I toss out a clipped-wing pigeon, chukar or quail, which can fly only a very short distance. The dog is not restrained in any way. When I throw the clip-wing, the dog will go into full pursuit. Just as the dog is about to get to the descending bird, I have an assistant fire a .22-crimp gun 30 yards or more from the dog. The

helper can't miss; the clip-wing always comes down.

By employing this training method, I guarantee that the dog has a pot of gold associated with the sound of the gun. I'm watching the dog—not the bird—to see the dog's reaction when the gun is fired. I can't do that if I'm shooting at a flying bird. If I see any apprehension at the sound of the shot, I go back to more birds with no gun. If the dog stops and looks toward the gun, then charges to the bird, I go back to more birds with no gun. If I can *imagine* that the dog even heard the gun, I remove the gun from the exercise and expose the dog to more birds. The assistant gradually moves closer until the .22 crimp can be fired from my side with the dog showing no problem with the shot or the bird. Once the dog has been introduced properly to the training gun, I repeat the steps with a .410 shotgun before advancing to a 28- or 20-gauge.

When the above steps are all in place, I plant birds in the field and will shoot 15 to 20 birds for the dog. I will not shoot at every bird. If the dog somehow develops a problem with the gun, and every time a bird gets up a shot follows it, the dog may develop a problem with birds by associating the sound of gunfire with them. By hearing random shots when the birds get up, the dog is less likely to flinch or develop a problem at the flush. I do not introduce the 12-gauge until I have shot birds over the dog with a 20-gauge.

Even a dog that has been properly introduced to the gun can develop problems down the road. Anyone who has been subjected to muzzle blast from directly behind them knows how painful that is. When a pointing dog is on point, I always want to move to the bird from at least 10 feet to the side of the dog whenever possible. When I fire the gun, I want to be in front of the dog, not directly behind or next to it.

A pointing dog likely will be closer to the report than a flushing dog. A retriever at heel in the duck blind or by the handler's side in a dove field or at a Continental-style shoot also will be subjected to gunfire at close range. Try to keep the muzzle blast to the side and in front of the dog. Remember: The dog is more important than the bird. We wear hearing protection to prevent hearing loss, but dogs do not. Keep your priorities straight: Think of the dog.



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