

Patterning & Hunting in Range

Training your dog to hunt within the desired range for the day's conditions probably ranks near the top of the list of priorities for the walking upland gunner. A Labrador retriever or springer spaniel flushing pheasants beyond range makes for a frustrating day—one often punctuated by screaming politically incorrect expletives. Watching your pointing dog disappear over yonder hilltop or play hide-and-seek in the grouse woods is just as bad. Neither experience makes for the kind of day afield any of us looks forward to.

As in all canine training, it is folly to expect a dog to perform with excellence if pre-season training hasn't been done well. Teaching a dog to hunt within the desired range and to pattern efficiently under various wind conditions should begin in the yard and then progress to the training field prior to the season. Strapping an e-collar onto a dog's neck moments before going hunting with no prior training or proper introduction to low-level stimulation may lead to a dog that will not range farther than the hunter's shadow or bolts to the next county. Foundations are important, and the initial training lays the groundwork for success in the hunting arena.

A dog is a predator questing for prey. The objective is not to reduce the dog's drive and instincts for finding birds. The goal is to develop a dog that hunts with you in the manner in which you want to hunt. This requires training. Wishing and hoping is not a sound training strategy.

Whether you have a pointing or flushing breed, I strongly recommend introducing the dog to the e-collar in the yard and not in the field. The sought-after behavior and response to a command is not taught with stimulation. Excellence is taught with the e-collar. We implement



Pointing breeds need to know how to pattern and use the wind, but they can range farther if they will hold point until the hunter arrives.

the 80-percent-compliance rule: If the dog does not respond in the yard eight out of 10 times by complying to a command, it is premature to use stimulation. Teach the command first, and then reinforce with stimulation.

In a proper e-collar introduction program, the lowest level of stimulation that the dog feels should be determined before correcting for non-compliance. In addition it will benefit the dog's processing of why it is being corrected if the undesirable behavior is identified while the dog is still exhibiting it and before stimulation is administered. For example, the identifier could be the word "No!" Give a (known) command you want the dog to comply to, and then, as the dog is giving the proverbial finger by not complying, say "No!" count to two, and stimulate with the level appropriate for the dog.

Once commands have been taught in the yard and e-collar conditioning has been completed, the time is right for teaching patterning and hunting in range. Patterning is the ground coverage that the dog runs in order to use the wind to better smell birds. Quartering, for example, is a left-to-right and right-to-left pattern that is most effective when hunting into the

wind. A dog running a quartering pattern is in position to smell game in front of it. However, if a dog is coursing in a quartering pattern downwind, with the wind blowing from it to the game, this probably will prove unproductive, as the dog likely will bump birds. Later, you will want to train the dog to pattern differently when hunting downwind or across the wind. Whenever feasible, a hunter should try to hunt into the wind. This gives the dog the opportunity to find more birds and increases the probability of game in the bag.

It is easier for a dog to learn to quarter into the wind, so

this is where I begin to teach patterning in the field. I teach flushing breeds to pattern and hunt in range differently than I do pointing breeds. All flushing breeds obviously need to stay within gun range. With pointing breeds, however, as long as they meet the requirement of holding point until the gunner arrives, range is not as critical to putting birds in the bag.

It will help a lot in teaching flushing breeds to quarter if you can use a groomed field. If the prevailing wind is coming out of the north—blowing in a north-to-south direction—then cut rows from east to west. A mower on the back of a tractor will cut a five- or six-foot strip, which is ideal for preparing a groomed field. A five- to six-foot-wide cut row 40 to 60 yards long alternating with an uncut row of the same dimensions is the blueprint, and you can continue this pattern to use as much room as you have. The trainer should walk into the wind—south to north—and up the middle of the field. This will put 20 to 30 yards of the crosswind rows to either side of him. Thus, the dog will never be farther than 20 to 30 yards to either side—within acceptable gun range. Plant a locked-wing pigeon in the high cover on the right

edge of the first row and then on the left edge of the high cover on the next row, or vice versa, and repeat this placement of planted birds down the field. With only a few repetitions, the dog will learn that it won't find anything if it runs straight up the field. The dog will find birds by quartering in a right-to-left and left-to-right pattern.


Because this works for the dog, it will repeat the behavior. This initial groundwork is far more effective than taking a dog to a preserve and letting it run wherever. If the dog finds a bird 60 yards down the field, then it likely will run 60 yards down the field on the next outing. Fixing is harder than preventing. The prescription for a dog that runs out of range is the same: Bring it to a groomed field, and it soon will mend its ways.

I teach both flushing and pointing breeds to turn on the whistle and to recall the same way. Once a dog responds 80 percent of the time to the recall command in the yard and I've introduced it to the e-collar, it's time to "generalize." Generalization means teaching the dog that it has to respond to the command wherever the command is given. I now employ avoidance training. I give the recall command in the field, and if the dog

recalls, I reward it. If the dog does not respond, I notify the dog that its behavior is not acceptable, and then I correct with the e-collar. The identifier could be the word "No" or a low-level stimulation in the nick mode followed by a higher, more meaningful level of stimulation. Not every collar system has the ability to incorporate a low-level modifier with a higher-level correction mode in a timely fashion. I give the command only one time. Repeating a command will not teach the dog to respond with excellence the first time the command is issued. With consistency from the trainer, the dog will learn that it can avoid the correction by responding immediately.

Once the dog is reliably recalling, I attach a 20-foot check cord to its collar. I hold onto the check cord as the dog is running down the field. I give two quick tweets on my whistle—my cue for the dog to turn. (Any cue/command will work as long as the cue is consistent each time.) I then immediately give a jerk on the check cord. In a very short period—often one session—the dog will turn when it hears the two tweets in order to beat the jerk on the cord. At this point I turn the dog loose without the check cord attached. As the dog is running, I give the turn cue. If the

dog turns, I let it know that this is what I wanted with an enthusiastic "Atta Boy!" If it does not turn, I notify and correct with stimulation.

To teach a pointing dog to handle in range, it is mandatory to first establish the desired range. A handler running horseback field trials or hunting from horseback on the prairies is seeking a dog that covers more country. Someone hunting a five-acre preserve will demand a closer-working dog. Where the birds are planted in training dictates the range at which the dog hunts. If the dog initially finds birds at 500 yards and this success is reinforced with repetitions, it becomes a 500-yard dog. If you want the dog to hunt closer, take it to a birdless field, and when the dog ranges out too far, plant a bird in front of you. When the dog recalls, it will find the bird and become more inclined to check back. In training or on initial forays to the hunting coverts, carry a bird in your vest. If the dog gets out too far, plant the bird close to you. Give the dog a reward for checking in and a reason to hunt with you as a partner. 

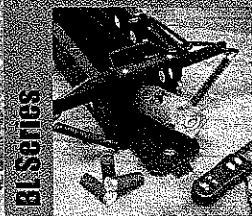
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