



## Blinking Birds

The purposeful avoidance of game-birds by a dog is called blinking. Blinking and gunshyness are the two worst faults a hunting dog can exhibit. Identifying the probable cause and recognizing early symptoms of blinking may salvage the dog from becoming only a house pet and may save countless hours of hoping that the dog develops into a bird finder. Turning soft on point, flagging, as well as bailing out of the scent cone are all tell-tale signs the training is going down the wrong road.

Blinking is normally a trainer-induced mistake in which something goes wrong and the dog makes an association that the trainer did not intend. Repetitive fundamental errors and breaking cardinal rules involving

birds are the most common causes of blinking. Too much pressure or administering corrections around scent is a culprit.

Blinking does not necessitate successive errors of judgment. The dog's powers of association are incredible, and his memory is phenomenal. Any association of the effect, as perceived by the dog, as very negative or very positive is quickly imprinted in the dog's memory bank. It does not take many repetitions – *perhaps only one* – for a dog to identify a specific situation as being good or bad for him. If a dog perceives that a negative effect was caused by being in the vicinity of scent, blinking can be the result.

Additionally, dogs are extremely place oriented. They have a strong

propensity to associate a very negative or very positive effect with the location where the consequences, whether positive or negative, were experienced. Again, it will not necessitate many pairings of a place with a situation for the dog to associate the two. If the dog is corrected at a place where he smells the bird, but before a proper foundation has been laid, he may view any area with bird scent with apprehension.

A fundamental rule of training any breed for any task is, "A dog should never be corrected if it does not understand what behavior resulted in the correction." It is all about how the dog perceives the cause and effect, and not how the trainer perceives the pairing.

For the pointing breeds, certain benchmarks are the key to deciding when to teach the dog to formally hold point, not creep, and remain staunch. Dogs should be introduced to birds and allowed to chase before the process of teaching the dog to stand game. The stronger the genetics, the greater the dog's desire to hunt, means the dog will be more likely to accept pressure around birds. It doesn't take much pressure, however, to make a less-than intense dog consider finding birds and pointing not worth the effort – simply restraining such a dog with a checkcord may be enough for such a dog to throw in the towel.

The stronger the genetics, the easier the dog is to train to higher standards. A dog exhibiting a strong desire for birds and an upbeat attitude toward training is not as fragile around game and is a lot easier to develop.

There is a window of opportunity to move to more formal point drills to teach the dog manners around game. I like to see the dog pointing game on his own before graduating to teaching bird manners. In order to accomplish this, I run the dog on wild birds. The dog will not catch wild birds, and, with time, a genetically talented dog will start pointing on its own. Of course, when the birds fly the dog will give chase. When I see the point deteriorate and the dog begin to root out birds, it is time to take him out of the bird field and start working on point drills.

The bottom line is that it is extremely volatile to put a checkcord on a dog whose bird drive and pointing instincts have not been developed, command, "Whoa," and jerk the dog when he moves on the bird. If the dog was moving in on a rattlesnake an owner would jerk the dog back; it doesn't make sense that a dog would learn to stand proud on a bird by using the same methods as would be used for snakeproofing.

So what is the prescription if a dog does start blinking? Recognizing that blinking is a direct result of a negative association with birds is the first step. If a dog begins blinking, take multiple steps back in the training. Let the dog go to the field, have fun, and chase birds. Kill some birds over the dog, assuming the gun has been properly introduced. Place a strip of duct tape

over your mouth and do not hack the dog in the field. Make sure the yard work is complete before giving the commands in the field. Whatever you can improvise to make the dog want the bird – really want the bird – do it. When a dog begins blinking birds your number one priority is to get the dog enthusiastic about the game it is meant to hunt. Obedience should take a backseat to developing a bird crazy pupil. ●

Check out George's video training series, available from *The Pointing Dog Journal's* Video Library. The series covers everything you need to know to take your pointing dog from a pup to a finished hunter. For more information on The George Hickox School of Dog Training for Owners and their Dogs, and their pointers and Labrador retrievers, check out [www.georgehickox.com](http://www.georgehickox.com).

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