

Puppies -- Teach Retrieving and to Hold

1. General Info - If the puppy is more than 3 months old, don't shoot and use the "little birds" such as starlings, wrens, etc., for your retrieving. They are the one gulp size and if there is blood and guts it can cause a "munching" problem. A dog can develop an eating problem from shot-up birds or wet pigeons. If that happens, only use birds that are not shot--do not use wet or frozen pigeons. If you use the frozen pigeons, let them thaw all the way first. Gas the pigeons (in a bag over the exhaust of the car) so that there is no featherless skin, blood, guts, etc. You can apply a shot and throw them with less chance of the dog eating them. Never use a badly shot duck until the eating or mouthing problem is solved. Later, train using a duck with an open wound, as you will get the odd one in a trial, test or when hunting but use this after the force fetching is done and there is no eating problem.

Don't use birds all the time. If the dog picks them up with no problem, has learned to smell for them and brings them to you with a soft mouth then you've achieved what's important. Train with canvas and vinyl bumpers, and birds only occasionally. A young dog can lose interest in bumper work quickly if they know birds are nearby. There might be times or places where you can't use birds or they aren't accessible.

2. Never shoot a gun for young dogs without a retrieve associated with it, as this is exactly what can cause a dog to be gun-shy. Yes, this is a man-made problem, not hereditary. Once they are retrieving nicely, then add a shot with a small caliber gun like a .22 and throw the bird. The gunner should be out a fair ways from you doing the shooting and throwing, not overtop of the dog. Work your way up to using a 12 gauge and to being closer to the dog with the shot and throw, doing this over a period of time. No rushing. Shooting further from the dog to start is very wise to prevent a gun-shy dog.

3. Stick to 3-4 retrieves at a time for young dogs, never throwing in the same place twice (you don't want them going back to an old fall) and learn to quit right away if he/she tires or slows up in speed or desire. Always end on a positive note, even if you have to throw a 10-foot bumper to get the happy ending. Throwing too many retrieves at a time makes a dog lose his interest, thus the dog laying down, dropping the bumper/bird, not coming back, etc. If you are working on the dog going across a little ditch, as in land-water-land, and they do it correctly, then stop or move on to something else. Don't repeat in the same place even if it is a failure. If they don't do it, repeat the same scenario but move on down the ditch a little ways.

4. How to Teach your Pup to Hold. -- Start by taking short walks with you new puppy. As he grows, he will enjoy these walks and automatically pick up things in his mouth and happily bring them to you. When he is older, a walk with other dogs is good for socialization, but for this exercise, it's just you and your dog. This time will provide several important facets for his beginning obedience and retrieving. As you walk, when the puppy picks up a stick, ball, soda can, etc., call him happily to you by saying the command "here". Usually he'll come right over to you, knowing he'll get a little attention. When he does, praise him for a moment, and then gently take the object from his mouth with the command "give". The key here is to immediately say, "fetch" and offer the object back to the puppy's mouth, say good boy and let the pup run off to play again carrying the object. In a few minutes, do the same thing over again, remembering the commands, give, fetch, and then praise. You'll find that in just a few days of this fun play, the pup comes to you much easier than before, he will start holding the object until you take it from his mouth, and he learns that "fetch" means to take something into his mouth again and carry/hold it. As he progresses, add a little more to it. When he comes up to you, gently hold the collar, tell him to sit, then "good boy", then the give and fetch routine. Next step is to move this fun game into your yard work, using a bumper for carrying, then doing the give and the fetch. Once you start throwing marks to practice the retrieve, he'll already know what to do and where to go when he picks something up. You'll be surprised how much easier they come to you, sit, give, and fetch again and all you did was to take a fun walk in the woods with your dog!

I do this with all my puppies starting at 9-10 weeks on their short walks. You don't want them ever to drop the bumper/bird or spit it out. The ideal thing is to have the dog return to heel position with the bird held in the mouth until you take it from them but this is taught in several stages. (Having the dog come to heel position is important when you get into multiple marks and handling). Also, if the dog insists on dropping the bumper all the time, try sitting on the ground, teasing and playing with him/her. With bumper in hand, scurry it around on the ground, getting her to jump at

it, grab it and hold it. Give it a little short fling if necessary to encourage picking it up and holding it--it's a game to them but one that can help teach. Let the dog hold it a bit, while you rub them and tell them "good dog". Don't be in a rush to take it away from them if they are holding while you rub them. One reason a smart puppy doesn't come back to you is because they know as soon as they do you take their "prize" away!

5. Only use One-Word Commands- Heel, sit, give, fetch, and hold, NO, kennel.... Send the dog to retrieve on their name. Fetch means to take the bumper. So if the dog drops it, you say "fetch"...that is the command to take it from your hand, off the ground, etc....then you use the word "hold" while the dog is sitting, with little taps up under the chin--this keeps the head up and the dog can't spit out the bumper....lots of praising...don't make the dog hold too long at first. Once they know give, fetch, and hold, then you can do the force fetching which is with the ear pinch. It "only reinforces" the commands that the dog knows. Too many people force the dog to learn the commands with the ear pinch instead of teaching the commands first and then reinforcing what the dog knows.

6. Do Basic Obedience along with the retrieving ...especially if the dog is dropping the bird, and won't come in to you. Do your retrieving either in the morning when the puppy is not tired and rearin' to go...or after they have been kenneled for a while. Never train when the pup is tired or after they have ran around the yard and played for a while. Keep them "high" and wanting to run and work more. Do the obedience at a different time or with a period of time in between so the dog is fresh and up for working again.

Reinforce the Commands – Once the dog is older and easily responds to sit, heel and come, then you have to reinforce the command. Just like the force fetching, teach the command first, then apply a little pressure for reinforcement to make the dog know that they need to do the command when asked.

Force to Sit - use a long leash and choke chain. Just keep saying "sit", cuff with open hand up under the chin if the dog goes to come toward you and pull the leash up, holding it tight above the head till the dog sits. Don't go but a few steps away, then try to walk around the dog, holding the leash in your left hand, holding it high and straight above the head. If the dog moves, you pull straight up, staying "No, sit". Every correction is always "no, sit" or "no, come", no hold, etc. Always use the command NO, then the command for what you want. This tells the dog to stop what they are doing and then they hear the correct command that you want from them. After 10 minutes of this drill, you will be amazed. You should be able to walk around the dog, tug gently on the leash while using the Sit command and the dog will actually sit, and not come to you, even with the tugging! Always teach the dog to respond to "voice or sight" commands, not by the tug of the leash.

Force to Come - Sit the leash length away. Since the dog is now forced to sit (you did this already every day for a week), then you will do the same with Come. Do not use the dog's name (obedience classes do this but since in field work the command to retrieve is the dog's name, you don't use it for anything else but that) So, it's "come" and then quickly pull the leash firmly to you. Stay only 3 steps away again at the beginning. Next time, come, walking quickly back ward 2-3 steps further, and firmly pull that leash until the dog runs up facing you and sits. In fieldwork, the dog should not walk around to the right behind you to heel position. When the dog is in front, hold your left arm out and say heel. Take a step or two backwards while you gently pull the dog with the leash wide around and to your left, and into heel next to you. (All these commands are in a normal voice, even fetch, no loud scary voices.) You can work on coming to the heel position separate from the sit, and the come. Just start with the dog sitting in front of you, and hold out your left arm, pull the leash wide and around while you say "heel". Heel means to come in to your left side and sit quietly. Do not use the dogs name with the heel.

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