

First Hunt

If you lay the right groundwork, a young retriever's first duck hunt can be a positive learning experience

“I like to take dogs on their first hunt when they are between 10 months and a year old,” says John Amico, owner of Deep Fork Retrievers in Choctaw, Oklahoma. “If a working retriever from a good breeding is not mentally mature enough to be taken on a hunt by then, he’s probably not the right dog to be training.”

Amico and his wife, Beth Ann, have been around dogs for as long as either can remember. John was once a kennel boy for pointing-dog guru Delmar Smith. Beth Ann walked the neighbors’ dogs for 25 cents a stroll and trained them for 50 cents while still in grade school. Both found their way to retrievers out of sheer love for what the dogs could do.

The Amicos make it clear that a dog’s first hunt is part of an ongoing training program, not the end of it. “The first few times you take the dog hunting, it should be for the dog,” Amico says. “Take one of your hunting partners with you. Let your buddy shoot ducks while you handle the dog. That way, you can make sure the dog follows what you have taught it over the preceding year.”

Choosing the right location for a dog’s first hunt can also make a difference. “I recommend hunting a spot that’s on a point,” Amico says. “Retrieving ducks from a blind on a point with fairly open water is real straightforward – more like what you’ve taught the dog during training sessions. You need some kind of transition from training to hunting, and making the first hunt look as much like training as possible is a good way to accomplish that.”

Even so, the dog will sense the difference between training sessions and hunting and will have to make adjustments. “Dogs have to learn that ducks come from the sky,” Beth Ann says. “They come in from many different angles, and there’s really no way during training to mimic that. What’s important is not to get the dog in over its head. That’s why we stress not putting the dog into situations where it’s going to make a mistake.”

Not getting a dog in over its head covers many bases in the Amicos’ training, which consists of a series of gradually escalating exercises to prepare the dog for his big day afield. Amico says that, at a minimum, he wants his dogs steady to wing and shot, retrieving to hand, and picking up singles well before the first hunt. To get the dog to that point, Amico starts with the basics. He will handle the dog while a bird boy throws bumpers. When the dog is steady at that level, Amico ups the ante by shooting the gun himself. Then he throws live, clipped-wing pigeons with accompanying gunfire. When the dog has reached the final stage, which may take months, Amico says he can “throw a wing-clipped mallard in front of the dog and it won’t move” because the level of distraction has escalated during the training process.

Even so, hunting introduces a completely new set of experiences to an impressionable pup, a fact trainers often overlook. “You have to work with guns some,” Beth Ann explains. “That means making sure the dog is steady when you click off the safety as well as when you stand up to

shoot. You have to think about what you'll be doing when you're hunting and make sure the dog is used to it."

That's a lot of groundwork to put in place, but that's just the half of it. The more broad-based a dog's background, the less likely it is to be rattled by events on opening day.

It's your job to set up the hunt so the dog will perform properly," Amico says. "If you let your dog get away with stuff on a hunt, he may still perform flawlessly in the training field, but in the duck blind, he'll act like a fool. That's a common problem – people put the animal in over its head and expect it to perform, and there's really no way it can."

The Amicos' philosophy is to expose the dog to as much as possible. Since dogs are place-oriented, Amico switches training locations frequently until the dog starts to associate commands with the trainer, not the location. And he gives the dog plenty of opportunities to explore. "We take puppies and young dogs to the woods and fields all the time to let them investigate everything," he says. "I don't think people do enough of that. But that's what sparks a dog's desire to hunt."

In the end, it's all about preparation. "You are doing a great disservice to your retriever if you take him hunting before his basic requirements are fulfilled," Amico says. "What's more important: the number of ducks you shoot that day or the dog responding properly to your training?"

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