

Puppy Head Start Program Proves Good for Gator

Editor's Note: This is the second story in a series about Gator, a black Labrador. *The Oklahoman* is monitoring his progress as he learns to become a hunting retriever.

Five-month-old Gator is now a graduate of "puppy head start".

At last check, Gator had just been bought by Steve Earwood of Midwest City, an avid duck hunter. He was picked from a litter of eight at Deep Fork Retrievers in Choctaw.

Gator was selectively bred to become a hunting retriever, and so far he's on course. He's taken to the tools of the trade like a duck to the water (pun intended).

Labrador retrievers are not only good hunting companions, they are good conservation tools. A good dog will retrieve ducks that otherwise would be lost to the hunter.

That means fewer ducks being killed to fill bag limits. Over a long duck hunting season, it could make a significant difference in the overall harvest.

During the last few months, Gator has learned to swim, developed a drive to chase birds, been acclimated to gunfire, learned rudimentary commands and the ability to discern a duck decoy from the real thing.

John Amico, owner of Deep Fork Retrievers, said one of the first things he accomplished with Gator was to get him "birdy".

By chasing pigeons with clipped wings, Gator was introduced to birds and developed his prey drive.

"Chasing is actually the instinct that causes the dog to retrieve," Amico said. "We present retrieves in a way that triggers this instinct."

Waiting a year to introduce a dog to game birds is a mistake, Amico said.

"Puppies have to be exposed to birds," Amico said. "It's a mistake to let a year go by before you show them a bird. They will either eat it or the bird will scare them to death and they will run from it."

Once that was accomplished, Gator was introduced to swimming by being taken to a pond with a gradual incline. "Training bumpers" were thrown in an animated way into the pond so Gator would charge into the water to retrieve.

The bumpers were tossed a little farther each time until Gator was forced to "swim a few licks," Amico said.

“The whole trick to try and get a puppy where he really likes the water is to get him to swim and he not even realize that he did it,” he said.

Amico used food to manipulate Gator into learning “working words” – sit, here, whistle sit – and rudimentary hand signals.

“We are trying to build a positive outlook towards learning instead of pressuring the pup into compliance,” he said.

While becoming acclimated to guns, it was important that Gator associate gunfire with a falling bird.

That is accomplished by first having a helper throw birds into the air and have Gator recognize the “mark” by seeing the arc of the fall. After you see the dog develop a high level of interest in the bird’s flight and is able to complete the retrieve, “you start overlaying gunfire over that arc,” Amico said.

In the beginning, the gun is fired from a distance so the dog will not be scared. As the dog becomes more acclimated to the sound of gunshot and associates it with birds falling, the gun is gradually fired from closer distances “until you are finally shooting it over his head,” Amico said.

Taking a dog to a gun range to introduce him to gunfire is not a good idea, he said.

“It either scares the hell out of them or it doesn’t,” Amico said. “In either case, it’s not proper training because you haven’t made a good association with a falling bird.”

After Gator became comfortable with swimming, decoys were introduced to the scenario. Puppies at first want to retrieve a decoy, but quickly learn it is not the desired object, Amico said.

Gator also learned to jump out of a boat. That was accomplished by first anchoring the boat next to the bank and throwing out marks. Gradually, the boat was moved into deeper water and the process repeated.

“Everything is just a matter of setting up scenarios that create chained events until a task is understood,” Amico said.

Gator is still not ready for a duck hunt. Now he will be trained to do everything he was taught in puppy head start. His formal training now begins.

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