

Take Your Pup for a Walk on the Wild Side

With over two hundred million nasal olfactory receptors, a dog's nose has a sense of smell that's thousands of times better than a human's. So pity the poor pup that spends the majority of its time in one of the most sterile environments - the backyard. Dogs destined for careers in the hunting field can benefit greatly from early introductions to "sweet dirt" or areas most ripe with nature's aromas. Taking nature walks with your young dog also serves as an excellent way to further its socialization, allowing it to become even more at ease with the world. Most importantly, it's the first step towards developing a pup that actively hunts game in an efficient manner.

The Nose Knows

At birth, a pup's nerve system is still incomplete. It cannot hear or see, and lacks the ability to regulate its own body temperature. For the first two weeks of a puppy's life, its only real contact with the environment is afforded by its developing sense of smell and touch, enabling it to seek out the warmth of its mother and her supply of milk. The instinctive action of crawling towards and finding nourishment is also a pup's first experience of "positive reinforcement", a principle fundamental to its life-long learning process.

By the time a pup is ten weeks old, it should be acclimated to its home and the human routine. You should now begin expanding its world and introduce it to the hunting field. But no matter the age or breed of your sporting pup, the curriculum sequence remains the same.

Location, Location, Location

Successful hunters understand the importance of scouting an area before the hunt. The same concept should be applied prior to outings with your canine partner. Since your goal is to develop your budding hunter's ability to use its nose, choosing the most stimulating scenarios is paramount. While cattle pastures may offer more olfactory opportunities than the average neighborhood park, agricultural and remote, undeveloped areas are an even better choice. Look for sites with varying terrain so the pup will learn to negotiate multiple changes of cover.

Tip: Match the size of the cover to the size of the dog. A pup faced with overbearing obstacles tends to stay too close to the handler and not strike up a hunt.

Keep your dog's safety and physical well-being in mind also. Check for unexpected drop-offs, swift water or other hazards. If your pup hasn't been exposed to swimming yet, your ideal location may include a shallow pond with a graduated water entry.

Tip: Avoid ponds with scummy or stagnant water as they may harbor toxic cyanobacteria or distemper.

Prepped for Adventure

Now that you've chosen some suitable areas and gotten the landowner's permission, you're ready for your adventure, right? Not so fast. A few key items will help make your outing even more enjoyable for you and your dog:

1. Drinking water: Be sure to pack an extra bottle or two for your dog and start teaching it how to drink on cue. This will come in handy in a lot of situations.
2. Collar with identification: A sturdy buckle collar with an I.D. plate will help ensure your dog's safe return if lost. Make sure the collar fits snug around the dog's neck with room for just two fingers. Loose collars can come off easily or hang a dog in low-lying branches. Fluorescent or reflective collars help make your dog easy to spot in high brush and at distances.
3. Check cord: Use fifteen feet of 3/8-inch braided cotton rope with a brass swivel snap at one end and a knot in the other.
4. First aid kit: Be ready for any minor injuries – EMT Gel is great for minor wounds and abrasions. Keep your vet's number on your cell phone's speed-dial.
5. Flea and tick collars and other dermal treatments: Your dog should already be protected with age-appropriate pest preventatives and vaccinations. Bring home memories and experience, not tiny pests which can carry Lyme disease.
6. Grooming kit: Brush out burrs and stickers before the ride home, especially on long-hair sporting breeds.
7. Kennel Crate: Your pup may enjoy riding up front with you, but after a long day in the woods, *your* nose might appreciate a break from the smell of wet dirty fur.

The Outdoor Classroom

Once you've arrived, unload your vehicle and prepare yourself *before* letting your pup out. Countless dogs have become lost or even worse while their owners' backs were turned. Play it safe and release your dog only when you can give it your full attention.

Tip: Don't give in to an excited pup's pawing and whining to be let out. Teach it that only sitting quietly will result in its release - vocalizing will get it nothing.

The next step is the easiest – walk with the pup and let it explore. Let your pup set the pace, but keep it moving with you. If it seems to dawdle too long over a varmint smell, move it along with a verbal cue “hup” (which means “come around”) and walk off in the opposite direction. Keep unnecessary chatter to a minimum so as not to distract the pup away from its work.

When an older or “big running” pup starts paying more attention to its nose than you, let it start dragging the check cord attached to the “D” ring on its collar. A simple step on the end of the cord with a “hup” cue and quick movement away will remind the dog to hunt with you.

As you take your pup on these walks, you will see its instinct to hunt grow. It's now time to teach pup what to hunt and how to find it.

Happy Trails

The first exercise to introduce your pup to hunting birds is teaching it to trail scent. Slice up a hot dog in quarter-inch pieces. Feed a couple to your pup so that it's familiar with the smell and wants more. Put your pup up for a minute (just so it's not able to see you) and lay a straight trail ten feet long with slices every foot. The trail should be laid in short grass, into the wind so that the scent of each successive hotdog is blown back in the pup's face. This layout helps the beginner pup follow the progression of the trail.

Bring the pup to the downwind end of the trail, point at the first slice and cue pup with a word or phrase to begin hunting. "Hunt 'em up" or "birds in here" are typical verbal cues. Moving down the line, help your pup stay focused by pointing your finger and repeating the verbal cue at each upcoming slice.

When the pup becomes proficient at finding the hotdogs on the verbal cue alone, reverse the trail's head to upwind. Now the pup has to follow the trail on its own; there's no wind to help it. Repeat these trailing lines in various locations so that the pup starts to generalize the task of trailing on cue.

The next step of the exercise is to teach the pup to trail birds, transitioning the "prey" from hotdogs to bird scent. Most sporting breed pups are exposed to live birds at an early age to make sure that they revel in the smell, sight and taste of their ultimate prey. If your pup has not been exposed to birds, use a clipped wing pigeon as an introduction. Flip the pigeon across the ground and let the pup go after it. As with the hotdogs, proceed only after your pup has had a taste or two and enjoys chasing it.

Now establish a bird trail by making a drag pole with a four foot stick and equivalent length of string tied to the end. Tether the bird's feet to the free end of the string. Pick a few feathers from the bird's rump and place them at the head of your trail. Drag the bird from this point ten or fifteen yards downwind through moderate cover and hide the tethered bird at the desired end. Wear rubber boots and keep the bird from touching surrounding cover to avoid laying false trails. Bring the pup to the head of the trail and use your verbal cue to hunt.

Once your pup masters straight line trails, add a right angle to the mix. Drag the first leg of your trail into a crosswind, then turn downwind 90 degrees to an end point (your trail will resemble an "L"). This set-up will teach the pup about the strength of scent, how to recover from its loss and follow it to its conclusion.

Quarter Master

So far, you have taught your pup how to find and follow scent to a bird. Your pup is now ready to be taught the next skill – quartering to the gun.

As in your previous training, location is vital. Select a long field at least 100 yards in length with moderate cover, approximately 40 yards across. The orientation of the field should be set to the

prevailing wind. The lateral edges should be well defined with heavy cover, i.e. trees, thick brush, high weeds, etc. To set up the field, you'll need five pigeons, each in its own mesh sack (onion sacks are ideal). Proceed into the wind and place the birds just inside the perimeter in a zig-zag pattern, spacing the birds approximately twenty yards apart. This distance will condition the pup to hunt within reasonable gun range.

Bring your pup to the center of the field and walk into the wind towards the first bird, coaxing the pup to follow along. Let the dog find the bird. Praise your pup, set the sack back in place and move diagonally across the field towards the next bird until you've worked your way through the pattern at the end of the field. What you will observe is that after a day or two of this exercise, the pup will start running towards the remembered bird locations. When you see this behavior, remove the second and fifth birds and run the pattern again. When the pup doesn't find a bird at the second location, "hup" him towards the third and so on. This strengthens the dog's understanding of the quartering pattern and reinforces the meaning of the word "hup".

Once the pup is running freely to the birds, change your walking pattern and simply move up the middle of the field in a straight line. The dog should start to quarter in front of you looking for the birds. Move to different locations with similar terrain features when the dog masters this scenario.

Tip: Each time you change location, remove different birds from the pattern so that the pup always has to hunt. This technique will cause the dog to better conceptualize the task of quartering.

Lessons Learned

These lessons of discovery will develop a confident hunting partner that knows how to trail wounded game and actively seeks it in an efficient pattern within gun range. Your pup's first hunts will be much more productive because you introduced it to the wild side.

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