

# Dogs

## 10 ways to get your hunting dog back in shape



By ROSS MCLAUGHLIN

Opening day is just on the horizon, and for some, it will be your first hunt with your dog. For others, you have already experienced the joy of hunting with a good dog.

Whether it's to help you prepare your dog for its first season, or just to brush up an older hunting companion after many months off, I offer you my top 10 things to help your dogs get ready for that first bird down.

- 1** Your dog needs to get off the couch for some retrieving to get his muscles back in shape before hunting season. It has been many months since he has used the muscle groups in this type of activity. Get your buddies to throw some training birds into a pond and then start adding in the noise of the shotgun as described in tip 3. This will also sharpen your dog's marking skills to ensure he doesn't miss any birds.
- 2** Remember late last fall when the dog was really getting the hang of taking your hand signals to find birds he had not seen fall? Well, without follow-on training this past summer, you are probably back at square one. Set up a drill in your yard and practice the "overs" and "backs" so you don't have to be standing in the boat or field screaming at your dog to go right while it continues to go in the opposite direction. It is really not a pretty sight and when your antics cause the birds to flare from your setup, your buddies might tell you to leave your dog home next time.
- 3** Have you fired your gun in a field with your dog beside you while your buddies have been throwing training birds? Surprisingly, most dogs don't automatically know what a gun is about, so you need to properly introduce your dog to the gun. Start by having your buddy throw a bird and fire a blank from a gun about 100 yards away from you and your dog. Then have him walk it in closer with every throw. The dog learns that when the gun fires a bird "SHOULD" fall but not always.
- 4** Introduce your dog to the new decoys you bought. Some dogs have not seen silhouette decoys or the new full body style. If your dog is only used to the shell-style decoys, you might be asking yourself why he brings back the full body decoy and not the goose.



Introduce the new decoys on land first and then repeat the exercise in water.

**5** The new mutt hut you bought to hide the dog in when you are field hunting looks great, but don't forget to practice putting the dog in it before opening day. Try throwing some hot dog bits in it and watch your dog fly into it. Getting him to stay in it is all about training.

**6** Continue by setting up a hunting scenario with the new decoys and the mutt hut, calling birds in the air (probably hand thrown), and firing shots. And not just one shot. We always shoot more than we should at the beginning of the season and you need to ensure that your dog is still beside you when the shooting stops. In field hunting, a dog breaking or going before he is are ordered to go can have serious consequences. Not only that, when a dog breaks it might flare the goose that has jewelry on it. Oh, darn!

**7** Getting a new whistle is always a good thing. It's like a new furnace filter. They need to be changed every once in a while. I prefer the Jim Gonia mega whistle and I hate the Fox 40. You only have to be beside the person with the Fox 40 to know why. Your ears will be ringing, as will the owner of it if they have their rain hood up over their hat.

**8** If you are a late-season waterfowler, you might want to take a good look at the dog vest you bought several years ago. First, make sure all of last year's extra weeds are out of it and that it still fits your dog. I am not saying your dog is overweight, but it might have grown more since it was a puppy or put on some more muscle from all the great training you have been doing this past summer. Check it

out anyway, as it might make the dog happier in the frigid water.

**9** **Safety** is the MOST important thing you should remember and **never** forget. When your dog is out in the field or water picking up birds, remember to ensure none of your buddies is looking to shoot at birds that might get up and try to fly away. The dog will probably be right behind the escaping birds.

**10** If the dog makes a mistake, the first thing you should ask yourself is this: "What have I **not** done to prepare the dog?" Most of the time it is not the dog's fault. Above all, always remember that you are out there for the thrill of the hunt, and that includes your dog. So enjoy the season with your dog – no doubt you both



have been dreaming about this time of year... since last year. ♂

*Ross McLaughlin is a well-known hunting-dog trainer and owner, along with Laurel Cook, of Culandubh Kennels in Clayton, They specialize in the breeding and training of fine retrievers as both family and gun dogs. For more information, visit [www.foxredlabs.ca](http://www.foxredlabs.ca).*

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