

Check Off These

by Scott Linden

To-do” lists have fallen out of favor in recent years – except among hunting dog owners. Admit it, even if only in your head, you’ve got gear, destinations, hunting partners, and maybe a new shotgun tallied and ready to check off. If a more polished performance from your dog is on your list, here are three boxes you can tick before Opening Day.



Approach a pointing dog from an oblique angle – and with purpose – to ensure steadiness and get cooperation from all parties.

The real problem with steadiness is *you*.

Your dog stands birds with confidence, tail high and laser-focused. What you do next is crucial to *keeping* him locked up. Learn from my experiences:

The landowner’s nephew minced toward my dog on point. Still 60 yards from the now-quivering dog, he was oblivious to our diplomatic entreaties to hurry up, get to the bird, and put it in the air. After all, we wanted to be invited back. Once he had crept the entire, agonizingly long distance, he admired the point, grinned as if he’d trained the dog, took a selfie, then watched in ignominy as the ringneck flushed wild.

Don’t be that guy. Instead, be punctual. The longer you dawdle, the greater the chance a bird will flush wild, run

off, or the dog will do the flushing for you. Assert yourself. Birds and dogs seem to hold better when the gunner moves with confidence. Stride right in and everyone will likely do what’s expected of them. This is the time to show you are in charge.

But choose your route with care. When approaching the bird, swing wide around the dog and you’ll cut off one escape route. Flanking your dog also minimizes his chance of breaking point. Sauntering close alongside a pointing dog is an invitation to follow you into the flush – that’s how we teach *heel*, after all.

In the practice field, consider how you train steadiness. Here’s another lesson: My wirehair Buddy and I were deep into preparation for an upcoming NAVHDA Utility test. Even with my wife’s help on the checkcord, Buddy lunged every time the bird flew. The marriage-saving revelation: Buddy was reacting to my wife tensing the checkcord, holding on for dear life in anticipation of the bird’s flush and his rush. She was telegraphing that tension literally and figuratively. He pulled against her pulling – and toward the bird. Luckily, I tried to remedy that situation with a brush-up the next day, and my spouse was unavailable. No checkcord, no tension (on the cord or in the air), and *voilà!* A steady dog.

The dog has done his instinctive job the moment he freezes into a point. After that, it’s up to us to stage-manage the affair for his sake and ours – it’s an obedience job. A safe, strategic shot and flawless retrieve are the result. We hope.

e Training Tasks

Acoustics and obedience.

I watched in horror as the GPS's red arrow showed my wirehair Manny racing away from me at 900 yards. I called, whistled, and shot into the air as the panic ensued and the distance increased. A sheer cliff, raging river, and God-knows-what-else lay in wait as the number on the screen shifted from yards to miles.

Since that misadventure, I've learned a lot about how dogs think, and even more about how they *hear*. As a former musician, maybe that last part came naturally, but relevant to bird dogs? You betcha!

Of course, our voice is the *lingua franca* of human-canine communication. We give a command, and when our dog "disobeys," we blame it on him. That blame should often be placed on the environment. On a recent valley quail hunt among the tumbled basalt columns of a desert canyon, I shouted for my pup Flick to come. Nada. I then applied former-tuba-player force to my whistle, blasting so hard the pea lodged in that little slot, and what came out sounded more like a dying butterfly's last gasp.

Until voice and whistle failed, they were *loud*. So loud, the "commands" were echoing, beckoning Flick in the opposite direction. He thought he was being a good boy, streaking toward my signals as they bounced off the cliff. I turned around and blew the whistle away from the dog. He pivoted, the pointy end of his red GPS arrow now aiming directly at his grateful owner.

In the West where I hunt, a good chukar dog will range 300 or more yards. Unless you're a champion yodeler, you're sunk if you rely on verbal commands. Ditto whistles. But a waving arm, pointed in the direction you want him to go, will likely be seen by that four-legged speck on the ridgeline. Teach fundamental hand signals and enjoy those epic casts.

Long before GoPro, we experimented with "dog-cams" on my TV show. Watching that raw video, I learned it's an audio circus at dog level. The little pops and crackles we hear sound like a freeway accident to a dog. Consider what's assaulting those floppy ears: collar tags, a bell jingling, brush crashing, screeching wind, rushing water, a beeper collar, his own panting. And you're 50 yards away screaming at the top of your lungs, hurling frantic commands into an auditory black hole. Again, think *hand signals*.

Technology is a boon for helping our dogs excel. Supplement your vocabulary with the *other* buttons on your transmitter. "Vibrate," "beep," and "tone" become extensions of your voice, extending your range to that of the e-collar, often more than a mile. Try yelling, blowing, or waving that far. I dare ya.

So the next time your dog "disobeys" you, don't jump to the inevitable conclusion. It may not be stupidity, blatant disregard, or stubbornness. Your dog may not be able to hear you.

*Stunning...
and a natural
echo chamber.*



They're called "bird dogs" for a reason.

Overtime, paid vacations, and cash bonuses are not on your dog's list of priorities. He has an evolving menu of rewards you can use to compensate him for good work, but we often give short shrift to the most important one: birds. His reason for living is to pursue and capture birds. Rewarding your dog with his be-all and end-all simply makes sense.

Here's an example: Your dog is covering ground methodically, assertively, and holding his point. When that sharptail flies, he's even steady. Safe shot, *fetch*, and he powers back, bird gently held between slobbering lips. And we immediately snatch it away.

That doesn't make much sense. Unless he's chomping or chewing, why not let him hold a bird once he sidles up to you? The intoxicating smell, taste, even the texture of feathers on tongue has got to be heaven for a bird dog. And we spoil it.

So he understands I'm not after his bird (at least for a bit), I'll often put my hands in my pockets, sit down, or turn my side to him while he's got a bird in his mouth, as long as he stays close. With a pup, stepping on his checkcord will keep him nearby without a collar grab that's interpreted as prelude to stealing his bird.

More and more pro trainers are glomming on to another trick, especially useful with young dogs. First, remember that a "point" is merely a pause before our dog pounces on his prey – the bird. Our job is to prolong that pause until we (or the dog, for some) fly the bird and shoot it. Eventually, our hope is to prolong that pause until we command, "Fetch."

That's when your dog is paid off. A dead bird in the mouth is like winning the lottery. So for good work, make "good boy" a bird. Use it instead of food treats. Sure, you must control that part (give a brief snuffle, or hold the bird while he mouths it until you force-fetch him, for example).

I know this is counter to many old-school training methods that insist dogs understand the "Alpha dog" (you) dominates the entire relationship. In that method, you pick up most if not all downed birds so he learns "who's boss." Piffle! Try this method instead with your young dog and be surprised at how much quicker he becomes a steady pointer.

Without training, our partner would simply swallow most birds, maybe deconstructing them first. With careful, thought-through tactics, we can forestall that while still allowing him to savor the primordial reward of prey in his mouth, and jet-propel his training.



The ultimate reward for a bird dog.

Sure, we have plenty to do as hunting season looms. But checking off these three boxes pays dividends in the years to come. For both of you.

