

THE SECOND HUNT

By Bill Dillon

There's a point, a flush of birds rising and two birds come down. The young dog had worked perfectly you thought and you got a killing shot on both birds. The dog brings back one with a retrieve to hand. Now he returns for the second bird but it's not where you both thought it fell. You're sure it was dead but the dog doesn't find it. You're both looking now but no bird. After a few minutes you both start to doubt the certainty of where you thought the bird had dropped. He must have been a runner. That double you thought you had is now a single with a runner – you both want to move on, the dog wanting to find another bird and you have lost patience. You both move on to the next likely cover thinking that you gave it your best shot.

This scenario happens thousands of times every hunting season. It doesn't matter whether you hunt with flushers or pointers, the hunt dead, or as I call it "the second hunt", can be as important or many times more important than the first hunt. The majority of our training is directed toward the efforts of the first hunt: the dog working cover, the point or the flush, the shot and the retrieve. But a small percentage of training is directly delegated toward the second hunt – finding a downed bird that has moved.

The released birds that many use for training or the liberated birds that are shot at many game farms are great exposure for our dogs, but in most cases they don't have the survival instincts of wild birds. Wild birds fly differently and they die differently. What does that equate to in relationship to wild bird hunts and the training of our dogs and ourselves for such? Lost cripples that should have been in the game bag.

I strictly hunt wild pheasants here in South Dakota with clients who use all kinds of different breeds of upland dogs. The ability to produce through the second hunt, for both hunter and dog, is of paramount importance. I would say that 50%, if not more, of the pheasant shot are not dead when they hit the ground and they are going to move somewhere. It may be five yards or a hundred yards but they will move to different cover. That will to survive is an automatic reflex. I can't tell you how many birds I have seen hit the ground stone dead (we thought) and the next thing you know they're up and running to the next section. Or you get to where you marked the bird's fall and feathers are lying all around and the pheasant is gone. I think we all have experienced such scenarios. So how do we educate ourselves and train our dogs to these conditions, because in order to train our dogs we must educate ourselves first.

A wild bird is just that – wild. The environment you are hunting him in is his back yard and where he has been raised. He is hunted every day by predators on the ground and from the air. His instinct to survive comes from generations of survival of the fittest. One example of how evolution has carried over in just our time is the cackle of a rooster. As a young hunter I would identify a rooster by the cackle he made on the rise to flight, but today of the thousands of birds I see rise during a South Dakota hunting season less than ten percent cackle. The cacklers got shot and the non-vocal pheasants have survived to become the breeders.

In South Dakota one and one-half million birds are killed on average every year and eighty percent of those birds are that year's hatch. The other twenty percent are birds that carried over and have been through a previous hunting season, and the older "big spur" birds from previous seasons are the "Rambo's" of them all. Other species, quail, partridge, Chukars, sharp tail, etc. all have their own specialties to survive as well. We need to understand them. Understanding relevant factors and applying them are essential.

When that bird goes down and he's right where you mark him, great but don't expect it. So begin now training yourself as well as your dog. Train yourself to:

- Let the dog go to the mark and give him space. He's the one with the nose not you. Keep saying, "hunt dead" if he goes off after he's worked the immediate area. Let him go – watch his body action to see if he's still birdy.

- At the marked area after the dog has worked it, look for loose feathers lying around. Sometimes depending on scenting conditions the dog can be brought back and will pick up the scent off those feathers.
- When you go into the mark area walk easy. Everywhere you step you are laying down your own scent, which only adds more to the equation.
- Understand the scenting conditions. Is it dry, windy, damp, calm? All will affect the ground scent.
- Be aware of the wind direction. I see many guys try to bring their dogs in up-wind to find a bird. A dog has to have wind in their nose to pick up the scent cone. The dog in this situation may cast to work the wind and pick up the scent. Let him work that wind.
- Believe your dog. In most cases that dog has a better handle on it than you do. A dog doesn't have just one sense – his nose. He also has sight and hearing and he uses them all. A couple of examples of sight and hearing are:

Last season I was hunting sharp tail grouse. The dog pointed, the grouse came up and I shot twice and thought I had missed both times. As you know sharpies fly forever. My dog had held to mark for several seconds as the grouse flew over the horizon. He took off at a dead run toward that horizon and I thought to myself he was chasing the bird but I let him go. When he quickly came back over the horizon he had a dead sharp tail in his mouth. He had seen something I had not.

A client's dog had pointed a bird with a strong wind in his face while his owner was walking in on the point. I could see the dog had heard something just to his right. The dog was solid on point but his eye was looking towards the rear with his ears perked. I told the hunter that I thought there was one behind the dog. After the first bird flushed and was shot, the dog just turned around and pointed again. The second bird was also shot. He had scented one and had heard the second.

How do we train our dog to hunt the second hunt? Before the hunt dead facet of training can be started keep in mind the dog's other training should be well established with the fetch command well understood. A training method I use is to plant some training birds and clip the primary feathers on another bird so it can't fly and I put that bird in my bird bag. As I'm working the dog into the planted training birds I drop the wing-clipped bird into some cover remembering where I dropped it and not letting the dog see me do it. Once the dog has found the planted training birds and they've been shot and retrieved, I command the dog to hunt dead by repeating the command "dead" while working the dog down wind of the dropped "crippled" bird. Once the dog has found the scent of the dropped bird use the commands "dead" and "fetch". By doing this the dog will connect the command "dead" to looking for a crippled bird. It becomes a new command with a new action required. You're now at the beginning level for the second hunt. The dead command becomes a directive to look for a downed bird, the fetch command to retrieve it to you.

The best method of continuing the training for the second hunt is to expose your dog to wild birds and situations related to wild birds. Once that dog has experienced that second hunt and produced that bird you would have previously walked away from, you'll both realize that those runners can be retrieved if you let your dog utilize all of his facilities and you spend the time and effort in training and exposure. You're not always going to succeed, but the retrieval of ones that you do get will be great memories, wonderful upland game on your table and less feathered cuisine on Mr. Coyote's menu. The memories of finds and retrieves made during the second hunt are usually, as I call them, the hat tricks - those that you ask yourself "how did that dog do that?" The best of them will be ones that you can't teach, all you can do is put the dog in situations where all the breeding, training, exposure and desire accomplish the unthinkable and the bird that should have gotten away didn't.