

Training with Live Birds

The sandhill cranes are circling above and we've seen several flocks of snow geese glistening in the evening light. The cackles of cock pheasants are ringing throughout the countryside. It is late October in South Dakota—a perfect

breed, learning to hold point, hunt in range, deliver birds to hand and/or sit to the whistle. Thus, I am a strong advocate of giving a young dog lots of bird contacts simply to develop hunting instinct and a good attitude for training.

But the use of birds is not just for early development. We need pheasants in order to train a Lab or a springer to be a bird finder in pheasant country. I can't teach a short-hair to hold point by using only a canvas dummy with bird scent. An automated

when pen-raised birds are more advantageous. With planted birds, the trainer has control of the situation and can orchestrate bird contact within a structured teaching session, eliminating many of the vagaries of wild birds.

Our formula chronologically progresses from letting a youngster develop its hunting instincts on lots of good-flying (uncatchable) birds to yard training, then to structured patterning, pointing or flushing (depending on the breed), hunting in control, sitting on the flush for retrieving breeds, and back to wild birds. During the structured period of teaching, we use planted birds exclusively. Only after the dog is religious on planted birds do we return to the hunting environment where the dog has to perform with excel-

lence. If the dog won't hold point on a pigeon in the training field, it certainly won't stand staunch on a grouse. A flusher or retriever that runs out of gun range and chases a fly-away to the horizon in the classroom is not much fun when 40 pheasants flush wild from the canary grass.

The pen-raised birds we employ for training primarily include bobwhite quail, pheasants and pigeons; however, chukar, Hungarian partridge, guinea fowl and ducks also serve a role. Quail, pheasants and pigeons are usually available with a little planning and a few phone calls.

Pigeons are great birds for training flushing, retrieving and pointing breeds—for reasons I'll explain later. Bobwhites are covey birds and recall easily, so by building or buying a recall pen, the trainer can have a ready supply of birds that will work their way back to the pen to be used again. I use good-flying pen-raised quail extensively for pups up to six months of age. I simply let some of the birds out of the holding area and take the pups on a quail "hunt." Whether working with a flushing dog or a pointing breed, I advocate these quail walks. The pup develops its questing, and the flush of a quail is much less



Tucking a pheasant's head underneath its wing will put the bird to sleep—and allow it to be planted.

time for developing a bird dog.

Indy, a young vizsla, is doing her owner proud. Carol has brought her two vizslas to hunt pheasants with us and for some training on wild birds. In just the first two days Indy, the younger of the two dogs, has begun holding point longer and chasing birds less. The sheer number of bird contacts have catapulted her up the ladder of becoming a first-rate hunting dog.

Carol is taking full advantage of the plethora of birds. Before legal shooting time, the motivated trainer, blank pistol in hand, can be seen trekking the grass and sloughs with her young hopeful coursing in front. Indy's development has been accelerated, thanks to the bird-rich environment honing her genetic abilities.

But one week of hundreds of bird contacts will not a finished dog make. It certainly will jump-start a genetically talented dog and build an intense desire to hunt that will pay huge dividends when it's time for more advanced training. I am a firm believer in letting pups have fun chasing birds before they progress to more formal training, such as being put under control and, depending on the

retriever trainer alone will not produce an effective dog for the duck marsh. And I have never seen a stylish setter or pointer that handles grouse and holds point that was trained solely with a wing and a rod. Anyone who has been to one of my training schools, read any of my training articles or spoken with me at any length knows that I preach birds, birds, birds.

The reality is that not everyone enjoys the luxury of having productive bird cover just around the corner. Even if it were possible to put your dog into 15 coveys of wild quail on a Saturday, there comes a time in the training process

likely to startle a juvenile than that of a raucous rooster. With young pointing breeds, I let the dogs run free dragging a check cord. At this stage I do not put a quail in a bird launcher, lead the pup on a check cord to the bird, command "Whoa!" and release the bird. Now is *not* the time to teach the dog to be staunch. Teaching a dog to hold point is a whole other matter for later on.

For flushing and retriever breeds, catching birds is OK. The flusher's job is to put the bird in the air, and we want our dogs to have a driving flush. If the dog believes it can catch birds, it will continue to have a strong flush. At the other end of the spectrum, we do not want our pointing breeds to catch birds. The more birds a pointer catches, the less the dog will point. Good-flying birds are mandatory for this reason. Catching birds leads to flagging later and will make teaching a dog to hold point a lot tougher.

Getting good-flying quail is not always easy; not every breeder produces quality birds. If you have access to some land—even five to 10 acres—that has a hedge-row bordered by some tall grass, you're all set. Quality Wildlife Services sells a battery-operated photo-sensor quail recaller that is really slick. I have a hundred of them—although you'll probably need only one or two—and they pay for themselves.

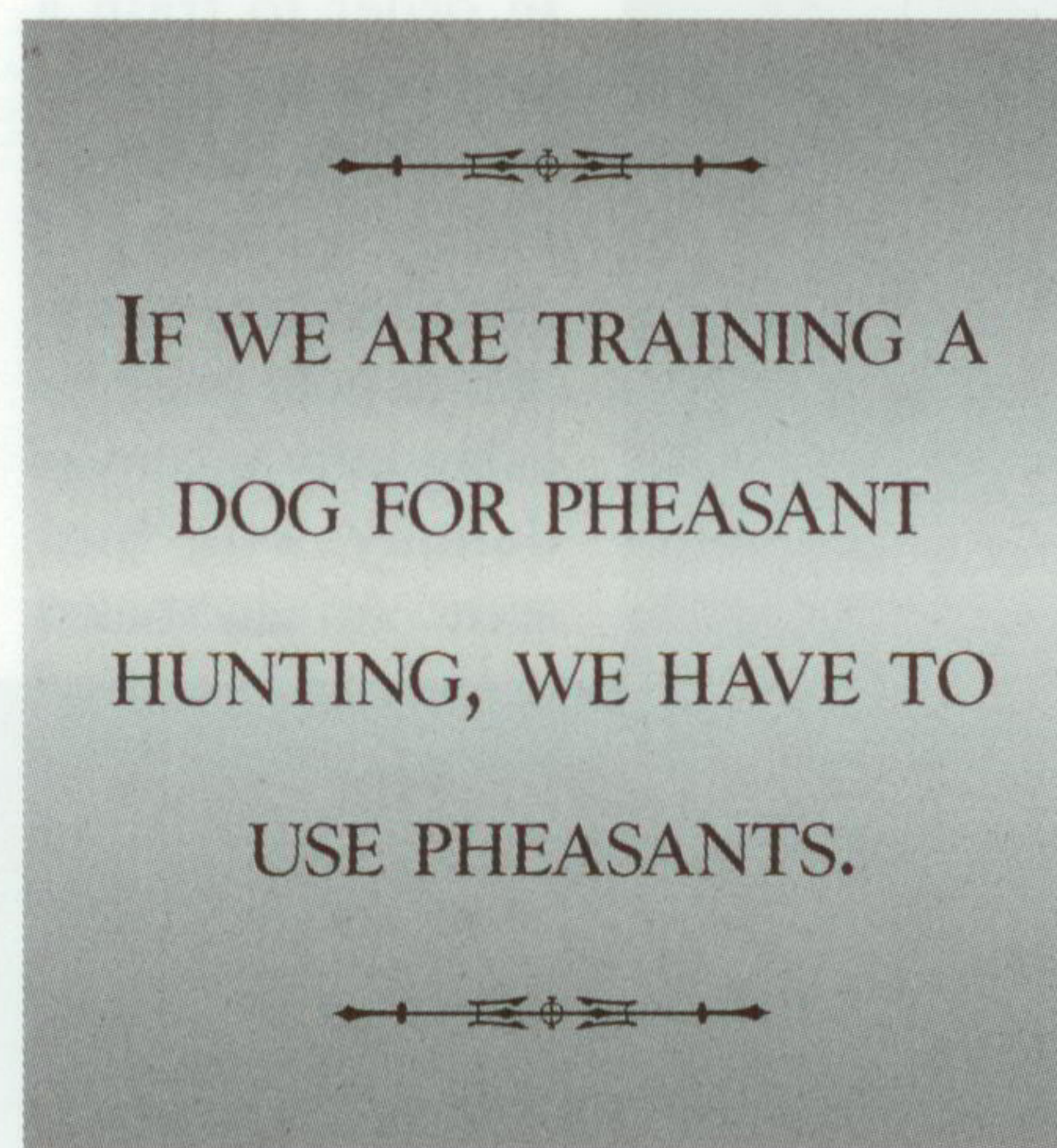
The way to produce quality fliers is this: Put 25 quail in a box and don't feed them for a day. Fill a zip-lock bag with water and put it in the freezer. The next day take the birds, the bag of ice, some milo or gamebird feed and an electronic recaller to the field. Broadcast a five-gallon bucket of feed in the area where you will release the quail. Take the block of ice out of the bag and cut an opening in the box that the quail are in. Place the box where you want to release the birds and put the ice in front of the hole. Attach the recaller to a tree or bush and walk away. The ice will melt after you have left the area, the birds will wobble out and find food, and the recaller will keep them in the area. You will also need to have a waterer nearby.

Do not disturb the birds for a week before running your dog on them. At this point you will have a virtually wild covey available for training. Your dog won't catch these birds. Two coveys are better than one; three are better than two and so on. These birds work well for

puppy quail walks and are also great for creating a true hunting environment for graduate-school work.

If I could use only one bird for training, my choice would be pigeons. Almost all of my field work for any breed can be accomplished with pigeons. By locking the wings of a pigeon with a harness, I have a bird that will be where I put it for point drills. I can dizzy a pigeon by spinning its head and plant it where I want for flushing drills. By planting a dizzied pigeon, I have a bird that will get up and fly strongly for training either pointing breeds or flushing dogs. By using a pigeon with its primary feathers rubber-banded, I have a bird that will fly only 20 yards or so. Pigeons are also great for putting in remote launchers to develop marking skills for retrieving.

I use wing-clipped pigeons for introduc-



ing dogs to the gun. I do this by tossing a clip-wing, and while the dog is in full pursuit I fire a .22-crimp pistol. I never "miss," as the bird always comes down, and the dog has a guaranteed retrieve.


For many of these drills I use regular barn pigeons, which can be trapped or are available through commercial suppliers. For drills where birds won't be "damaged"—either by shooting or retrieving—I use homing pigeons. By using homers and building a coop with bobbed doors for birds to re-enter, I have a constant source of birds that can be used repeatedly. Homers can be found through local pigeon-racing clubs or livestock auctions, and it's important to buy "eggheads"—four- to five-week-old birds—that will imprint to your coop and not fly back to the seller's.

If we are training a dog for pheasant hunting, we have to use pheasants. A dog can't learn to track pheasants on planted

pigeons. A pheasant can be planted by tucking its head under its wing. The pheasant will go to sleep—really. Place the pheasant in some heavy cover and then run your dog in the field. When the dog gets close, the noise from the crashing through cover will usually get the bird moving and—voilà!—you are teaching the dog to take moving birds.

Guinea fowl also work well for this. In addition, guineas tend not to re-flush. Therefore, once a bird has gotten airborne you can fire your gun. The guinea naturally has a short flight and will go down within a reasonable distance. We then send the dog for the retrieve, and the dog gains an experience that simulates retrieving a crippled bird.

We also use Huns, chukar and ducks. The Huns and chukar work well when using bird launchers for pointing drills, training dogs to back or teaching youngsters to hunt. Ducks are great for teaching tracking. We take a wing-clipped duck out at night, command the dog to stay—or keep it on a lead—then toss the duck into the grass about 10 yards in front of the dog, allowing the dog to see the bird. Then we shine a flashlight in the dog's eyes. The dog is thus unable to see the duck waddle off, dragging its oily derriere through the grass. The duck leaves a scent trail strong enough to allow the dog to track it successfully, which is the key. After the duck has had a few minutes' head start, we release the dog. The dog will run to the spot where it saw the duck land and start using its nose—not its eyes—to track down the bird. For obvious reasons, this drill should not be done at the water's edge.

Just because you have a dog doesn't mean you have a bird-finding machine. You have to nurture the dog's talent and build its desire to quest for and find birds. As I'm fond of saying: "No birds, no bird dog." Only through training with live birds will you help your partner develop into a first-class hunting dog. Not only that, but training will extend your season year-round, as well. 

Author's Note: For more information on quail recallers, contact Quality Wildlife Services, 234 Daybreak Rd., Waynesboro, GA 30830; 877-242-2482, fax 706-437-8471. For information on pigeon traps and coop supplies, contact Lion Country Supply, PO Box 480, Port Matilda, PA 16870; 800-6625202; www.lcsupply.com.

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