

# Gun Sense

**G**un problems are serious business when it comes to hunting dogs. A dog that runs back to the truck at the sound of gunshot or blinks birds in fear that a big bang will follow a flush is not much of an asset. A dog that is apprehensive or downright petrified of the report of a shotgun was not born gunshy; gunshyness is environmentally induced. Certainly some dogs and some lines are more prone to developing a problem; but, that said, it's best to assume all dogs will be apprehensive at first. I cannot think of any training scenario where the well-worn adage about an ounce of prevention holds so true. More dogs are made gunshy by careless owners who assumed their dogs would have no trouble. Just because a dog demonstrates an extraordinary drive for questing and birds is no guarantee that he won't react adversely to a gunshot.

As I am writing this article, I'm staying with a friend of mine in Kansas. Jerry Hull, owner of Sand Wells Outdoors, hosts hunters with their dogs on his 15,000 acres of absolutely spectacular wild bird habitat. The catalyst for this particular article was a conversation at dinner with Jerry and some of the dyed-in-the-wool bird hunting addicts who take vacation time from their paying jobs to guide hunters simply because they love dogs and bird hunting. The subject of gunshyness came up, and the group of us recounted a smattering of the problems relating to the gun and the causes for the problems. Here's a few of the "Absolutely Do Not Do's" that topped our list:

1. Do not take a dog that has not had birds shot over him to a hunt. Jerry recounted an incident with a client who took his young dog to a preserve to expose him to pheasants. The dog had previously chased birds back home but had never been shot over. When the first rooster erupted, the dog's owner missed on the first shot but dropped the bird on the second. Unfortunately, the dog did not see the bird fall – when the second shot was fired, the pup lay down. More dogs are made gunshy from the second shot than ever are made gunshy from the first shot. After that incident, as soon as a pheasant flushed, the dog took off in an opposite direction in anticipation of the shot that would follow. The moral of the story is that the dog's first hunt is not the time or place to expose him to the gun.

2. Do not expose an inexperienced pup to multiple guns firing at volunteered birds. An often employed pheasant strategy is to station gunners at the end of a field or corn section. This block-and-drive method is very effective in reducing the pheasant population but has been a disaster for many dogs. The dog is running when pheasants start flushing and the drivers are marching through the field. The dog quite often does not see the escaping birds in flight when there is a barrage of gunfire. Instead, he's caught totally by surprise and can be permanently afraid of the sound of a



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discharging shotgun. Even a dog that has been exposed to the gun by having one or two shots fired when he sees the bird can become totally unnerved.

Attention should be given to preparing a dog to gunners shooting at volunteered birds that the dog does not see. I place remote launchers loaded with pigeons in the field and mark the area with a piece of survey tape to help me time the release to ensure the dog sees the birds. This exercise is implemented after the dog has been properly exposed to the crimp gun, small-gauge shotguns, and 12-gauge while he's chasing birds.

I run with the wind blowing from the dog to the launcher. This is not a scent drill where I want the dog to smell the bird; instead, I launch the bird at some distance from the dog – I want him to see the bird. I have an assistant stand away from the dog and launcher. If the dog sees the bird released, the assistant fires a crimp gun. If the dog does not see the bird, there is no shot. I use a clipped-wing pigeon in the launcher because it can only fly a short distance and always comes down.

Over a period of sessions, we graduate from the crimp pistol to the sundry shotgun gauges. The finishing step is to fire a shot prior to launching the bird. The shot is fired, the bird is launched, and hopefully the dog sees the bird. Now the dog, upon hearing a shot, will immediately look

for the flying bird. Then, and only then, will we begin firing multiple shots.

3. Do not walk straight up a pointing dog's back while he is standing a bird. Always walk out to the side of the dog and get in front. Any reader who has experienced a shotgun blast coming from directly behind him knows the pain. A dog does not have hearing protection, and repeated gunfire that hurts his ears can lead to potential noise problems.

4. Do not expose a dog to the sound of the shot just to "see how he will do." Again, I recommend first exposing the dog to birds and the flush before introducing the gun. When the dog is aggressive on chasing the bird, I then throw a clipped-wing bird with the dog in full pursuit. My assistant stands 40 yards or so away, and when the bird comes down with the dog thinking *I got you, I got you*, the assistant fires a crimp gun. When the dog has no problem with the crimp, we move to a .410, then a 28- or 20-gauge, and finally the 12-gauge.

Do not assume the pup will not be gunshy; assume he will, and employ solid training techniques to ensure that he enjoys his trips to the field. 🐾

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Check out George's video training series, available from *The Pointing Dog Journal's* Video Library. The series covers everything you need to know to take your pointing dog from a pup to a finished hunter. For more information on The George Hickox School of Dog Training for Owners and their Dogs, and Stonecreek English setters, pointers, and Labrador retrievers, check out [www.georgehickox.com](http://www.georgehickox.com).