

TOM DAVIS

GUN DOGS



One of my few dog training maxims is that there's no substitute for wild birds. None. Having said that, however, let me hasten to add that pen-raised birds, planted or released, are virtually indispensable in this day and age. And, make no mistake about it, they're a marvelous training tool. They allow you to control the situation, particularly if used in conjunction with a manual or electronic release trap. For staunching up a young dog's points, encouraging steadiness to wing and shot, introducing the gun, and teaching a dog to honor its brace mate, pen-raised birds - whether pigeons, quail, chukar or pheasant - fill the bill perfectly.

In fact, they're in some respects a better choice for these specialized training applications than their wild counterparts, because you can orchestrate the scenario much more precisely. Also, assuming you have access to them in the first place (more on this later), they're available on demand. If you need another bird, you simply reach into your bag, or go to the flight pen, and get one.

But what you have to remember is that the lessons learned with pen-raised birds are merely a beginning, a framework on which to build a complete gun dog. Or at least that's what they *should* be. There is only one tutor capable of teaching a dog the correct way to hunt and handle wild birds: experience. This is where the "no substitute" part comes into play.

"You kin always tell a dog that's been worked on nuthin' but pen birds," a veteran trainer once told me. "They jest run whichever way their head's pointin', cuz they don't know where the birdy places is. Hell, they jest don't know howta *hunt*."

This sentiment is echoed by Steve Del Rossi, the innovative pro whose Quail Hollow Kennels in Salem, New

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Jersey, enjoys a nationwide following of Brittany spaniel fanciers. "I've always felt that for every one dog 'made' with pen-raised birds," Del Rossi contends, "three have been set back in their training because of inexperience on the part of the owner and the characteristics of the birds themselves. If you're not extremely careful, or if you overdo it on pen-raised birds, your dog can fall into a number of bad habits. Whenever I see a dog that continually bumps birds, creeps on point, or ground-trails, it's almost invariably a case of too many pen-raised birds, and not enough - if any - wild ones."

While Del Rossi certainly utilizes his share of "artificial" game - he's especially fond of chukars - he stresses wild bird exposure, not only in his own training program but as the best way for the

average sportsman to go. "Using pen-raised birds requires too much equipment for all but the most serious gun dog owners," he observes. "Flight pens, callback pens, release traps, etc. In my opinion, the more equipment involved, the better the chances that something will go wrong. I'm a firm believer in keeping training as simple as possible."

And, let's face it, many (if not most) of us don't have the time, the room or the inclination to maintain our own birds. This is one of the reasons we patronize shooting preserves, join dog clubs, and cozy up to professional trainers, more and more of whom are offering daily, even hourly, rates. By establishing these connections - and paying the freight - you can get birds more-or-less when you want them, without suffering the headaches of having to care for them yourself.

Frankly, this is the route I've taken. My pigeon coop has stood vacant for years, and I long ago gave away my quail recall pen. There's a shooting preserve fifteen minutes from my home where the going rate for a chukar is \$7; I belong to a gun dog club through which I can usually buy pigeons for no more than \$2 per bird; and, best of all, I have a good friend who is a



professional trainer. So when I need a bird for a specific training purpose, I can locate one.

But the real beauty of my situation is that I live in an area with an abundant population of "local" woodcock. These are the birds, along with the occasional ruffed grouse, that I do the majority of my spring, late-summer and early fall training on - just as Del Rossi advocates.

"Even in New Jersey, the most densely populated state in the country," he notes, "we have ample opportunities to train on wild game. We have quail, pheasant, woodcock and ruffed grouse, and there are designated dog training areas on state-managed land that have outstanding numbers of birds. Believe it or not, some of the best grounds in New England for training on grouse are in the vicinity of Darien and Greenwich, Connecticut, due to the five-acre minimum zoning regulations. Even if you live in Brooklyn, you can take your dog to Staten Island and train on wild pheasants!

"I'm convinced that with a commitment of time, energy and a little know-how, most sportsmen in this country can find wild birds to train on within at most an hour's drive of their home. And it's a lot easier to obtain access to private land if you explain to the property owner that you're just looking for a place to train your dog, not a place to hunt."

According to Del Rossi, six months is about the right age to start a dog on a wild bird training program. It should already know three basic commands by then: whoa, heel and come. It should also be comfortable dragging a 3/8-inch, 20-foot solid-core (non-tangling) check cord, such as the style sold by Dogs Unlimited. Finally, the dog should have previously been accustomed to gunfire. To avoid potential conflicts with landowners and neighbors, Del Rossi prefers not even to fire a blank pistol during these sessions, although my personal feeling is that it's okay if done with discretion.

Once you've secured permission to train on a given piece of land (it doesn't have to be big as long as it consistently holds birds), walk it without your dog in order to familiarize yourself with possible danger zones - barbed-wire fences, road crossings, old farm dumps - and with conspicuously birdy-looking spots. If you're lucky, you'll actually flush a bird or two. Del

Rossi likes to work his dogs with either a bell or a "beeper," and he always heels them to the edge of the cover and makes the stand on whoa for a few moments before releasing them, just to make sure they're in the proper frame of mind. You want your dog to understand that it's time to get down to business. Here's how Del Rossi describes his method:

"When your dog hits scent, quickly but calmly stop him with *whoa* whether he points or not. Work your way up the check cord until you're at his side, then bend down, hold his collar with one hand, and place your other arm around the dog's waist. If you have a friend along, have him flush the birds. If you're alone, and the birds don't flush on their own, slowly stand up, whoa the dog if necessary (the fewer commands, the better) and flush the birds.

"Don't allow your dog to give chase. If this is a problem, try standing on the check cord and flushing the birds by lobbing stones into the cover. One of the reasons that dusk is the best time to train on wild birds is that your dog's ability to see them after the flush is greatly diminished - along with the temptation to chase. This way, the dog literally trains *himself* not to chase.

"After you've flushed the birds, heel the dog several yards in the opposite direction before releasing him. If you get another game contact, great. But don't worry if you don't. When it comes to bird dogs, slow and steady wins the race. Two positive training sessions a week, with two or three game contacts each time, are plenty to get your dog in top form by opening day. Keep the sessions short, keep them simple, and keep your dog hungry for more." (Words to live by in *any* training situation.)

A dog trained in this manner will not only avoid the pitfalls associated with pen-raised birds, but will have a huge head start on the way to becoming the kind of sharp, decisive gunning companion you've always dreamed about. Pen-raised birds have their place, and most of us would be in dire straits without them. But the bottom line is that there's still no substitute for the real thing.

For more information about the training and breeding programs at Quail Hollow Kennels, contact Steve Del Rossi at 104 Quinton Marlboro Rd., Salem, NJ 08079; 856-935-3459.