



left: Darin Langhorst right: © Theodore Smith

## Respecting the hunting dog

BY BURTON MYERS

**D**ogs were always part of our home. Walking, feeding and cleaning out their runs were routines of my daily life. Because of that I learned the rules of dealing with dogs from before I

could remember. All wildfowlers, however, aren't so lucky and their first encounters are usually with someone else's dog.

There is a line in *The Pink Panther* when Inspector Clouseau asks an innkeeper "Does your dog bite?" and the innkeeper says no. When he bends to pat the dog, it attacks.

"I thought you said your dog did not bite," says Clouseau.

"That is not my dog," responds the innkeeper.

It's the first rule of dealing with another hunter's dog: expect the unexpected.

Second, never give it commands or expect them to be obeyed.

The classic example, says Tom Goldsmith, a well-known dog writer, trainer and wild-life artist, happens after a bird is downed. "The dog doesn't know who shot the bird," he says, "so don't expect somebody else's dog to bring you your bird.

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in front of my dogs that it's OK. I'll give it to you in a moment, but the dog has to bring it to me first.

"Let the handler handle the dog."

Also critical during that time period is when a dog is chasing down a crippled bird. Dogs are a huge asset in retrieving birds that have been hit but are not fatally wounded. And while a dog is chasing down a wounded bird on water, always defer to the dog owner on how he wants the situation handled. And, once the dog is back on shore, always ask before you engage in any interaction with the dog.

"Directly address the situation before the hunt," says Ted Gadawski, a professional dog trainer and the owner of Bluenorth Kennels. "Can you pet the dog or talk to it? Every dog owner will have different ground rules."

A hunter who wouldn't dare dream of approaching a strange dog in the park often assumes, sometimes to their deep

regret, that knowing a dog's master is the same as knowing the animal. Just as with humans, it takes time to develop trust in a relationship.

For instance, don't expect to be able to go back to a car or pickup that contains an uncaged dog that you haven't been with on a number of outings. I had a buddy who made that mistake and reached in through a slightly open window to retrieve his wallet from the dashboard, only to have the jaws of a very big retriever clamp down on this forearm. The dog never broke the skin, but the hunter remained pinned in a heavy downpour for the next 15 minutes while the rest of us wondered why he hadn't returned to finish his supper. Dogs left in vehicles can be particularly protective.

**I**T'S A SERIOUS ERROR TO ASSUME THAT all dogs are alike. They display a variety of personalities – most are easygoing, but a minority are chain-gang mean. Even the most affable pooches have potential to get snarly when they're injured, tired or stiff from a long day in the field.

Never play with another hunter's dog. It might seem harmless fun to throw a stick for that always-eager-to-retrieve dog, but



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the owner may have spent weeks or months getting that dog to “stay” or to be “soft-mouthed.” In less than 10 minutes you could undo all of that hard work.

“The reality is that the average dog has just enough training to get by. They don’t have the deeper foundation that allows them to switch from horseplay to fieldwork,” says Gadawski.

Under no circumstances feed a dog even a shard of your ham sandwich without the owner’s permission. You could be feeding it something that triggers an allergic reaction. Chocolate, grapes and raisins and the onions and garlic on a slice of cold pizza are always a no-no, but even things like macadamia nuts and avocado can cause serious reactions or death for some dogs.

Never criticize another hunter’s dog. You’d be better off insulting their mother. Good friendships have ended over a seemingly innocuous slight about a poorly trained, poorly handled or just plain bone-headed hunting dog.

Though not as serious a problem, avoid praising a dog directly. “That,” says Goldsmith, “is the responsibility of the owner. It is part of the special relationship between the dog and its handler.”

Learn to trust a dog’s senses. Sound is their principal trigger and many of them have better eyesight than we do. Some become exceptional at hearing or spotting incoming birds. Study dog behaviour and you’ll begin to recognize when a dog is becoming “birdy,” giving you time to prepare for a flush or the sudden appearance of a flight of ducks.

**D**O TRY TO HUNT WITH A variety of breeds and with experienced handlers. Not only will the dogs enhance your hunting experience by retrieving downed birds, especially cripples that are on the run or birds that fall in hard to find areas, the lessons you learn from them will help you make an informed choice when it comes time to take on the care and responsibility of a dog of your own.

Finally, remember that three things will almost always guarantee an invite back with a hunter and their dog. First, respect the relationship between them and their dog. Second, at the end of the day say how much you enjoyed watching the dog work. And three, shoot well.

There’s nothing a handler likes more than having lots of opportunity for their dog to gain experience. ✎

**Below:** This yellow Lab is sporting a Mossy Oak leather collar, available at Ducks’ Online Store (item C915 – \$22.95, see ad on page 17 for details).

