

Bird Dogs Need Birds

Who wouldn't want to hunt or own a well trained /experienced bird dog (pointer, flushing dog or retriever)? With short seasons, inconstant weather, sporadic bird populations, work and family commitments, the possibility or probability of training our dogs on wild birds exclusively is next to impossible. The alternative is both effective and possible: pen raised birds. Homing or barn pigeons and bob white quail are tremendous tools in the making of a great bird dog.

Before I get to the fun stuff of acquiring and using our birds, let's talk about the legal end of it. In order to raise and/or keep birds you need 3 different permits from the state of Vermont:

1. an importation permit, \$50.00/year,
2. a breeder license, \$50.00/year (\$10.00/year to renew), and
3. a permit to train and condition hunting dogs, no charge. These permits are obtainable from the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Agency in Waterbury, Vermont. The permits are neither too long nor too difficult to fill out.

Over the years of dog training I have learned a great deal about trapping, hatching out, and raising birds. Some of these experiences have been more successful than others. I remember the days when I would drive to the Ide Company in St. Johnsbury at 7:00 am to collect my catch of pigeons from the previous day and to set out water and food for any new comers. The entire ordeal, including the forty-minute ride each day, often caused me to be late for my other responsibilities but I needed these birds! Since my days of trapping wild pigeons on roofs, we have raised homing pigeons, have incubated quail, chukar, and pheasant eggs, and have raised already hatched chicks. At one point we have even had ducklings in our daughter's bedroom (Wendy wasn't too crazy about this episode!). We have bought mature birds, as well as too old to recall birds. I guess you could say that we have run the gamut with game birds. All of this is not because we are lacking for things to do but only for one end; to have a bird to train the dogs on.

Many people who start in this venture want to do it all from incubating the eggs to raising the chicks into adult birds. This process is not unlike buying a chainsaw, a wood lot, a pickup truck in order to collect your own fire wood to burn in your wood stove in order to heat your house; all it takes is plenty of money, time, and hard work. We have tried many things, including having birds from start to finish, but today we do it like having the oil truck back up to the house. We buy ready to use birds or at the very least started birds. We have found that unless you have the perfect set up and a knowledgeable person to guide you, raising your own birds does not work. Over the years we have researched to find the healthiest and most useful birds available and we buy them. Doing this allows us to focus on our original project and what we do best, breeding and training exceptional sporting dogs.

Having your own supply of birds is the easiest way to train pointing and flushing dogs year round. The best birds to use are common barn pigeons, homing pigeons, bobwhite quail and chukar partridge. Pheasants are expensive, cannibalistic, and take a very large space to house them. It is important to get the right bird and to use it in the correct application or you can do much more damage than having no birds at all.

In our training programs, different birds are used for different developmental stages and different types of dogs. You want to be sure that once you have your birds that you use them appropriately.

The beauty of the game birds is that they will recall. When you let some go and keep some in a *Johnny house*, a recall pen that looks like an ice shanty, the birds inside the pen will call (whistle) to the birds outside of the pen and draw them back. We use a cone funnel run into the house like a minnow trap so that the birds can get back in but not out. Recalling birds is a great way to use them over and over again. A person could do very well with 20 quail and train a couple of dogs all summer and into fall. However, birds don't recall forever. We use birds between 14 weeks and 9 months old. Before this age they don't fly well, and after that they don't recall well. Another thing is that pen raised birds don't fly well if they are wet so you shouldn't use them on rainy days.

Buying quail can be a challenge. We have had the most success with Sand Prairie Quail Farm, (319) 652-5407. You can buy eggs and chicks, or what we recommend, 6 week old started birds for around \$2.65 each including shipping to your post office. Before you get your birds make sure that you are set up with the correct information on care and suitable equipment. After your birds arrive be sure that you have plenty of water, food (game bird grower), and grit (sand like material) which are all available at your local feed store. Once your birds are in your pen they should stay there for about 6 weeks before they are ready to be used. Remember, the less human contact with the birds, the better.

A common size *Johnny house*, quail pen is 4' wide x 4' long x 6' high. You want the birds in the pen to be able to stretch their wings. About 4 feet up we have a 6 inch walk way so the birds can fly up and hop down. This will keep them in condition in between training sessions. Of course you can make a flight pen like we have for the pheasants. This pen is made of chicken wire and top netting upwards of 50' x 50', but we are raising hundreds of birds for training not just a few like you would need. Raising birds is no easy task. It is time consuming and labor and money intensive. It is also at the whim of nature so anything can eliminate your bird population from predators and weather to sickness and disease. I keep quail because I need them to train the dogs so I will not sell you a few birds. Call the number above or a source you know of and be ready for training your dog. Having your own supply of birds is the easiest way to train pointing and flushing dogs year round.

If you need training supplies in addition to your birds, the following numbers may help you: LION COUNTRY SUPPLY (800) 662-5202 or DOBBS TRAINING CENTER (888) 326-5527. These places have the equipment from quail house supplies to manual and remote traps to fly your birds.

The best place to put your quail house is in a grown up pasture next to the woods. You don't want to work your dog in a mowed hay field or in a thick soft wood area. One of the biggest mistakes people make is that they don't let the birds sit long enough before they bring out the dog. The birds should sit for 30-60 minutes in order for them to build a scent cone. Another thing that makes a big difference in how the dog works on birds is the time of day. Mornings and evenings are the best time and noon to 3:00 P.M. is the worst. Time of day has a great impact on scenting conditions which has an impact on dog training.

Remember when using birds to keep your sessions short, 15 to 30 minutes each. Five to six times a week with short sessions is much better than three hours on Saturday morning. Your dog and the birds can't take one long session a week. If you get your birds in June and start using them by July 15, you'll have two months of dog work on the recalled birds and them I recommend shooting the birds over the dog in September just before the wild bird season starts.

Although I mentioned quail first, my bird of choice is the homing pigeon. They are strong, grow fast, breed continually, and recall well! The difference between the game bird and the pigeon is that the game bird recalls to the flock and the pigeon recalls to its home. The same size house will hold a dozen pigeons, they are hardier and you could train all year with a dozen birds. The homing pigeon will never stop recalling. You can also trap barn pigeons under bridges but these will not recall. Again, I raise these birds because I need them, I do not have extra to sell.

You can use the same application for both pigeons and quail with the dogs, but again a mistake can set you back weeks. Some people are excited and want to start their 3 month old dogs on birds. I don't start my own dogs until around 6 months of age, and I start them on homing pigeons. Some trainers start with quail as early as 3-4 months and let the dog do what we call bump and run. This practice is to get the young dog hunting for the birds and is great for a flushing dog as it will push the bird up and it is an exciting and confidence building experience for the pup. The problem with this activity is that it adds a step to training with a pointing dog. The pointing dog will search for the game, which is great, but then the bump (flash point) and run (the chase) creates a problem. Everybody who brings me a pointing dog wants it to stay on point until he comes into gun range and is able to flush the bird. If a pointing dog is encouraged to flush the bird then it must be trained to stay on point at a certain age. You can see how this type of early bird activity can add much time to the training of a competent pointing dog.

I start with 6 month old pups using the homing pigeons in the remote control bird launchers. The most important things to remember are:

- 1) if you don't have a remote launcher, you will need a helper to flush the bird and
- 2) always have the pup on a twenty foot check cord.

Hopefully this will not be your pup's first time on the check cord since you should have practiced your quartering in an open field before you introduce the dog to birds. After the dog is used to having a collar on and has been check corded in quartering drills many times it's time to work the pup on the pigeon in the trap (or the bird can be spun and put to sleep on the ground). You need to help the pup find the bird and work him to it, making sure the dog NEVER grabs the trap or the bird. When the pup stops or flash points or the flushing dog gets excited (*birdy*), you activate the remote (or pull the release cord) and the bird springs from the trap. Holding the dog in a body lock will prohibit him from chasing the pigeon that is flying away. You should practice this 5 or 6 times before introducing the dog to the blank pistol. As you continue with these techniques and practices you are well on your way to training your dog on live birds and preparing your pup for a season of wild birds.

There are a few points to remember about training your dog on pen raised birds:

1. these techniques do not work only on pups (though it is better for the dog to be exposed to birds early), you can work your older dog on birds to encourage birdiness and to practice hunting techniques, and
2. no formal yard work or training on planted birds can replace the experience of running your dog in the woods and exposing it to the sounds, smells, sights, and feel of the cover.

Whether you buy expensive birds and training equipment, or you make do with catching barn pigeons and bird harnesses, what YOU do with your pup each and every day will make the difference in the training process.

In closing, you didn't get to be a great deer hunter, turkey hunter, or fly fisherman without countless hours of practice. What makes you think that your dog (even though it is your best friend) will be a great hunting dog going out just a few times a year?

Good luck and great hunting,

John Hayes