

Bird Boy Notes

The “bird boy” is a very important part of successful training for retrievers. The bird boy can assist the dogs in finding the bird and enhance the training session, but only if done properly. There are many methods for training retrievers, as well as a variety of techniques to improve the dog’s marking. These vary by trainer and by dog. Do not assume that what was used for the previous dog should apply to the next dog or your dog.

Experienced dogs can be very smart about things – don’t underestimate the importance of things as simple as facing the direction of the throw.

Rule #1: Do not help the dog unless requested by the handler.

In doubt, use your radio to check in with the handler.

If you are complete beginner and the “bird boy” is experienced, in this rare case the bird boy may make the decision to help the dog. The type of help you may want should be discussed as much as possible prior to running the dog.

The Bird Boy's Responsibilities

Before a mark is thrown

Make sure you understand the setup. Is it singles or multiples? When is it your turn to throw the bird? Remember that different handlers may run the same setup in different ways, according to their dog's level of experience. Make sure when the dog comes to the line you know what you are expected to do. If in doubt, radio in to the line and ask for instructions.

One of your key jobs is to make the dog look in the direction of the throw prior to the throw. Typically, you will make noise by using a duck call and firing a starter pistol or shotgun. A common way by which the handler indicates that it is time for you to call is raising both (or possibly one) hand up and down below the waist. The throw should not occur at this point.

The handler may also ask you to step outside of the holding blind if you're at a hidden gun station, as extra help for less experienced dogs. Or you will be asked to make extra movements. Don't hesitate to use your radio if you're unsure as to what is expected of you.

Throwing the mark

The most common signal for a mark to be thrown is when the handler raises his/her hand. Also common is a duck call from the line. This should be agreed upon by handler and gun boys before the dog goes to the line.

There are a variety of sequences to the throw. Typically, you will make a quack, then shoot and throw. If the dog has been unsteady, you may be asked to pick up the bumper, reduce the noise (quack, shot, or both), and re-throw. The purpose is to lower the excitement level and have the dog be successful. For field trials you will not quack, but shoot and throw. For HRC you will make no noise at all.

In multiples, you may be asked to stand up, quack or even re-throw if the dog does not remember the second or third bird.

For field trial setups you may also be asked to "retire", i.e., to hide behind a holding blind or natural feature after you have thrown the bird. The exact timing of retiring needs to be agreed with the handler before the first bird is thrown.

After the mark is down – help along the way

A second silent throw: this technique is typically used for a very long or complex mark. The purpose is to encourage the dog and maintain momentum. This should be discussed before running the dog. It is important to watch the handler for when to throw, but make sure the dog actually sees you throw. Remember it is silent – no noise.

For people interested in field trials, they may want you to swing your arm in the direction of the throw to avoid “wrapping” the gun (meaning going to the wrong side). Often it is sufficient to simply raise your arm toward the mark. Again, this would be requested by the handler.

After the mark is down – help to find the bird

This help is to assist the dog in finding the bird if they have gone out to the mark, but were unable to find it, or were lost along the way.

First of all, remember Rule #1. Do NOT help unless requested by the handler. The only exception to the rule is if the dog is just about to get into a hot blind – in that case, don't hesitate to get the dog's attention away from the blind.

The bird boy's job is NOT to show the dog the mark, but keep the dog in the area so that they can find it. The main techniques for providing help to the dog are:

- Slowly walking toward the mark, sometimes just movement can bring the dog in the area
- A quacking noise or a loud "hey, hey" to encourage the dog to return to the area of the fall or to stay in the area of the fall. **HELP THE MINIMUM AMOUNT – THE DOG LEARNS MORE BY WORKING IT OUT ON THEIR OWN.**
- If a quick duck call or a "hey, hey" is not enough, you may help by walking slowly toward the mark, while calling again.

- Above techniques may be combined with a fake throw, i.e., pretend to throw another bumper in the direction of the original fall.
- As a last resort a second throw may be used. If possible, quack as the bumper is in the air.

In multiples, if the dog switches after a hunt, the handler may stop the dog, give a cast to direct them back to the area of the fall and then ask for help.

In some cases, a dog may be handled on route to a mark in order to show the dog the correct line or to teach them to “fight the factor”. These are experienced dogs and you should not help unless requested.

When the dog has picked up the bird, you may indicate this to the handler by raising your hand.

Other considerations

When you're at your gun station, avoid any unnecessary noise, in particular when the birds are going down and while the dog is working. Wait to reload wingers until you're sure the dog won't be distracted.

When you're throwing birds or bumpers from outside of a holding blind, do not wave your hands, play with the bumpers, etc., unless you have been asked to do so and it is your turn, otherwise you will distract the dog.

Let the line know if you're not ready when you hear "guns up".

If you're working a hidden gun, make sure you, your equipment, bird bags etc, are behind the holding blind.

If an inexperienced dog gets into your gun station, it is best to ignore the dog – do not pet the dog or in any other manner encourage the dog to go to the gunner. **BE CAREFUL NOT TO LET THE DOG GET A BUMPER OR BIRD FROM YOUR BAG OR CHAIR!** This merely teaches the dog that it is successful going to the gunner. There are many issues at play here. We want dogs to be comfortable running close to guns, but not so comfortable that they always look for help from the gunner. The dog may need to be helped at this point, but look to the handler for instructions. Be very, very careful not to scare or spook the dog. (If the dog is sensitive this can result in some very serious consequences, such as refusal to go to a mark or particular station) If instructed to tell the dog to get out, do so in a firm, calm voice, but **ONLY** if instructed by the handler, who will know the temperament of their dog.

Make sure you have gun, ammo, duck call, radio, chair, hat, sun screen, bug spray etc. when you go to your station.