



HOW TO INTRODUCE WARM GAME

Some dogs can adapt to warm game, but others are wary and need a lot of encouragement. Lez Graham gives her advice on how to ease the transition

At some point you're going to have to introduce your dog to bringing back warm game. Some dogs just get on with it and pick it up and bring it back, while some are wary and need lots of encouragement. We all know there are dogs that try to eat game, and some will even bury it!

The key to introducing warm game is, as far as I'm concerned, preparation and patience. All too often, dogs are taken along to a local shoot because their owners know someone. They have not been trained in the basics, let alone the whistle work. Although some do get away with it in the first season, many do not; and not only do the dogs create havoc, but they also munch and crunch their way through the day. A term from my old IT days springs to mind here: "Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance", and yes, for those of you familiar with the term, I have deliberately missed out a P.

So how do we get our dogs picking-up game? Presuming that you've done your training and you have a dog that's steady on dummies and delivering to hand without shaking, crunching or

puncturing them, it's time to get some artificial game.

Start with fur

I don't go rabbit shooting, but I am inclined to start dogs on fur first as I've found it causes less problems for excitable dogs when they first pick it up. Feathers tend to incite inexperienced dogs to use a feather to drag the dummy around, rather than pick it up. Dogs are also more likely to pluck a feathered dummy than a rabbit dummy.

I tend to start with a simple rabbit dummy or a rabbit ball for introducing fur - real rabbit fur wrapped around a dummy and either sewn on or tied on with string. Don't use the fake fur as it has a very synthetic feel to it and if the dogs bear down slightly it makes a subtle, or not so subtle, crumpling/squeaky sound and may encourage your dog to play with it. You're much better off buying a prepared rabbit dummy or cured rabbit skin to wrap around your

own dummy, rather than skinning a rabbit and using that to introduce fur - it will simply be too much for the dog to cope with, regardless of how well you clean it.

The reason for using string, as opposed to an elastic band, when attaching a rabbit skin or pheasant pelt to a dummy, is to ensure the dog doesn't get a little nick from the band as it picks up the dummy for the first time, thereby making it wary. Think of dragging an elastic band out of your hair or across the hair on your arms, that's potentially what the dog can feel on its sensitive top lip if it catches the band on pick up.

Add rabbit skin

When your dog is confidently bringing back 10 rabbit dummies for you, then it's time to add a bit of complexity.

Take your rabbit skin and tie it around a three part dummy, making sure that the rabbit skin covers the sides as well as the middle so that if you held the dummy in your hand it would look like a dead rabbit.

Having your dog retrieve this will mimic, as close as possible, the feel of a rabbit in its mouth and will hopefully cause a little bit of suction that can occur when a dog carries a rabbit - much better for your dog to feel it now than panic with the real thing.

Introducing feathers

Just like fur, with feathers I always start



Praise your dog to hold the game while you are, so that you're still in control

the dogs on a feather dummy. However, unlike fur, I prefer to use dummies that have pheasant pellets sewn on already.

When introducing these dummies, I allow time for the dogs have a good sniff and when they go to pick it up, I praise them regardless of whether they put it down and readjust or not, it has to feel very strange to them, so I cut them a bit of slack and let the first couple of retrieves be fact-finding missions in relation to texture, smell and weight. Then it's a case of applying your normal

training exercises until your dog is confident with feather and fur.

Cold game is, as the name implies, stone-cold dead. Either shot game or roadkill works for an introduction, providing that the roadkill has been bumped rather than flattened - if you've been storing game in your freezer make sure it is completely defrosted prior to using it.

Let your dog have a good sniff of the game while you're holding it. If you initially throw it or leave it on the ground, you run the risk of your dog taking off with it or sitting down for lunch if he tries to put his mouth on the game, quietly praise and encourage him to hold it while you are, so that you're still in control. I do not cover the fur up before putting it out for a retrieve, as once a dog is confident on rabbit dummies, the transition to cold game is quite easy. However feathers are another thing and many dogs can try to pluck a bird.

Dress the bird

If your dog found it challenging to move on to feather from canvas, then dress the bird by getting a stocking 0 find 15 denier are best, as 10 denier aren't robust enough and anything greater than 15 masks the feeling of feathers. Put the bird in head first, pull it reasonably tight, and twist the stocking

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Got a question for Lez?

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when you get to the start of the tail feathers. Take the stocking back down the bird and when you get to the wings, make a little cut in the stocking and pull them through. Continue running the stocking and tie in a knot once you've covered the head again. When your dog is confident at picking up a dressed bird, then take the stocking off.

When you first transition on to warm game, please don't get frustrated or cross if your dog balks at picking up the bird or rabbit. Although it's dead, it will still have blood flowing through its veins and a slight pulse as the vascular system shuts down. And it will be warm.

As far as your dog is concerned it's been trained to leave alone anything that is alive and now you're expecting him to pick up this warm pulsating thing and bring it back. And the smell will be intoxicating - animal, blood and shot -

seriously mind blowing. Your first retrieve should be staged, where you pick the game up yourself and do a memory retrieve or a short marked retrieve. Baby your dog through it if needs be. Throw the bird a short way and encourage him to bring it back. Hopefully you'll only need to do this a couple of times and he'll get the

idea, then it's a case of taking it steady, only allowing a couple of retrieves on the first time out.

Always remember that whatever you're handling will end up in the food chain, so if you're using a bird or a rabbit for training, do not hand it over at the end of the drive, rather dispose of it separately - taking it home to freeze for a bit of cold game training always gets my vote. **54**

Stockings can help move the dog on to feathers



Lesley prefers to use dummies with pheasant pellets already sewn on



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