



TRANSITIONAL TRAINING

Lez Graham explains how to teach your gundog to pick-up and retrieve

Transitional training sounds like a highly technical thing to do with your dog. It's not – all it means is going from one thing to another and back again and it's all part of your gundog's education.

It's never too early to start teaching your dog to pick-up different things, though I always wait until I've established an enthusiastic retrieve over a wide range of items before I put a dog on to feather or fur.

Where to start

If you have your gundog indoors with you, order it to pick-up bits and bobs during the day, and make a point of deliberately dropping things for it to bring to you. Spoons are fantastic, and it's not a massive step from picking-up a metal spoon to collecting a food bowl and bringing this to you.

Making your gundog help you tidy away dog toys and chews that have been left lying around your home is great fun, as is training it to find and bring your

slippers to you. Empty phone cases or old handsets are excellent for teaching dogs to carry the trickier items – they can be quite slippery and will teach your dog how to hold nicely. A phone or old remote control will simply slip out of the mouth of a dog which tries to crunch it or move it around.

The main thing is to remember that, though you are having fun turning your dog into a "home help", you are developing its ability and enthusiasm to pick up anything you point at. You are fine-tuning your gundog for the day you point at a pheasant or a partridge and say "get on", "hold" or "pick it up".

Every time your dog brings you something in the house, the garden or on a walk, gently take it (before it is dropped) and tell the dog to sit. As well as building a great relationship with your dog, you'll be working with delivery to hand and reinforcing everything you do on the training field.

If you have a puppy or a young dog, it's much easier to start transitional training by simply sitting on the kitchen floor with it and rolling various items around for it to pick up and bring back. If your dog is outdoors, add these items to your training bag and have your dog



A dog taught to pick-up a spoon will soon bring you its bowl

retrieve them instead of the dummies you usually use.

Weight and movement

I like to train my dogs to find and retrieve keys. Not only does it mean that if I drop them when out and about, there's a good chance of finding them, but it also makes the dog think about how to carry something that's tricky to pick up, that moves around and jiggles.

Pop the keys on a dummy key ring to encourage your dog to pick them up sensibly and help prevent them grabbing a key or hurting its mouth. To start, put the keys into a baby sock and tie it on to the key ring so that the dog won't get hurt while learning to run with them. Spend some time on your



Dogs learn to carry slippery items by retrieving old mobiles



Bottles of water will accustom dogs to uneven weights

walks playing "hunt the keys", which will quickly become a command. My favourite way of introducing weight and movement is to use bottles of water. Start with empty plastic bottles – the square-ish ones with grooves are the best because they give the dog some purchase when it picks them up.

When it's okay with this, add water to the bottle so that it moves around when the dog carries it. Starting with a 500ml or 750ml size, build up to a 1.5l bottle half full, even for smaller spaniels. This will teach them how to carry things with an uneven weight distribution, in preparation for the day it brings you back big cock pheasants and live game.

If your dog is unsure or is having problems getting a purchase on the plastic, wrap a Retrieving Roll around it to help build confidence; it is weight and

movement that we're working on for this exercise, not what it feels like in your dog's mouth.

Feather and fur

I never consistently work a young dog on feather and fur. Some dogs become partial to the excitement that feather and fur can bring and become difficult about retrieving boring old canvas.

Using covered rabbit balls is a common way to introduce fur, as is tying cured rabbit skin to a dummy. Don't overdo it with these, as they quickly become soggy and can encourage dogs to spin them in their mouths and crunch on them. If you're using rabbit balls in woodland, always check for twigs and "pointy things" because these can put a dog off and also damage its mouth.

Many gundog equipment suppliers sell dummies with feather attached and this is also a good starting point. To introduce a bird, "dress" some defrosted game by putting it head first into a 15-denier stocking (10-denier ones aren't robust enough and anything greater masks the feeling). Pull it tight, twist the stocking when you get to the tail feathers and pull it down the bird. When you reach the wings, make a cut

"Playing hunt the keys will hone your dog's ability to bring back tricky objects"



A Retrieving Roll around the bird may help your dog pick it up



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Got a question for Lez?

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in the stocking and pull them through. Continue running the stocking, and tie in a knot once you've covered the head.

If your dog is great with canvas but not sure about feather or fur, wrap a Retrieving Roll around your normal dummy and have the dog retrieve that for a few days. You don't need to put anything in the treat pouch. Then wrap the roll around the defrosted bird and let your dog sniff it. If it's reluctant to pick it up, go back to wrapping it around a dummy with a treat in the pouch. After a couple of retrieves, try the bird again, this time with a treat in the pouch.

Remember to give your dog a chance to have a sniff of anything new and to allow it to figure out how to pick it up and balance it in its mouth. Putting pressure on your dog when it's trying to work something out could result in it giving up and coming back to you empty mouthed. **SG**



Allow your dog to sniff around anything new and give it time to work out how to pick it up

NEXT MONTH:

Lez begins her preparations for the shooting season