

The Hunter's Companion



By Micah Holmes

Photos by Russell Graves



I feel a bit sorry for deer hunters, bird watchers, and even fishermen for that matter. Their outdoor pursuits are as noble as any other I suppose, but they are missing one particular ingredient – a dog. If you ask me, hunting for quail, waterfowl, raccoons, rabbits or squirrels receives extra bonus points, because they allow for, if not require, the participation of a sporting dog.

Granted there have been plenty of pheasants killed by hunters flushing out fencerows without the aid of a pointer, and a retriever is a luxury, not a necessity, on a duck hunt on a shallow marsh. But a dog adds another dimension to the hunt. Perhaps only a child can make a hunting trip more memorable or more unpredictable.

Fortunately, most of us have selective memories when it comes to our furry companions. We remember the hound that stayed on the trail for hours until it finally treed a big 'coon. We remember the day our young dog outshined the veteran pointers owned by people we really wanted to impress. We remember an icy retrieve of a bull canvasback on big water.

Other memories you hope to forget. Like the day the dog performed admirably on opening day of dove season and then proceeded to eat one dove and tenderize two others after the hunt was over. Like the afternoon in the woods when the squirrel dog suddenly seemed more interested in chasing mice on the ground rather than squirrels in the trees. Like the morning the tailgate clanked down and the pointer headed for the hills - not be seen until sundown. You were angry, embarrassed and elated when he finally

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ANOTHER MAN'S DOG

“If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.”

In no time is this axiom more true than when commenting on another man's dog. You can say what you want about his poor shooting abilities, his rusting truck or his growing mid-section. However, if you value the friendship, keep your observations about his dog positive or, at the very least, neutral.

I've seen hunting dogs do some rather boneheaded things and I've learned it's best to just look the other way or accept the owner's excuse if he offers one. I only ask that he return the same courtesy when my dog hikes his leg on a decoy or otherwise forgets his good manners.

came back; tongue hanging out like everything was right in the world.

Humans and canines have been partners for a very long time. An instant bond between man and dog was formed when a young, hungry wolf lurked around the shadows of a campfire, and a greasy bone was thrown his way. The relationship has served both parties quite well and over the centuries the bond has only grown stronger. This desire for companionship is in the genes – both the dogs and ours. Just ask a boy if he would like a dog for his birthday or watch a puppy desperately begging her master for attention and you will know that humans and dogs were meant to be together.

There are plenty of reasons not to own a sporting dog. Puppies are noisy, stinky, rowdy and generally destructive unless they are sleeping. Owning a dog can be a 15-year commitment, which is longer than most folks live in one house. Training a dog takes time – a commodity of which most of us are woefully deficient.

So why own a gun dog? Sure, they help us bring meat to the bag by sniffing out rabbits and retrieving birds, but a dog's contributions run deeper than that.

Our relationship with dogs strengthens our connection to the world of nature, and by doing so our dogs make us better hunters. When they catch a nose-full of quail on a whiff of wind we are suddenly aware that game is nearby. When a dog hears faint whistling wings of ducks we tense a split second after they do and we both leave the waiting mode and enter the hunting mode. When a dog sees or smells or hears something they allow us to take part in that experience and act as extensions of our own meager abilities.

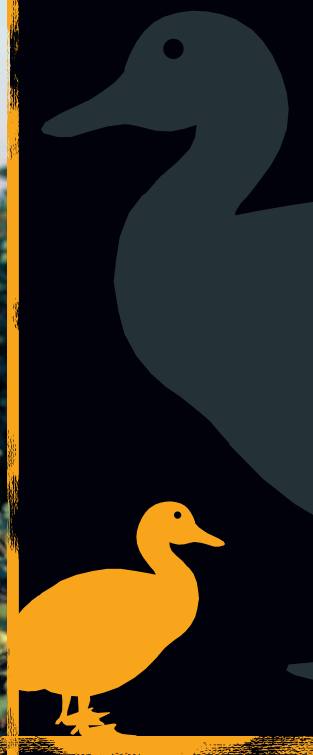
Dogs bail off into briars, run for miles and swim strong currents because that is what they were born to do and that is what they live to do. But they also do these things to please us. Conversely, we go hunting and pull the trigger because we enjoy it, and we know this will bring joy to our dogs. This man/dog relationship brings a measure of selflessness and interdependence to a pursuit that could become greedy and lonely if not shared.

A good dog loves to hunt and is singular in focus. Their enthusiasm is contagious and ever present. While our own passion for the sport may fade as the weather gets uncomfortable or life gets complicated, our dogs are always ready to load up no matter what the hour or the season in life. Even our most reliable two-legged hunting partners occasionally must turn down a hunting trip to attend a nephew's birthday party or some other distraction. Not our dogs.

The places we love would not be as special without them. A quarter section of birdy cover would not be the same if we couldn't watch our dogs sprint through the tall grass with their noses high in the air. The smell of freshly-spent shotgun shells and mucky marsh would be incomplete with the smell of a wet dog mixed in. And the dark woods of a creek bottom in winter would not be the same without the distant, melodious sounds of hounds on the pursuit of a hot trail.

Those who say gun dogs are more than just another tool to increase our harvest - a means to an end - haven't owned a good gun dog and certainly never fully appreciated one. Sporting dogs are an integral part of our hunting heritage and our pasts have been interwoven throughout history. 🌿

A good dog loves to hunt



FIRESIDE READING



Start a fire, bring the dog inside to curl up at your feet and settle down with one of these fine books about dogs.

Where the Red Fern Grows by Wilson Rawls

A true American classic set in the Ozark Mountain foothills of northeast Oklahoma.

Follow a young boy in his quest for the best 'coon dogs a boy could ever hope for. If you haven't read it yet, put down this magazine and check out this book from your local library today. If you read it years ago, do yourself a favor and re-read it soon.

Call of the Wild by Jack London

This adventure book chronicles the men who tried to tame Alaska and a dog who couldn't be tamed. London gives us a unique look into the mind of a dog.

Encyclopedia of North American Sporting Dog Breeds Edited by Steve Smith

A practical, informative book if you are researching different gun dog breeds. This book is written by hunters for hunters and examines pointing dogs, retrievers, spaniels, versatile breeds and hounds. The history and development of each breed is covered along with full-color photographs.

Tears & Laughter: A Couple of Dozen Dog Stories by Gene Hill

A fine writer writing touching stories about great dogs.

Panther: and other stories of great Hunting Retrievers

Edited by Art DeLaurier Jr.

A story about a small lab with a big heart and a collection of other original hunting retriever tales.

Pick of the Litter

by Bill Tarrant

One of the most popular bird dog columnists, Bill Tarrant, offers the best of the last 20 years of great writing.

For the Love of a Dog: Classic Bird Dog Stories by Darren

Brown, Editor

This anthology gathers many classic stories of bird dogs that show the unbreakable bond that develops between hunter and dog.

Winston: The Life of a Gun Dog by Ben O. Williams

Williams has bred and trained dogs for over 40 years and, in all that time, one particular dog stole his heart more than any other - Winston, a spirited, hugely talented, but far from perfect Brittany. Williams chronicles their time and travels together in this short book.

