



# Tune Up for your Trip

Wild South Dakota birds demand preparation from hunters and their dogs.

**BY DENNIS FOSTER**

**H**ere in South Dakota, our bird numbers are bouncing back, but that does not necessarily mean easy pickins for hunters. Unless you frequent preserves or commercial operations that release tame, pen-raised pheasants — birds I jokingly refer to as colorful chickens — you had best be fully prepared.

Wild pheasants do not lead an easy life, nor are they willing to give it up to you just because you showed up in your pretty orange hunting outfit. Put simply, they are not impressed with what you wear or your dog's pedigree and expensive training. Wild birds face any number of challenges on a daily basis, and, quite frankly, human hunters are one of the least deadly.

Despite habitat losses and cruel Dakota weather conditions, these hardy survivors continue to eke out a living no matter what challenges they face. They encounter predators on a daily basis that are far more skilled, cunning and effective than we humans could ever hope to be. As hunters, a hungry coyote or fox makes us look far worse than even Elmer Fudd's clumsy and inept attempts to bag that famous, wascally wabbit.

That being said, here are some hard-earned, common-sense suggestions that I have gleaned from years of hunting and guiding hunters to limits of these beautiful birds.

## **Personal Training**

The biggest thing to remember is training is not all about you. Rath-

er, it should be about you and your dog.

This is where I see many hunts quickly ruined, and I will be the very first to point out that it is seldom the dog's fault.

Yes, the dog may have shot directly from the pickup and beat the blockers to the end of the field, gleefully busting up birds all the way. But this is simply because the dog did not fully comprehend what was expected of him, and, even worse, the owner did nothing to stop the dog's behavior beyond screaming a stream of obscenities in the direction the dog was last seen streaking.

Electronic collars are a humane tool that serve as a way to reinforce training. At times they also serve as a great hearing aid and should definitely be used when needed.

The dog may have a pedigree a mile long and may have been through schools costlier than those of your own kids. It might have even won a ribbon in so-called field trials with lots of letters behind them. However, if they have not experienced truly wild birds, growing pains should be expected.

By far the biggest mistake I see made every year is that dogs spend too much time with the trainer and not the owner. The trainer can only teach, and dogs perform well in the field only when they truly like and respect their master.

Once they understand the program, they will gladly do whatever it takes to make their humans happy. This requires an emphasis on the amount of time spent with the dog, and not the amount of money.

Quite frankly, the best dogs I see every year are with hunters who take pride in actually working and partnering with their dogs. The worst are the ones that are purchased, taken to a trainer, forgotten until hunting season and then expected to perform like a circus animal.

It never ceases to amaze me how much pride some people can have in something that is merely a commodity to them and then be so disappointed when it doesn't meet some ridiculous set of expectations.

### Walk with Purpose

My advice would be to simply spend time with your dog as often as you can, and one of the ways you can actually do this is by getting outside and taking your dog for a walk. Try to do this in the country and not in some dog park filled with the scent of other dogs.

Even if you live in an area without pheasants, it will do both you and your dog a wonder of good from more than just a mere exercise standpoint. If it takes a half-hour to drive out of the city in which you live, make sure you schedule time for the drive and the walk. It can be a fun event you and your dog can look forward to.

Walking with a purpose gives you valuable time bonding and getting your hunting partner used to more than the living room and treat time. They actually get the opportunity to practice by hunting in front of you, and by doing so, they quickly learn what is an acceptable distance. About 25 yards is plenty, and this goes for pointing dogs, too.

Always, and I mean always, remember that a wild bird's first instinct is to run. Believe me, if a pheasant has survived long enough to outsmart a constant barrage of hungry ground predators and stay hidden from the eyes of owls and hawks, they can make your dog

look more than a bit silly.

You see, truly wild birds don't buy into the same sit-nicely-for-the-pretty-point philosophy that you might. On rare days the birds behave better and sit much tighter for reasons unknown, and on those special days the dogs have to all but root them out and may even catch a few in the process. Relish those days, though, as they are the exception and not the rule.

The bottom line is it's always better to have control, and going for walks helps the dog understand what's expected in the field. Even with the most boisterous and energetic of pointing dogs, having control over dogs can be easily accomplished by spending time with them and taking them for purposeful walks. They will quickly learn to use their running instincts to work up and down a line of hunters or more thoroughly quarter back and forth directly in front of you, locating birds they would have otherwise missed in hot pursuit of running roosters.

In the process you are not only brushing up your dog's skills, but you will also be getting yourself in at least some semblance of shape to walk and keep up with your dog during the season.

I am out in the field every single day and see plenty of guys who struggle to fight through the cover pheasants like to call home. When hunters worry more about what their legs are telling them, it just takes away from the enjoyment of being outdoors with friends and family.

You don't need to be the star of the track team, but before chasing wild birds you should be able to get from Point A to Point B without too much difficulty. This is not to say you have to make every walk on every single day you're afield.

If physical ailments plague you or your age is a limiting factor, there is a distinct and honored role for you. Good blockers and flankers who take a leisurely stroll through more open and sparse cover are always needed, and it's an unwritten pheasant rule that the old guys always get first choice on the tasks of blocking and flanking the other hunters.

### Shells and Chokes

When it comes to shotguns, money spent has very little, if anything at all, to do with results. In the right hands a well-worn old pump shotgun will knock down as many, if not more, birds out here in the real world than any of the supremely expensive over/under shotguns or new autoloaders. To put it simply, I would use the gun you're most comfortable with, practice with it regularly and feed it properly.

By feed it, I am referring to the shells you run through it. Quality trumps quantity here, as ethical hunters should not be constantly shooting and wounding birds that fly off only to die later. Premium shells help prevent this, and spending a few extra bucks on a box of shells is the ethical choice to make.

A general rule I go by is to start the season using larger loads than the 6-shot most folks load up with in October. All of the major manufacturers such as Federal, Fiocchi and Winchester have suitable options, and after some experimentation the last couple of seasons, my guests and I will be relying on a couple of the hotter offerings from Rio when the season opens this year.

I suggest starting with 12-gauge, 2.75-inch No. 5s, and then within a couple of weeks, graduate to No. 4s. After the first six weeks or so of the season, and depending on temperature and snow, move right into magnum

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3-inch, 4-shot loads to finish the year.

Also, pay attention to the label on a box of shells, especially when it comes to feet per second. Hotter loads do two things. First, they compensate for failing to lead a bird enough, and faster loads also mean the pellets strike downrange with more kinetic energy, which means they have more penetration and killing power.

Switching to tighter chokes follows the same general

timeline and theme as the season wears on toward December, starting with improved cylinder early on, then moving to modified and finally improved modified. Toward the tail end of the season, the surviving birds aren't just better educated, they are tougher with more fat and heavier feathers that are difficult to penetrate with lesser load-and-choke combinations.

To wrap up, make a dedicated effort to prepare as best you can. If you just can't shoot, go hunting with someone who can. If you don't have good dogs, go hunting with someone who does.

Now, if you don't have a good dog and can't shoot, hire a guide. We need to eat, too, ya know! When you hunt with a guide, you and your dogs might just pick up a thing or two in the process that will help make your future, unassisted outings more successful.

**About the Author:** Dennis Foster is a freelance writer and pheasant guide from Mellette, S.D. For more information or to contact him directly, go to [dakotapheasantguide.com](http://dakotapheasantguide.com).



By being fully prepared, pheasant hunters and their dogs have a better chance at enjoying scenes like this, where wild South Dakota birds cooperate and hold long enough for a shot.

Photo by Chad Coppess/SD Tourism

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