

DOG TRAINING CLOSE TO HOME

■ Pointing dogs can hone their skills even inside a city

As an adult onset uplander living in the heart of the “big city” flanking Walla Walla’s downtown shopping district, I never really considered owning a pointing dog. A German shepherd and buff tabby marauded throughout our 600-square-foot apartment space as it was. However, I had also never lived anywhere with legitimate upland hunting opportunity.



UPLAND PURSUITS

BRAD TRUMBO

When my first rooster pheasant fell to the good fortune of arriving at a pheasant release site behind a hunter with a seasoned Lab, my interest in upland birds piqued instantly. Suddenly, the old Savage Fox double that I loved so dearly took on purpose and was carried in pursuit of the abundant valley quail in the public access beyond the city limits.

I don’t credit my lovely bride with making the best impulse decisions, like springing for a Llewellyn setter pup while we both lived in separate cities and apartments, fresh out of graduate school and living paycheck to paycheck. And that little pup was pure hell on our nerves and furniture. Yet, in hindsight, she changed our lives profoundly, forever. Mine in particular as the hunter of the household, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Similar to a custody arrangement, Ali and I split the duties of caring for young Finn,

handing her off on our weekly visits. We both sought urban greenspace and any wildlands on the outskirts to expose Finn to wildlife. And while I knew nothing of training a pointing dog, I learned quickly how to utilize birds like pigeons that had grown accustomed to humans on city sidewalks, and found Rooks Park on the edge of town with a resident covey of valley quail.

While pups need bird exposure, they also need socialization, basic obedience, and hunting commands, which can be taught indoors and on downtown streets. “Whoa” is a standard pointing dog command to keep the dog steady and on solid point as you approach to flush a bird. It can also be used to stop a dog in the field in a dangerous situation. Trainers use apparatus like barrels, tables, and elevated boards to teach this command, which can be done in the corner of a small space. Similarly, “place” boards are typically used for retrievers, but can also be used to teach “whoa” as an object which the dog is to remain steady on when given the command.

Once your pup has the basic obedience down, it’s time to practice in public. Start with only a few repetitions, cycled with some time in between. Pups still need time to be pups and it’s a big world in the city.



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

Beware of distractions like fox squirrels when seeking bird exposure in urban greenspace.

Slowly build up your frequency and number of repetitions as the pup becomes less interested in the ancillary surroundings. Remember to start slow and simple with high reward for good work. Keeping a pup interested in training is important to ensure the lessons stick.

After a few jaunts downtown, your pup should have seen the flush of local pigeons enough to seek them actively. It will remember where the birds loaf and feed from your prior walks and anticipate the approach. Pointing behavior may still be coupled with the sight and sound of the birds, providing a good “whoa” opportunity. If possible, work with a partner to steady the dog while the other flushes.

The local valley quail were our saving grace when training Finn in her first year. She sought the usual blackberry and brush pile haunts and perked at the sound of their calls. While her maturation was slow, the regular exposure to covey birds on the edges of natural wetlands instilled early drive and positive



Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

The brushy margins of a manicured park lawn provide quality food and cover for quail.

reinforcement for seeking.

Additionally, different breeds mature at different rates. My setters are typically not hunting with complete purpose until age three, but that doesn’t mean

they don’t find birds afield at a young age. Maintain optimism throughout the early years, building the trust and teamwork foundation.

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Brad Trumbo/Contributed Photo

A male valley quail forages on a park lawn.

Savoring storms

The first drop of rain plunked the sidewalk with a splat I could hear despite the two earbuds jutting from the sides of my head, the plastic appendages of the urban pedestrian addicted to podcasts.

The drop left a dark damp spot about the size of a quarter on the concrete.

Raindrops rarely travel alone, of course, and within 15 seconds the sidewalk was stippled with dozens of similar spots, the effect rather like a time-lapse series of photos of measles speckling somebody’s torso.

My light-gray T-shirt quickly turned dark-gray, the clammy cotton clinging to my skin.

It was refreshing, though, as welcome as a cool breeze wafting through a window at the close of a hot day, which this day was. A few blocks farther on I heard thunder off to the west, where the hazy veil of rain had partially obscured the Elkhorns.

This thunderstorm that swept through Baker City on June 14 wasn’t the season’s first.

But it was the first tempest that coincided with my daily walk, normally an afternoon excursion that I put off until evening in deference to the 90-degree heat.

I generally like thunderstorms.

My affinity isn’t absolute, only because storms sometimes ignite wildfires that become devastating infernos, or spawn crop-pounding hail, or, much more rarely, a deadly bolt of lightning.



ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

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A cumulonimbus cloud looms over Baker Valley on June 13, 2021.