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Keep dogs engaged in offseason with new tricks, unstructured activity

Although some diehard hunters are wringing the final seconds out of the 2011-12 hunting season by hunting crows and snow geese for the next several weeks, most Delaware hunters have cleaned and stored their guns, packed away their decoys and moved their camouflage to the back of their closets.

The collective sighs of forlorn hunters resonate throughout hunting households as they are forced to deal with the monthlong emptiness that accompanies the end of the season. The inactivity that now occupies the schedules of many hunters may be welcomed by some and loathed by others, but it is sure to be perplexing to hunting dogs.

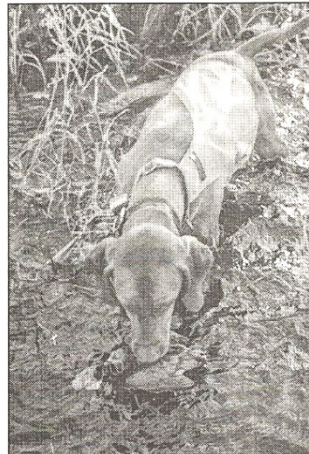


HUNTER'S JOURNAL

STEVEN KENDUS

Hunting dogs, especially the high-activity searching, chasing, pointing and flushing breeds like beagles, pointers and spaniels, grow accustomed to their extended explorations and pursuits when they are hunting rabbits, pheasants, woodcocks or other small game. Their frequent activity, strong desire to please their handlers and uncompromising passion to satisfy their instinctive drives leaves them more than content during Delaware's various small game and upland game hunting seasons.

As a dog hunts during Delaware's hunting seasons that span from September through February, he becomes more physically fit. Likewise, hunts may make him more mentally



Hunting dogs, such as Gus the Vizsla, need activities to keep them mentally and physically sharp during the offseason. STEVEN KENDUS

alert and less apt to exhibit undesirable conduct like excessive barking and property damage (via chewing, digging, etc.), since the high activity levels provide engaging outlets that eliminate boredom and encourage natural behavior.

Dogs used for waterfowl retrieving from blinds and boats also benefit from their hunting season activities, and they, too, can be befuddled when the season ends.

Waterfowl, small game and upland game-hunting dogs struggling to comprehend the end of hunting season often look at their owners curiously when alarm clocks ring in the predawn hours. Others jump in trucks and wag their tails excitedly when their owners try to leave for work. And others pace like caged lions when they hear collar bells, see their hunting vests or smell guns or

ammo.

The end of hunting season doesn't have to be the end of compelling and energetic activities for hunting dogs, however.

To combat the abrupt cessation of hunting-related activities, hunting dog owners should keep their dogs physically and intellectually stimulated during the offseason. Hunting dog owners and their canine hunting companions can engage in multiple activities that reinforce hunting lessons and drills, create memories and teach new tricks.

Offseason hunting dog activities can incorporate real-life hunting scenarios, such as retrieving fowl dummies on land and in water, and they can introduce new concepts, like teaching a dog to track wounded deer or to locate shed antlers.

The hunting offseason also presents a superb time for carrying a camera, rather than a gun, into the woods so that hunters can capture action photos of their dogs locating, chasing or pointing game. Many of the same game species are present in Delaware's fields and forests during the spring and summer as in the fall and winter hunting seasons, so photo opportunities can be plentiful.

While structured activities can be great for dogs and owners alike, unstructured exercise and activity is also important for hunting dogs. Allowing them to explore their natural surroundings, run with other dogs and fetch balls in the water also keep dogs in shape for hunting season and build bonds with their owners.

Steven Kendus' Hunter's Journal appears monthly in The News Journal. Kendus is the author of "Hunting The First State: A Guide to Delaware Hunting." Follow Kendus at www.HuntingTheFirstState.com and on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Contact him at skendus@HuntingTheFirstState.com.