

Training with the Pros

by Everett Skehan



ALAN LADD: Training on Wild Grouse and Woodcock

On a crisp October morning, we took my two young pointers, Elhex Pinocchio, also known as Mr. Big, and Riptide Rambler, illustrious son of Elhex Upland Gilly, into the old abandoned farmlands that border Woodcock Haven Kennels in central Maine. To say they enjoyed their little excursion would be a gross understatement; these two classy youngsters were suddenly immersed in puppy Heaven.

Rip was the first to go charging into the popples, and in less than a minute slammed into point along the edge of a thick clump of evergreens. Before we could get to him, a brood of grouse began thundering skyward, rocketing off through the golden autumn leaves with Rip in hot pursuit.

And then the fun really began. In less than an hour, the two exuberant pointers run consecutively in covers less than five minutes from Alan Ladd's kennel, would move more than 50 birds. The majority of them were woodcock, but at least a dozen were grouse.

It was soon down to just flash points, bumps, and chases as the birds came so fast there was barely a pause in the action. It was great fun to watch and very beneficial to the dogs. Even though both of them had pointed and held grouse and woodcock to the flush on numerous occasions, they had never in their wildest dreams encountered so many wild birds in a single, short outing. It had temporarily blown their minds, and rightly so. And the value of an abundance of wild birds for training purposes was never so vividly portrayed. For the pure joy and tenacity of those zesty young bird dogs, could only be created by the discovery of their own true paradise.



Al Ladd prepares to flush a bird for Bob Wehle's outstanding pointer, Elhex Goldielock.

birds are there, and what can you expect to train on from July to October?

LADD: I have no trouble putting each dog on an average of four to six wild birds every half-hour throughout the summer and early fall. There are plenty of covers and lots of birds within just a few minutes of my kennel.

Q: How do you bring a young dog along on wild birds?

LADD: I take them out into the covers from the time they're four to six months old and just let them find birds, make mistakes, learn on their own. I like to get them into as many wild birds as possible.

Q: Do you break them on wild birds?

LADD: I don't break any dog until I know it has seen plenty of wild birds and can take the breaking process. Then I'll bring the dog into the quail field and break him on pen-raised birds in controlled situations.

Q: What is the average age of the dogs when you start to break them?

LADD: It depends on the individual dog. Some are ready to be broke sooner than others. But it's usually when they're about a year-and-a-half old. I start teaching them their manners and, then if they'll hold their birds without pressure, I'll go ahead and break them. But if they're not ready for that, I'll wait.

Q: What are some of the advantages of training on wild birds?

LADD: It shows the young dog hunting where the birds are and how to handle them. If they're crowded the wild birds flush, and so the pup learns and starts pointing sooner and with greater style than on pen-raised birds.

They also learn that they can't catch those wild birds, which helps avoid a lot of problems, such as creeping, circling, and pouncing, problems that might be encountered while training on pen-raised birds.

Q: How do you introduce the gun to puppies during wild bird training sessions?

Q: How did you ever locate land with so many wild birds?

LADD: It took me quite a few years to find this place. When I did come across just the right cover, I bought some land and built my house and kennel right in the middle of it.

Q: With grouse and woodcock becoming scarce in many areas, why do you think there are still so many wild birds here?

LADD: This is all old abandoned farmland. The soil is rich and there are popples, ferns, spruce thickets, and apple orchards. It's ideal cover that supports lots of grouse and woodcock. Plus most of the covers are on private posted land and there are no hunters on them, so the birds aren't killed off. We use strictly blank guns so we can train on those birds over and over.

Q: I know we got into an awful lot of birds this morning, but I'm sure many of the woodcock were flight birds on their way South. How many native



The author's pointer Riptide Rambler, points a bird while Ladd styles up John and Mel Pfeifle's fine young pointer, Elhex Rebel Yell, in a backing drill.

LADD: I only shoot the blank gun when a puppy is under a bird and in hot pursuit. The pup is totally concentrating on the bird, and the gun going off in the background is just a noise that doesn't phase him.

Q: *What is the sequence and ratio between wild birds and pen-raised birds in the breaking process?*

LADD: I start them on wild birds and let them bump and chase; later on, when they're pointing and holding, I

bring them into the quail field and teach them their manners and break them. But then when I put them back on wild birds, I basically have to teach them over again because they get so excited.

Q: *Can problem dogs that are flagging or creeping and circling domestic birds be cured by training on wild birds?*

LADD: Wild birds can definitely cure those kinds of problems. A lot of times you can cure stuff like that by just sending the dog to a different type of

trainer. The dog might be soft and the previous trainer might have used a lot of hands-on methods that intimidated the dog. The exposure to wild birds and the freedom involved does a lot to restore the confidence in those dogs.

Q: *Do you think some handlers overuse the checkcord in training on domestic birds?*

LADD: Definitely. Some trainers checkcord the dog into a bird and try to mechanically make the dog point by "whoaing" him. That's wrong. I never "whoa" a young dog on a bird. I let him go in on his own. If he points the bird that's good; but if he bumps it that's okay, too. He's got to make his mistakes and learn the game. He can't learn it if the trainer leads him in mechanically on a checkcord and makes him point.

Q: *How many birds should you show a young dog during a training session? Don't a lot of inexperienced trainers overdo it?*

LADD: I don't think you can overdo it with wild birds, but you definitely can with pen-raised birds. Let the dog see as

many wild birds as he can find. But in the quail field, that's not the case. People make way too many mistakes training on pen-raised birds. When I break a dog, I only put them on a couple of quail a session, and I only do that about twice a week.

Q: *What else do you do to enhance the breaking process?*

LADD: I do mostly yard work, with the barrel, teaching them to "whoa" and stay and "come" and working them without birds to handle. But too many people don't do this. They try to short-circuit the yard work, and that's very costly. And they put their dogs on far too many liberated and planted birds.

Q: *What time of year do you start working the dogs on wild birds?*

LADD: I don't disturb the bird covers during the nesting and hatching seasons from late March to July. I observe the woodcock on the singing fields and determine where the broods will be, but I don't run any dogs there. I start working the woodcock in mid-July when the young birds are about six weeks old



Ladd checkcords Nancy Whitehead's fine setter, Fleece Man, into a training area. Checkcording should be kept to a minimum with young dogs just learning to find and point birds.

and flying strong. Then a few weeks later we start working the grouse, which nest and hatch after the woodcock.

Q: *How often do you train on the same birds?*

LADD: We've got plenty of birds and lots of covers, so I don't train on the same brood more than twice a week. That way the birds are not harassed and won't be driven out of the area.

Q: *Do you use beeper collars to locate*

your dogs when they're pointing in the thick summer foliage?

LADD: I try to avoid beepers, but sometimes with a dog that runs big, I have to.

Q: *Isn't it important to get to your dog on point quickly, especially when it's in the early stages of the breaking process?*

LADD: Yes, and that's why you have to keep them at relatively close range when you're working them on birds. Once I decide they're old enough to develop their manners and break, I put the roading harness on them and let them drag a cable. This slows them down and cuts the range. The cable will keep them in the twenty-five to fifty-yard range, where you can see everything that's going on.

Q: *Do you train on woodcock before grouse?*

LADD: Yes. I start them on woodcock and move up to grouse, because the grouse are harder to find and handle. I'd rather have them find and point woodcock than go in and bump grouse.

Q: *When do you start yard training for "whoa" breaking a dog?*

LADD: In my opinion, they should see a hundred or more wild birds before you start "whoa" breaking them. You get a lot better finished dog that way, and you can break them much faster.

Q: *What's the ratio of wild birds to quail and pigeons?*

LADD: They see five times as many wild birds as domestic birds. I only work the domestic birds two months out of the year. Once we're onto the wild birds,

we stay out in the woods unless there's a problem.

Q: *I know it varies from dog to dog, but about how long does it take you to break a dog steady to wing and shot?*

LADD: It's about three months from start to finish, usually beginning when the dog is a year-and-a-half old. And if the owner gets his dog into a lot of wild birds when it's young, he's ahead of the game.

Q: *What about breaking a young dog off chasing deer and rabbits?*

LADD: It depends on the dog. We have a lot of deer and rabbits around here. Some dogs will chase and point them, and others will never bother with them.

I have access to a forty acre fenced-in area owned by my neighbor, beagle trainer Dennis Seelenbrandt. That's where I break the dogs off rabbits. He's got lots of wild snowshoe hares on these grounds. In the evenings, these rabbits all come to the feeders that Dennis has located throughout the woods. I take the dogs into those areas and in half an hour, a dog can usually get into ten or fifteen rabbits.

When the dog drops his nose and starts trailing the rabbit, I correct him with the electric collar. All you need to do is tap them briefly with a light level of stimulation.

Q: *How many of these sessions does it take to break a pointing dog off rabbits?*

LADD: Not many. For instance, my pointer, Woodcock Haven Striker – winner of the Woodcock Futurity – liked rabbits. The first time I took him over there, he gave me fifteen finds on rabbits. The second time, he gave me six or seven finds. The third time, he didn't point a single rabbit. In three sessions, each held a week apart, he was broke off rabbits.

Q: *Don't a lot of pups grow out of chasing and pointing rabbits on their own?*

LADD: If you have enough wild birds, the dogs usually break themselves away from chasing off-game. Most dogs that chase deer and rabbits haven't found enough wild birds in their covers. But if

they get into enough birds at a young age, they greatly prefer the birds over deer and rabbits. The ones that do chase deer and rabbits are usually the good ones. They've got so much energy and desire that if they can't find birds, they'll take the next best thing.

Q: *How many wild birds do you have to shoot over dogs in training?*

LADD: I used to think you had to shoot a lot of wild birds over the young dogs, but I've learned over the years that you can get away with shooting domestic birds such as quail, pigeons, and chukars and still get the same high-quality work on wild birds. The wild birds are far too valuable to train on, so I stopped shooting them several years ago, and I'm glad I did.

Q: *How often do you work a dog?*

LADD: I work about twelve dogs a day, and I go from seven a.m. until dark seven days a week. I love it. I usually run each dog three or four times a week on wild birds in the covers, and then I work them on some other aspect of training five or six times a week. I can work nine dogs a day on wild birds, then several others on yard training.

Q: *Do you use the electric collar much?*

LADD: Not a lot, but it is a useful tool when you use it properly. The trouble, is too many people don't know how to use the collar and won't take the time to learn. You can so easily ruin a dog with the improper use of the electric collar, that I recommend most people simply forget about it and just let the dog drag a cable.

Q: *What about improper hunting practices over a first year shooting dog?*

LADD: That's a problem, too. The biggest thing is that most people take too many friends out hunting with them and when the dog makes a mistake, they're afraid to correct him because they think that will look bad to their friends. I recommend that for the first season they use a single-shot .410 and hunt alone and keep training. Keep the dog happy and under control, and don't shoot at any birds that aren't pointed. ■

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