

Hunting Dogs The Conservator

Belle sits at the ready, eyes ablaze with anticipation as she peers skyward waiting for the October morning magic to begin.

And when it happens, when that first green-winged teal suddenly jets in from the east, directly out of the glaring blind spot caused by the bright sun topping the pumpkin-orange horizon, Belle spots it first and makes the announcement with a frantic wagging of her tail.

Although I'd anticipated this moment, planned for it and should have been ready, somehow I'm still surprised to see the bird. I jump up from my willow bush blind, hurriedly raise the shotgun, and then immediately lower it when I realize the duck is long gone.

Expecting the shot, Belle had jumped up, all four legs ramrod stiff under a black body quivering with excitement. When the shotgun remains silent, she turns around and her soft brown eyes peer at me curiously, without a hint of judgment or accusation.

That look – which every dog-owning hunter knows – personifies the special and timeless relationship between hunter and hunting dog, a relationship built on trust and mutual admiration. It's a look that says 'I won't expect perfection from you if you don't expect it from me.' But most of all, it is a look of love.

Pennsylvania author Charles Fergus explores that relationship with poignant clarity in his delightful book, *A Rough-Shooting Dog*. He opines "it is love (and of this I have no doubt) that makes a dog work the hardest for its master."

Hunters of waterfowl and upland birds share a special bond with their dogs, from flushers to pointers and everything in between. Any hunter who has hunted with a good bird dog can't imagine going afield without one. For those hunters, hunting birds without a well-trained dog is akin to dancing without a partner.

It just can't – and shouldn't – be done.

More than just hunting efficiency is at stake here. A dogless hunter doesn't know the thrill of watching a dog work cover or swim out to retrieve a duck and then bring it back to you, while expecting no greater reward than a head pat and a whispered "Good Girl (or Boy)."

Without a dog, you're merely out with a shotgun, hoping the birds are where you think they should be, that you will be able to put them up and that they will land dead where they can be easily found by sight alone. As any hunter of waterfowl or upland birds knows, that is a dream scenario, with little relevance to reality.

"The dog is an absolute requirement," says Mike Leech, a long-time upland and waterfowl hunter in Brandon, Manitoba.

"They instinctively know what to do and they do it. They certainly know more about the birds than the person holding the shotgun does."

A DUC national director, Leech was exposed early in life to the thrill of hunting and field-training with first-rate Labrador retrievers, including grandfather Cecil Leech's Pelican Lake Petey Two, a two-time National Retriever Championships winner. Mike Leech still hunts waterfowl, pheasants and gray partridge with Scout, a grandson of Peter Two.

Leech, 47, says he's learned over the years that hunting dogs excel because "they just want to please their owners."

He relishes every opportunity he gets in the fall to sit in a blind, with Scout beside him waiting for the waterfowl to fly. Although mornings are always fun, Leech prefers being in the marsh in late afternoon, watching the sun disappear to the west.

But no matter the time of day he's out there, Leech says, "the dog is the experience."

Gordon Jackson, a long-time DU volunteer in High River, Alberta, heartily concurs.

Also a fan of Labrador retrievers, Jackson grew up in the southeastern Alberta town of Brooks during the heydays of the 1960s and 70s, when ring-necked pheasant populations were booming. He recalls hunting with a friend and his black Lab along irrigation ditches choked with weeds, willows and cattails.

The dog flushed pheasants and ducks for Jackson and his friend to shoot.

Those early days taught Jackson a valuable lesson that has as much to do with conservation as it does with filling the game bag.

"Sometimes birds don't fall down dead or they land in the thickest cover," he says. "A dog will find those birds, but a hunter without a dog won't recover many of them."

The experience led Jackson to get his own dog, a lab-collie cross that he hunted with for several years. He later owned a lab named Squire and Polly, an English pointer.

Jackson smiles when he recalls Rex, a black Lab he had for 14 ½ years after moving in 1980 to High River, where he helped organize the town's first DU fund-raising banquet.

"Rex had a natural instinct to hunt," he says. "He knew what his job was and he did it every time we went out."

One fall, Jackson shot a mallard that landed on the shore across an open creek. Rex swam over and was about to grab the bird when it suddenly jumped up and started flying away. Like a CFL receiver rising above his defenders to pluck a Hail Mary pass in the end zone, Rex leapt skyward and caught the bird in mid-air.

To Jackson, the idea of hunting without a dog is akin to shooting a shotgun into the air in the hope a duck will fly by into the shot pattern. It's a matter of luck, quite unlike the finely honed plan built on training and follow-through that defines the dog-hunter partnership from puppy hood through to death.

"To arrive too early in the marsh is an adventure in pure listening; the ear roams at will among the noises of the night, without let or hindrance from hand or eye."

So wrote Aldo Leopold, the father of modern day conservation, in his trail-breaking 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac*.

Leopold's words clearly were limited to human – not canine – senses. In the mysterious pre-dawn world, hunting dogs become complex four-legged radar screens of olfactory and visual signals, their senses further heightened by the occasional sound of a splash, har-onk or quack. On full alert in blind or boat, they never stop sniffing, cocking an ear to listen or trying to see through the darkness to identify all that they know, by instinct, is happening out there.

But things really get interesting for hunters and their dogs when the sun peeks over the horizon.

For my own Belle, a Lab-golden retriever cross, that's the time to get down to the business at hand. It's when the birds fly, the master shoots and sometimes there's a duck or goose to retrieve. But it's also the time when, between action, muskrats swim among our decoys, relentlessly teasing Belle by wiggling their little hairless rat tails as they approach closer and closer.

For Belle, it can be just too much. Frequently, she has watched a muskrat so intently that's she becomes a veritable mass of quivering nerves, with release coming only by jumping in the water in an attempt to catch it. These episodes always end with me yelling at her to get back in the boat or blind, and her scrambling aboard looking a little sheepish. The muskrat always escapes unscathed.

It's an indiscretion that some dog owners would never forgive, and would work hard to correct. I don't exactly approve, but somehow I can't get too upset when she does it. Like any relationship, ours involves give and take. I forgive Belle's odd behavioral lapse, and she forgives me when I fail by missing a bird or choosing the wrong spot to hunt. Belle is not a perfect hunting dog, nor am I a perfect hunter.

We've had almost 14 years to reach this understanding, and I don't regret a day of it. She's the best hunting dog our family has ever had.

Belle came into our life as a puppy, a product of a midnight country liaison between a purebred Golden retriever female and a big black Lab that lived down the gravel road. The farm couple that owned the bitch was so upset at this unplanned breeding they were giving away any puppy they could, and planned to destroy the rest.

When I went to see the litter, five puppies scurried around on the ground below. Belle was the only one that came up and nuzzled me. I was smitten, and later that afternoon she came home to meet my wife and two young daughters.

Belle is a natural hunter, not surprising considering her lineage. She was relatively easy to train to hand and whistle signals, and learned to follow my commands. When she was three months old, I was watching a hunting program on television one afternoon as Belle lay on the carpet. She was roused by the sound of an angry cock pheasant cackling as it was flushed. Tail wagging, Belle ran to the screen and pressed her nose to it, causing me to beam proudly while praising her enthusiastically.

Displaying the best qualities of her parents as she developed, she took to hunting pheasant and partridge as eagerly as she did waterfowl over water and land. Belle finds wounded birds more efficiently than any dog I've ever known – pointing and flushing breed alike. Her spirit is unyielding in any weather and terrain.

We've hunted together in Montana, all over southern Alberta and, when she was 10, we flew to southern Ontario to hunt wood ducks and ruffed grouse with a friend. Last year, she made her final retrieve on her final hunt, although I didn't know at the time it would be.

We were hunting ducks one late October morning, on a spring-fed, fog-shrouded creek not far from our home. A dozen decoys floated in front of our blind in the willows, thickly coated with white hoar frost from the night before. Another half dozen standing decoys were stuck in the frozen mud along the shore.

We sat patiently for two hours, waiting for ducks to fly but they never did. I didn't really mind – at least not for myself – because we'd already had several successful outings that season. But I was hoping for a duck, for Belle's sake.

When Belle started whining, I decided we'd go for a walk, hoping to jump any ducks that might be hiding in the cattails and bulrushes along the creek. Minutes later, Belle suddenly started getting birdy, her tail wagging furiously just before plunging into the cattails. A big cock pheasant exploded from the cover and presented an easy going-away shot.

The bird landed in the creek. Belle was on it instantly, hitting the water with a splash and swimming strongly until she clenched it in her jaws. Seconds later she handed the rooster to me, getting the mandatory head rub in return. It was our last bird of the season.

Four months later, the veterinarian diagnosed Belle with a heart condition. Later, she developed fluid in her lungs. Enjoy her during the summer, the vet advised, because she probably won't see much of the fall. Quietly, I wished that she'd at least make her 14th birthday on October 1st.

Last week, Belle collapsed during a short walk not far from our house. I carried her back to a shady grassy knoll and laid her down. She lay flat on her side, eyes closed and chest heaving. I feared the worst.

After 15 long minutes, Belle jumped to her feet and wagged her tail. At the vet's office, she was lethargic but her eyes looked perkier. The doc prescribed new heart medication and we headed home.

Belle has been sleeping a lot since then. The other night she brought her ball to my wife and I, and dropped it for us to throw, which we did.

We know Belle doesn't have many days left, and I only hope the end is painless, at least for her if not for us.

But our special relationship will never die. It will be enriched by a lifetime of memories of memorable hunts and not so memorable muskrats. Every hunter should be so lucky.