

The Thrill of the Chase

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Whether it is skateboards or squirrels, pheasants or bicycles, if your dog chases it can be at least embarrassing and at worst, dangerous.

Last month we started to look at the issues of chasing and some different options when considering how to tackle it. This issue, I have asked a colleague to describe how she taught her dogs not to chase the local wildlife – with simple, practical training techniques that anyone could follow. No electric collar required!

Here is Stella Bagshaw's recipe for non-chasing success:

The first step is to teach your dog a command that means 'don't touch this thing'. An easy signal to use is 'leave'.

1. Start by holding a piece of food in your closed fist and without saying anything offer the fist to the dog. Your dog can smell the food in the hand and will make an effort to eat the food. Do not remove your hand; simply wait for the dog to look or back away. Immediately he does so, click or say "Good" and then reward your dog from your other hand with a piece of food.

2. Move on to placing the food on the floor. If your dog goes towards the food, remove it immediately. When the dog looks away from the food reward him from your other hand. This can be frustrating to start with as many dogs can be very persistent in trying to get to the food.

Note: Do not reward your dog with the food that you are teaching him to leave. Pick this up and reward your dog with something that comes from you instead. This will encourage him to look to you for a reward rather than rewarding himself with the forbidden treat!

When your dog is able to look or back away from the food you have placed on the floor or in your hand, put in your new command or signal of 'leave' just before you place the food down. Your dog will now start to associate the verbal signal of 'leave' with *not* taking the food and looking to you for a reward.

This exercise needs to be practised in many different places: different rooms in the home, in the garden and out on a walk. At this stage DO NOT attach the leave signal with the thing you want your dog to stop chasing.

3. Move onto throwing the food (we call this 'food with legs'!) and ask your dog to 'leave'. This is best done with another person so that if the dog makes a mistake and tries to take the food the other person will get to the 'leave' food before the dog and remove it.

Real-world training

When you feel that your dog understands the signal of leave you will need to make things a little bit more like the real world.

1. With your dog on lead take him to wherever he is normally tempted to chase. If squirrels are his usual quarry, take your dog to a wood where you know you will come across lots of squirrels, if it's pheasants

take your dog to wherever you know you can find plenty of pheasants. No matter what it is that you want your dog to stop chasing you will need to find plenty of opportunities for your dog to practise.

With your dog on lead, wait until the 'prey' appears. As soon as the dog sights the 'prey' say 'leave'. At this stage most dogs will ignore the command and go to the end of the lead in an attempt to chase. DO NOT keep repeating the command. Ignore the dog even if he is barking and lunging at the end of the lead. Eventually - and this is usually when the prey has gone - the dog will turn round and look at you. Mark the look with a clicker or word such as 'Good' then call your dog to you and give your dog a great reward. Make sure that the reward is something that the dog finds irresistible - cheese, sausage, or toy, anything as long as your dog finds it highly rewarding.

2. You will need to repeat this process until the first breakthrough. This is when your dog turns around to look at you after he has heard the word 'leave' and before the prey has disappeared. Your dog is now starting to learn that chasing is not on the menu, but recalling back to you for a reward is.

As your dog gets quicker at responding to the 'leave' signal you can move onto the next stage which is having your dog on a longer lead or line.

Important note: If you are using this technique to teach your dog to 'leave' bicycles, skateboards or anything that is on or close to a road, always keep your dog on an ordinary length lead and do not use a long line or extendable lead.

The squirrel cue

Most dogs are pretty smart and will work out that whenever the squirrel – or whatever he likes to chase – appears, you say 'leave' and he comes back to you for a reward. It then becomes obvious to the dog that the shortest route to the reward is not to wait until the command or signal is given but to simply respond to the signal of the squirrel itself.

When the dog starts to volunteer to turn around and look at you as soon as he catches sight of the chase element, always recall the dog and give a wonderful reward.

Dogs will often start to generalise at this stage and certainly if you are working on prey such as squirrel or pheasants they will offer a 'leave' and look at the owner on most types of wild animal. In my experience this has included foxes.

When you feel your dog really understands this new behaviour you can start to work with the dog off lead. Don't forget, give the verbal signal if the dog is not responding to the chase element itself.

There are a few important things to remember when teaching your dog this new behaviour.

- Do not move on to a harder stage until the dog has understood the former stage.
- The dog must remain on a long line or lead until the dog is responding to the 'leave' signal 100 per cent.
- Find as many places to practice the training as you can.
- If your dog makes one mistake and chases something after you have said 'leave' put the dog back on a lead or line and re-teach the behaviour.
- Most dogs love to chase so it would be very unkind of us to deny our dogs this pleasure. Here are a few things you can do to that will enable your dog still to enjoy chase in an appropriate way.
- Teach your dog how to retrieve a Frisbee or ball
- Teach your dog how to play tag with you

- Purchase a wonderful training tool that is used by gun dog trainers called a Bolting Rabbit. This is simply a training dummy attached to a very strong piece of stretchy rubber. One end of the rubber is screwed into the ground; you then stretch the rubber with the dummy attached, and let it go. If your dog is good at wait or stay you can ask your dog to wait and then when the dummy is let go, then command or signal 'chase'. If your dog's wait is not terribly good, the Bolting Rabbit can be set up using a trigger devise, this means you can hold your dog's collar and release him as the dummy is released.

Today on a walk with my dogs, one of which is a Terrier/Whippet-cross, we spotted a herd of deer, six pheasants, and a squirrel. All the dogs returned to me without being called or given a command. The signal to come to me was the prey itself. Thank you boys!