

V E R S A T I L E HUNTING DOG

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For the Love of Hunting

**CHUKAR vs.
PHEASANTS**

*Positive
Training*

Estrus Suppression

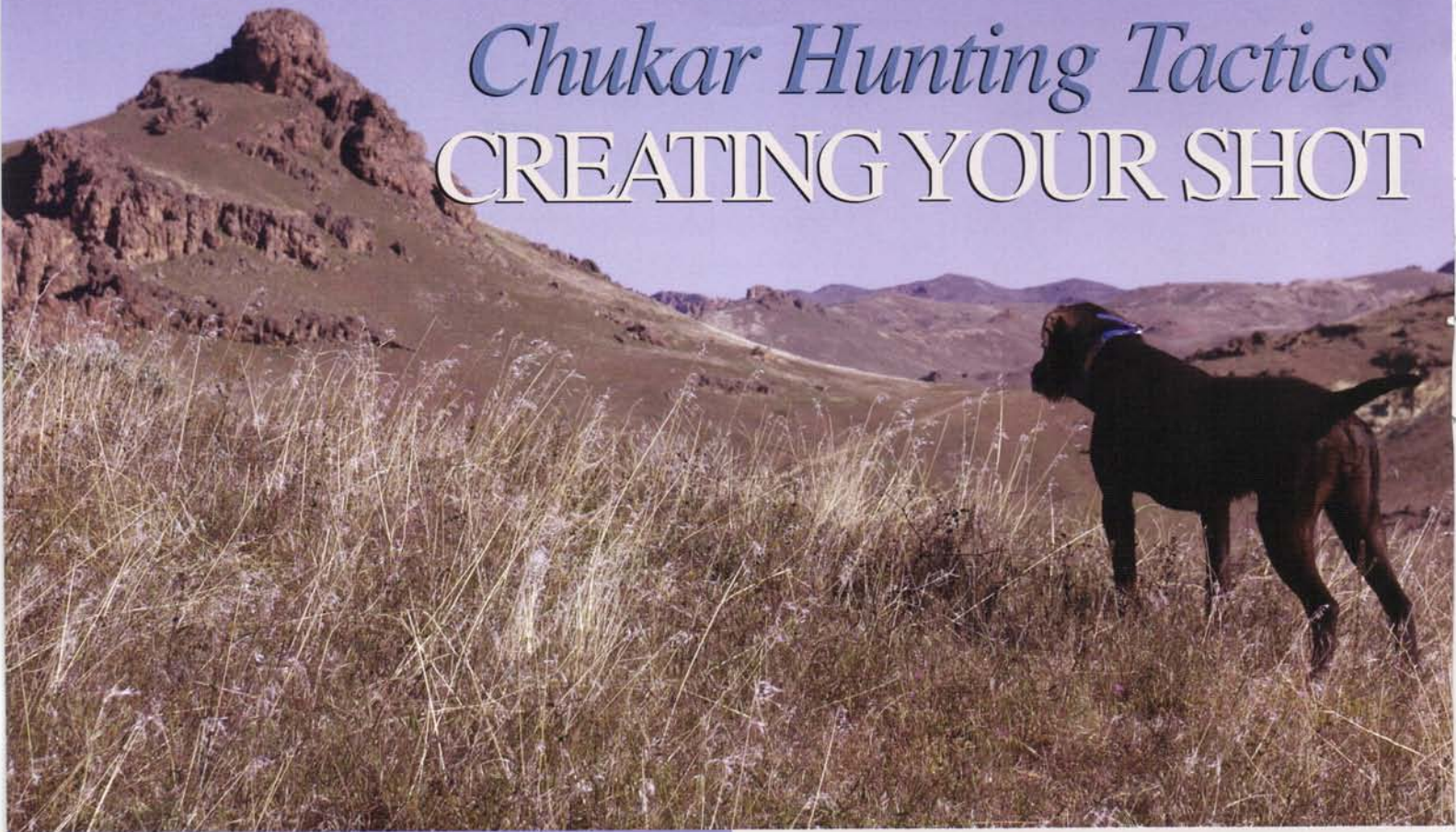
VC SHR Sassy Hemlock Bandito MH GGC
English Setter

Chukar Hunting Tactics



Chukar Hunting Tactics

CREATING YOUR SHOT



Chukar hunting can be a cruel master, as all pursuing this sport can attest. It draws you in with the promise and excitement from your first solidly pointed covey, but then immediately crushes you with one of any number of insults. Shots with only one foot firmly placed on the ground, a covey exploding in all different directions, birds running until out of gun range before taking flight—they're all abusive, especially once you've been bitten by the bug.



Shot making is a skill that all wing shooters would like to master, but the variations offered on a steep canyon chukar slope never seem to have the same presentation as the previous. Thus, finding that magic groove on a left to right downhill crossing shot may find an embarrassing conclusion when the birds escape unharmed leaving you with nothing more than several empty shells. After surveying many of the Northwest's avid chukar hunters, it seems as though most dread this left to right downhill shot more than any other situation experienced while chukar hunting. As Bill Dillon (one of Idaho's premier wing shooters) put it:

When a right handed shooter swings from left to right, you are pulling the shoulder and head away from the gun, causing your head to come away from the stock. It may feel easier, but keeping your cheek firmly planted on the comb of the gun is very important—hence the saying—wood to wood. There is a counter-argument on swing direction. When a right handed shooter swings from left to right, the gun barrel is pointed in front of the target. When this happens, it is easier to see the target with both eyes. When swinging from right to left, the barrel should be in front of (to the left of) the target. Your non-shooting eye is on the left side of the barrel, putting the barrel between the left eye and the target, which is on the right side of the barrel. Some people argue you shoot better when both eyes are on the same side of the barrel as the target. I don't put a lot of weight on this argument because

your shooting (master) eye is the one really doing the work. A lot of shooters put a piece of scotch tape or a Vaseline spot over their non-shooting (off) eye to prevent it from causing problems (cross dominance).

For me, being right handed and one that likes to start my swing from behind a single bird and swing through this bird when shooting, it is much easier to continue my swing and avoid stopping my swing at the instant the gun catches up with the bird. Whereas when I'm swinging to my left there seems to be an inept tendency to stop my swing at that precise instant that I catch up with the bird, causing a shot that is behind rather than out in front of the bird to adjust for the necessary lead required.

Birds are also more easily taken when the rise comes from uphill, above you, rather than those coming up downhill from you. When the birds take flight from below you, they are usually flying down and around the slope and it is particularly difficult to avoid shooting above the bird. Uphill rises usually are mere right to left or left to right shots with often times a mixture of these situations. The birds seem to also rise singularly with each taking their own course of escape, whereas many down hill rises usually see the whole covey exploding together, tempting the gunner into a flock shot, which rarely finds success.

Similar to our modern day golf excursions, a day on the chukar slope has so many varying scenarios that mastering all these dif-

ferent shot encounters would take the weekend participant a lifetime to conquer. Ironically, I can post my best golf scores when only playing with six of the 12 clubs in my bag. These are my high percentage shot makers which seldom let me down. It's the other six clubs that play havoc with my game. The same approach helps with my percentage of success on a chukar hunt; getting my high percentage shots at a higher frequency puts more birds in my bag. I'm continually looking for that right to left crossing shot with the birds being flushed from above me.

Lessons from a legend

Like most sportsmen of today, most of what I've learned concerning hunting, fishing, and of the outdoors, has been gifted from others that have previously conquered these passions. Just as there have been many to have increased my awareness of field training hunting dogs, there is but one man that I can credit my knowledge of success related to chukar hunting. Most everything I've learned concerning chukar hunting was learned in the 70's from Idaho's legendary chukar enthusiast, Joe Leonard. A limit of birds during this era was ten and seldom did Joe return from a hunt without his daily bag, and it was accomplished with a 28 gauge pump. The post hunt conversation was always of the day's dog work, unexpected experiences, and the number of shots it took Joe to acquire his limit; which was usually 12 or fewer shots. Joe would not take a bird that his dogs hadn't handled properly, allowing him to make



the flush and he felt that light little pump gun he shot helped him dismount the gun between birds so that each bird taken was shot with the gun being remounted as each new shell was chambered.

Often, during my hunts, I find myself taking a break with my dogs on a picturesque rocky outcropping and catch myself reminiscing of Joe, his pointing dogs, and all the theories he applied toward the success he had enjoyed with this sport. Larry Mueller once wrote an article about his experiences with Joe on a chukar hunt in Eastern Oregon for *Outdoor Life Magazine*. The article also endorsed the homemade chukar belt Joe had created for carrying a limit of birds at your waist rather than in a game bag attached to a vest. Joe always felt the birds were too beautiful to crumple together in one's vest, plus the weight was much easier carried from your waist. I still have the belt Joe had made me in 1975 and still use it on my hunts today. The chukar hunting theories that Joe was so passionate of were always discussed on the prehunt trip in the vehicle and once again rehearsed during the trip home.

One of the rules one had to abide by when hunting with Joe was to avoid hunting birds at their watering hole. He would bark out, "If all you're interested in is killing birds, then be on top of them at first light and again at noon when they're most vulnerable, and be at those watering spots." Then, with that special twinkle in his eyes that only Joe could display, he'd remind me in a soft sincere voice; "For me it's all about dog work, and the dog work I'm talking about can only be seen at midmorning when they've taken to their roost." His personality seemed to be that of a crusty old salt water fisherman, but was actually quite serene once you got to know him. It was for this reason we never left for a hunt before 8am. It was an hour drive to most of our hunts, and this would put us on the ridgelines by 10am. If you started too early, the birds would be moving from their watering area to their roosting or feeding area and they would usually run up hill, avoiding any good hunting opportunities and especially good dog work.

Lessons learned

What I've retained from those special days afield with Joe pertaining to shot making comes, ironically, from the use of solidly trained dogs; those trained to hold their finds and never flush birds themselves. You see, it's the dog that allows you to get those valued shots with the flush coming from above you and increasing the frequency of left to right shots. It's quite simple in theory, but the playmaker is a dog that is staunch following his original point and reliable until the flush. As the midmorning heat thermals are carrying the bird's scent up the canyon walls the best scenting for the dog is from the ridge tops. The dog is usually above the birds and those with superior noses are able to locate birds at amazingly great distances. Rather than advancing past the dogs in pursuit of their find, one must refrain as this will only result in the dreaded down and across shot, with the birds dropping out of sight instantaneously. When approaching his dogs, Joe would say "just envision rolling a beach ball down the hill and if it would roll off to the right or the left of the dogs, that is where you go." The basic idea is to leave the dogs on point, retreat qui-

etly down the hill on the right or left of the dogs while trying not to disturb the birds. Once you feel you're below the birds, sidle until you're directly below your dog. Now as you advance back up the hill you should have the birds between you and the dog and the flush should offer a crossing shot with a more likelihood of seeing some single flushes as opposed to the entire covey exploding at the same instant. More than likely the birds will take the course that the rolling beach ball would take, so experiencing more right to left shots can be more predictable when one creates a flush that will give this shot. It requires a very reliable and well trained dog to complete this scenario and also pull it off. You usually need to slip down some 100 yards or more below your dog and off to the side some considerable distance, which is most advantageous when you're out of sight of the birds. Basically, you're circling your dog's point to get below the birds. But first an educated guess using the canyon's fall-line to get a feel for which direction the birds are most likely to escape, and also positioning yourself for your highest percentage shot must be formulized.

The common denominator necessary for success is a dog trained to hold birds at long distances and one that is comfortable when left standing alone while you slip out of their sight to set-up your ambush. Often times on slopes or flats, I will circle several hundred yards before advancing back toward my dogs. I have, on occasion, retreated nearly back only to find their faces with "deer in the headlights" eyes, indicating the birds have been walking from me and the dogs are now the blockers while now sight pointing a covey of birds directly to their front. December and January will find chukar feeding on sage-covered flats during mid-day. Here they find new cheat grass sprouts as a protein food source and aerial protection or shade from the low sage plants. When on the flats and both of your feet are planted firmly on the ground, it's a red letter day when the circling technique works, the dogs remain staunch and you get your left to right shot on a covey of birds that don't all rise together.

Joe and I hunted together for nearly 20 years and he was over 30 years my senior, but still a hard one to keep up with during a chukar hunt. He hunted every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday from the season opener in September until the closure in January. I must now be coming full circle in the phase of one's experiences when continuing a hunting passion for over four decades. I am nearing the age that Joe was when I first met him and began our hunts and find myself not needing near as many kills to satisfy my ego. Just as Joe had done during the final ten or so years I hunted with him, I now find myself unloading my gun after four birds are on my belt and just enjoying the rest of the day watching my dogs work and taking pictures. I still take Joe a mess of chukar late each year, after the birds are mature with a good offering of yellow fat covering their breasts. Now over 90 years old, nearly blind, and struggling daily with worn out knees; he is still as sharp as a tack, and can reiterate nearly every memory of what his dogs gave him on all of his hunts. He had to quit hunting after turning 80, but seeing him cry at my annual offering of several plump, and perfectly cleaned birds is what I understand and admire of this man; his sincerity toward his passion, and what he gave to me.