

CURING STICKINESS IN RETRIEVERS

While stickiness (reluctance or refusal to give up the bird when ordered to) can be attributed to handler-induced errors, it can also appear out of “nowhere” and for no discernable reason. Stickiness can be as minor as a slight reluctance to give up the bird when ordered, or it can be as severe as total freezing, with the retriever’s eyes glazing over, and the jaw becoming totally locked. The only way for the handler to get the bird from the retriever is to physically pry the bird from the retriever’s death grip. While I have seen stickiness mainly in advanced retrievers, open all age dogs; I have also seen it in the lesser-trained retrievers as well. I believe that some breeds are more susceptible to being sticky or hard mouthed. I have seen more stickiness, and hard mouth problems in Boykin Spaniels than in other breeds. I also feel that the very birdy dogs will tend to develop this rather than one that is not.

Let’s review common handler induced errors. In lesser-trained dogs, handler errors in taking the bird from the retriever, and incomplete force fetch normally are the culprits. Too often the bird is roughly grabbed out of the retriever’s mouth. I have seen this in young puppies, where rather than grabbing the pup, the novice trainer grabs the bird or dummy. This also creates a problem with the pup not wanting to return to the handler. While the reluctance or refusal to return is cured when the pup is force fetched, or obedience trained, the handler is unaware how roughly they are taking the bird away from the retriever. The retriever might be still responding to not wanting to give up the bird by holding on to it. A tug of war could ensue. Puppies having a tendency to hold on to their bird all the way to the handler and holding until it is gently removed is a great asset. Obviously the way to avoid this reason for mouth problems is from the beginning the handler should always gently take the bird away from the retriever, starting as a pup.

Many times in force fetching emphasis is given to the “fetch” and “hold” portion, and not to the “drop”. All three are important. The retriever is praised when it takes and holds on to the bird, but not when it drops it when commanded. Further the retriever has pressure applied to fetch, and if they drop the object or not drop (hold) as well; but neither pressure nor praise for giving up the bird. Both are important. In normal force fetch programs, the release is not forced, and in my opinion is not necessary in most cases. Here is an excellent time for a beginning trainer who is forcing his or her own retriever to practice taking the bird gently and correctly from the retriever. Further I feel the command “give” is more of a request, as opposed to “drop” which is certainly a command. The dog must understand that the release is not a request; it is a command, with the refusal met with a correction, not another request.

In open all age retrievers, one has to assume that their force work is complete, and that the handler is taking the bird from the retriever correctly. Normally sticking or freezing is seen on the last bird of a triple (or quad), not the blind. The retriever knows they are finished. Do they think, “This one’s mine”, or “now I have to go back to the crate”?

Does the excitement of the marks play a role? Who knows? If this happens at a trial, the handler can usually get the bird by tricking the retriever that it is going to be sent on a blind. This does not solve the problem, but it will get you out of a jam. The handler should then go home and correct the problem before it becomes a habit.

If a retriever sticks on a bird, the handler should evaluate how they take the bird away, or if perhaps something is missing in the retriever's force work. As in any cure, this procedure works best if the dog has not got into the practice of sticking. With severe cases you might have to go back to the force table, and the retriever forced on "drop". In time with these severe hardened cases, there is a good possibility that the retriever will eventually go back to sticking in trials, and his/her career ended. However, if you catch the retriever before it becomes a habit, the prognosis is quite good, and I have had good success with this procedure.

Be it in marks or blinds, the retriever returns to the heel position which in this example is on the left side. Get a good grip on the bird, the end closest to the handler (I use my right hand to take the bird, then it ends up on my right side, away from the retriever, and I am ready to set up and send the retriever on its next mark), command "drop", then rotate the bird clockwise, while you move your hand down and out. The downward motion causes pressure on the lower jaw, and the clockwise motion rotates the bird out of the retriever's mouth. This should be done gently and deliberately. When you command "drop" lightly nick the retriever. Perform this every time you take a bird or bumper from the retriever. The nick is very important. With very little use the retriever will literally spit the bird from its mouth. When the retriever is doing this, you can stop nicking the retriever every time, and only use it if the retriever is a bit slow. I also like to refresh a retriever's mind the week before a trial, as it is normal for the retriever not to stick in training, but stick at trials. I feel partly the success of this method is from the retriever's response and thinking about the nick when commanded to drop, not necessarily the pain. This is very similar to the force to the pile in the way the retriever begins to think that "if I get this bumper fast enough, I won't get burned." Thus they learn to turn off the pressure by spitting the bumper out. This process works well also if the retriever tends to pull its head back when commanded to release. Be it in trials or training, it is important to gently take the bird from the retriever, and in the beginning, always remember to remove the bird the way outlined above. This procedure should be used even with "happy" bumpers. If the retriever is not collar conditioned, use the ear pinch instead of the nick. I have found though a collar is much more effective.

As I mentioned above, hardened cases should be brought back to the table and re-taught the "fetch", "hold", "drop" with emphasis on the "drop" using more collar pressure than what I use out in the field. Then the retriever can be put back on marks and the light nick used as above.

Hopefully you will never have to deal with a sticking retriever, but I urge you to try this method before giving up on your retriever.