

FEEDING YOUR GUN DOG ...by Bryan Taylor

Training and genetics can only carry a gun dog so far. In order for your dog to perform at its highest possible level you need to feed it a high-caliber, high-nutrition diet, here's what to look for.

Currently there are approximately 30 breeds listed as hunting dogs, though two-thirds of them are hard-pressed to find their food bowls, let alone game birds. If we trim the list to the dozen or so breeds that are realistic field dogs, it still represents a fair number. Add bloodlines within those breeds, and we end up with a substantial variety of pointer, flushers and retrievers. Indeed, working gun dogs come in a range of sizes, shapes and hunting styles but across this broad spectrum, one factor remains constant: the need for high-caliber nutrition.

Top-notch hunting dogs are the sum of good genetics, training and nutrition. If any part of this triangle is neglected, a dog's performance, particularly at higher levels of demand, will be diminished. Perhaps predictably, of the three fundamental elements, nutrition is the most commonly neglected, yet it's the most cost-effective and easily handled piece of the gun-dog puzzle. To be sure, if you hope to get peak performance from your hard-working gun dog there's more to feeding it than throwing out bargain-basement chow.

Good nutrition is as critical to a dog's life—daily performance, overall health and longevity—as it is to its owner's well being. That said, the nutritional needs of dogs are different from those of humans. On the whole our diets emphasize high-fibre and low fat, while proper operating nutrition for gun dogs reverses that ration.(note—an appropriate level of dietary fibre is necessary in a nutritionally-balanced dog food.)

According to some estimates, the dog food industry offers approximately 80 brands—comprising more than 500 formulas—of dry dog food alone. Those numbers are likely conservative and don't include all the small-time dog food producers and animal—feed mills that make their own food concoctions for local clients. Altogether, dog food is 2 billion-dollar-plus annual businesses.

MAKING THE RIGHT FOOD CHOICE

So given the bewildering array of available foods, how do you make the right choice for your dog? That sounds simple but the reality is that selecting the appropriate food for a working gun dog is a relatively complex subject without a one-food-for-all answer. For our purposes, let's broadly define a "working gun dog" as a dog between 2 and 8 years of age pups and senior dogs present different cases. Further, let's say our dogs are healthy, active and in decent physical condition; health problems, obesity or chronic weight-loss add additional considerations.

As a baseline to proper nutrition, keep in mind that for a portion of every year, hunting dogs are high-level aerobic athletes with working patterns involving hours of endurance activity or shorter periods of intense sprinting, running or swimming. Add to those daily demands dogs that are hunted frequently throughout a season, and the stress placed on our dog's bodies can be excessive. The glue that holds-these dogs together are the food we give them.

It might seem obvious but a commonly ignored factor in canine nutrition is that individual dogs have different needs. Serious exercise has a profound impact on the amount of energy required to maintain body condition. In that sense, what works for cocker spaniels might not meet the needs of pointers. Although high-nutritional quality is an across-the board necessity; the devil is in the details—such as balancing a dog's physical needs and caloric requirements with the energy provided by three primary dietary sources fat, protein and carbohydrates.

These dietary energy sources are offered in three types of dog food; CANNED, SEMIMOIST. AND dry. These three products vary widely in a number of characteristics, particularly the amount of nutrition delivered per pound of food, as well as palatability, cost and moisture. Moisture is important because as water content increases, the amount of protein, fat and other nutrients, decrease, which means a dog must eat more to produce the needed nutrition of a food higher in moisture content than one with less moisture.

Canned foods are lower in protein and fat, and higher in moisture, palatability and cost per serving. Semi-moist food has a bit more available dietary energy than canned rations, but they're also expensive and have high moisture content. These two-types of foods are rarely, if ever, used as primary hunting dog diets.

That leaves dry food, the form of energy-delivery used by virtually all owners of active working dogs. Most of the best maintenance-level kibble contains 20-27 percent protein, 12-18 percent fat (high performance formulas are higher in both categories) suitable carbohydrates, low moisture content and high utilizable calories per pound of food. They're by far the most nutrient-dense and cost-effective food types. Dry kibble also has a low spoilage rate, making it easy to store and transport on trips.

There are three categories of dry foods—super premium, premium and non-premium—based on such distinguishing characteristics as cost, nutrient quality and density, palatability and digestibility. By reading the labels of the bag you can get a rough ideal of nutritional levels of each brand and thus compare one to another. However, what we aren't told, at least directly, is the type of and quality of the levels of protein, fat and carbohydrates. A bag might list "chicken by-products" as its primary protein source, the problem here is that by-products can be any animal tissue other than striated muscle (flesh). Some animal by-products are usable by dogs, while others are non-digestible such as feathers, beaks and feet. Yet the food containing the latter could still list protein at a higher percentage. Low-cost dog foods also use vegetable matter, mainly grains, as a primary source of protein rather than more beneficial, but costlier, high-quality animal protein sources.

In a nutshell, sportsmen concerned with their hunting dogs; the old walnut—YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR, governs welfare and performance. These top end brands initially cost more per serving, but they're fed appropriately they pay for themselves in the long run, with less consumption to gain the same, usually higher nutrient levels, less stool production, costs related to health maintenance and injuries are reduced, and performance on a per-hunt and season-long basis is measurably improved.

So what are we looking for on the label of the food that we want to buy for our dog? It should typically contain 27-35% protein and at least 20% fat. Contemporary research has shown a high-fat diet "trains" a dog's metabolism to more efficiently mobilize fat as an energy source and provides greater energy output than does a reliance on carbohydrates. This fat-burning strategy conserves—for periods when very intense effort is essential—the body's limited carbohydrates (sugars) stored in the form of glycogen, which when depleted leads to muscle exhaustion and an overall drop in performance thus the food industry has come out with—you guessed it—power bars—or performance enhancements supplements for dogs—so far only available in Purina brand.

A recent study conducted by Iams Company on quail hunting dogs in the southern states—concluded that dogs with diets with higher fat and protein than the non-performance brand were impacted less by heat stress, had better overall blood chemistry and of significance to hunters, "demonstrated superior hunting performance based on total finds per hunt and on the number of birds located per hour of hunting." So should we all be feeding our dogs high-fat and high protein chow? Not necessarily. If you use your dog for little more than an hour here and there a few times each season, in all likelihood it'll get along fine on a high-quality premium maintenance diet. On the flip side of that coin is if you use your dog regularly thru the season and you expect consistently good results feed top quality performance-level food year-round.

You can feed your dog one of three ways, free feeding—not labs—limited feeding and time-limited feeding. The time-limited style is standard among hunters and trainers who need to control their dogs' food consumption. The other two regimens can lead to obesity or create a finicky feeder that picks at its food throughout the day; a dog that eats on its schedule and not yours. Ideally hard-working dogs should be started on a clinically and nutrient-dense high-protein, high-fat performance food at least 6-8 weeks before the onset of stressful endurance efforts such as intense or prolonged hunting. If you are switching foods do so over 5-7 days, gradually mixing increasing portions of the new food in with the old.

It's an undeniable fact that the old saying "you are what you eat" is true for hard working gun dogs. We can own the best bred hunting dog money can buy and give it the best training in the world but without high-quality nutrition, that well bred, well trained dog won't live up to its potential. So feeding your dog the top-tier nutritionally balanced food and you reap the rewards in many ways, most obviously by increasing your dogs overall health and performance.