

Q. My dog found 5 birds on Monday. Birds were released in that area the previous Wednesday. I didn't see him point these birds, because he tracked them into thick areas. I think they were all wild flushes so no shots were taken.

My dog was tracking the birds that wild flushed. I only saw one good point all day where 2 birds wild flushed about a minute later. Just lots of intense tracking. Shouldn't I expect a point at least once when pursuing scent? He may have pointed some of those birds but other than one, I don't know. One bird I know for sure he never pointed, but started tracking and it wild flushed. If he smells weak bird scent and starts tracking it, shouldn't he point eventually as the scent gets stronger? So far this season I saw him point 1 pheasant that then wild flushed. I shot it and he retrieved that bird to hand beautifully.

A. It's perfectly OK to shoot wild flushes. You just don't want to shoot birds that hold (stationary birds) that you know your dog found but didn't stop and point.

With running birds, as is usually the case when hunting pheasants in good cover, there's often little (if any) solid pointing. Sometimes you will see a dog track, stop/point, track, stop/point - repeatedly. These dogs are being careful, but it's no better for you than if the dog just kept tracking. In fact, it can be frustrating, because every time the dog stops/points you get your gun ready thinking the bird is going to hold - which rarely actually happens.

Pheasants will always choose to run rather than fly as means to escape. They'll only fly if pressured into it. This is because aerial predators, such as hawks, are their greatest risk. Birds that have seen a lot of hunters also learn that flying from them is a danger and will choose to run if they can. They'll only hold if they can't find a means to run away safely, such as when they run out of cover. For example, the bird is running through grass (with your dog tracking behind), it gets to a road or plowed field and either holds or flies. By that time, if the bird flies, it is often so far ahead of you and your dog that getting a shot at it is impossible.

You can only expect your dog to solidly point when a bird holds for it. Otherwise, with running birds, there's just lots and lots of tracking followed by wild flushes. Therefore, if your dog is tracking a running bird and the bird flushes ahead of him, go ahead and shoot it. Yes, he smelled the bird, but he had no opportunity to point. We only want to penalize a dog by not shooting when he has an opportunity to point but chooses not to. That is commonly referred to as "busting a bird" or "taking a bird out." The bird is sitting tight, the dog obviously knows the bird is sitting there, but rather than stop to point, he just dives in and tries to catch it. That is the behavior we want to penalize.

When your dog is tracking a running bird, you can either try to keep up, try to slow your dog down, or call your dog off. Trying to keep up is usually a losing proposition. Trying to slow your dog down takes lots of training because our dogs were bred to pursue and catch running game. You're going against his natural instincts. Easiest thing to do is call your dog off (use your recall command), make a big circle around and try to pick the bird up again from a different direction. If you take the pressure off it, maybe the bird will quit running, and the next time it's found it will hold or will wild flush close enough for you to shoot it.

Another option, which we use, is to keep our dogs searching within gun range as much as possible - 30-50 yards out. That way, when a running bird wild flushes we have a chance of shooting it. Sometimes a bird will hold briefly for a point, then take off running as we approach. If we've kept the dogs in close enough, we can usually get a shot at that bird.

Short answer is, hunting wild pheasants in good cover isn't anything like shooting training birds that have been planted. Planted birds make stationary targets for your dog to solidly point and lets you move in for the flush. Wild pheasants rarely hold for a solid point. If they have good cover they'll run. If cover is sparse and they see you coming, they'll flush wild.

Hope for some snowfall, as that tends to reduce the amount of cover they have to run through and creates wide open spaces that forces them to hold or flush.