

In The Field: Thoughts on Hunting with PBGVs

The Three Ways To Call Your Dog In The Field

Submitted by Mary Fluke

I was watching some folks at the last hunt and had a little epiphany about how we communicate with our dogs in the field. The way I figure it, there are three ways to call your dog in the field. The first is, “Dog, Come!” which means the dog needs to come to you to be leashed up and stop hunting. The second is, “Hey, Dog! I haven’t seen you in a while, just want to let you know where I am in case you want to check in.” The third is, “Dog, quick! There’s a bunny here and you need to come and get busy on the line!”

Different handlers manage these three ways to call their dogs in different ways. The “Dog, Come!” cue should be taught routinely on and off the field using many of the techniques that produce reliable recalls (pairing the “come” cue with a high value reward and training ALL THE TIME so that it stays solid). Teaching a dog to come to a whistle has an advantage because the sound is loud and carries well out in the field but that means you have to train using the whistle in your living room and your back yard all the time, too. It’s a good thing to do but it might get a little old for your neighbors.

The critical thing about the “Come” cue is that you shouldn’t use it in the field unless you are pretty darn sure that it will work. A big mistake that people make is to tell their dogs to come in a way that allows the dog to ignore them. Some folks might haul out the shock collar to train this at a distance but I’m not smart (a friend said I should add “or mean”) enough to do that so I just work on “come when called” all the time at home and then make a point of rewarding it in the field. Remember you’re not supposed to have treats in your pocket, much less in your hand, during an official run so make sure that you work on this during practice time. It helps to be close to your dog when you ask them to “Come!” It also helps if the dog is a bit tired and ready to quit.

(Don’t forget, if you say “Come!” and your dog ignores you and the judge sees that, you might get dinged on Cooperation With Handler.)

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That brings us to the second cue, the “I don’t know where you are but I’m over here” cue. I figure that I can just yell the dog’s name with maybe “over here, dog!” I’m not really telling the dog to come, just making sure that the dog can figure out where I am in the field in case I moved while the dog was out of sight. Sure, they are probably finding us using scent plumes and following our trails, but sometimes the wind is in the wrong direction and I’m just trying to give my dog a little help. It is good to make sure that your dog cares where you are so that’s where the reliable recall training comes in—the more we do reward based training, the more our dogs want to be around us and will care where we are in the field. I am sort of careful to be clear that I’m not calling the dog to me, although the judge will have his or her own opinion about that.

The last cue is the really critical one and also the one that is the least often effective. Let’s say you’re out in the field and someone in the gallery calls “Tally Ho!” You run over to the

spot and the person tells you where the rabbit started and where it went. The judge asks you to call your dog over to the spot so that you can set your dog on the line and the judge can evaluate pursuit. Are you able to do that with your dog? How many people have you seen that can do that? How many times have you seen a perfectly good line go to waste because no handler could get a dog over to it while it was still hot? A lot, I bet.

I think the key is to act like part of the pack. Our dogs honor each other based on voice and experience (learning which dogs have a true voice). When we call our dogs over to a hot trail, we are asking them to honor us so the last thing we should do is use a “Come!” cue that means “you’re about to get leashed up” or a “Dog, over here!” cue which means “check in when you feel like it.” What we need is our own version of “Arroo!” which means “I’m on a hot trail, get your butt over here and help me!”

I use “Tally Ho!” for that cue. Every time I know where a hot trail is, I call Tally Ho Tally Ho Tally Ho! If my dogs are running after a rabbit, voicing on a trail, I’m yelling Tally Ho! I want them to associate my Tally Ho with a hot trail. It’s hard to set that up to train ahead of time so you have to take advantage of every opportunity that comes up in the field. Run to the working dogs, get excited, get your dogs to run with you. When your dogs hit on the line (or just before), yell Tally Ho! The reward for them is to get on the line and get a snoot full of that luscious bunny scent so help them! Be part of the pack but make sure that your voice is true. Don’t be a babbler!

I’ve heard different handlers use different cues for this. I like Tally Ho, but I’ve also heard people say “Rabbit Rabbit,” or Right Here, Right Here. The constant is that the handlers say it where there is a known hot trail and that they sound really excited. The dog has to be close by in order to get to the scent before it gets too old in order to be able to make the association. For those of you that have ever done clicker training, it’s kind of like capturing a spontaneous behavior. There’s no way to predict when it will happen and there’s no way to lure it or even shape it, you just have to be ready for the moment when it comes. The scent trail is the reward, all we are doing is pairing it with our cue, whatever that might be.

(If you doubt that this is going to work, watch the dogs when we fire the gun. We usually fire the gun when the dogs are voicing on a hot trail. When we take a pity shot over working dogs they tend to get jazzed up because they think there must be a rabbit. Since we only fire the gun once each run, you can figure that it doesn’t take too many experiences for the conditioning to “take.” That tells us how powerful bunny scent is as a reinforcement for our dogs.)

There are as many different ways to handle dogs in the field as there are handlers, but this is what works for me. Maybe these ideas will help you out on the field.

Tally Ho, Y’all! ♦