



Pointers In Need Information Sheet #1

“Hunting Instinct” (Owning a dog with a strong prey drive)

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Matt Jefford is a volunteer with Pointers In Need whose role is to help our rescues transition from a full blown working environment or stray environment to a domestic one. He has experience of rescuing 5 dogs. Below Matt gives some personal perspective on what to expect with a Pointer.

Dogs often do things that we have a difficult time understanding. They dig, they chew, they eat rubbish, they chase balls. This often leaves us wondering why and looking for answers to explain their actions. I feel the problem may arise that when we don't know how to explain why our dogs do certain things, and those things might make us concerned, we use a common term, “prey drive”. But what does that really mean?

There is no easy definition or explanation sadly but labelling behaviours in dogs is a very complicated business and doing so without caution leads to a lot of frustration, for both you *and* your dog.

What Could the Term Prey Drive Mean?

Commonly, when we refer to prey drive, we are talking about a dog's ability, and desire, to find, pursue, and catch prey. In some circles, prey drive is synonymous with high energy and a general desire to perform behaviours or “work.”

When you talk about “prey,” there are a lot of different things you could be referring to. Does the dog want to find/pursue/catch an animal? A toy? A piece of food? And what does the dog want to do with it?

Now the word “drive.” From an ethological perspective (behaviour of animals in their “natural world”), prey drive isn't really a thing and can be confused with predatory behaviour. The concept of “drive” can be summed up as motivation or desire, and this fluctuates from one time to the next. An example would be, if you just ate a huge meal and got asked to go for a run you are likely to have little, if any, motivation (or drive) to do so. However, if you haven't eaten you may be much more excited to go for that run.

People are often surprised and frustrated by behaviour's associated with hunting, especially chasing behaviours, and when they think of these actions as “prey drive” they may become concerned their dog has a serious issue, such as aggression.

Does My Dog Have High Prey Drive? And Should I Worry?

Using the term prey drive doesn't necessarily describe a specific dog's personality but instead labels a lot of different behaviours. What is important here is the context: What are you seeing? When is it happening? Prey drive is the sum of lots of different behaviours occurring together in a certain context.

Breeds that have been bred to hunt are more likely to exhibit behaviours labelled "prey drive." For underprepared owners, not addressing these potential behaviours in their dog could lead to frustrations. The bottom line is that every dog is individual, but breeding makes a difference. **If you're considering adopting a Pointer from a working background, make sure you do extensive research, planning, and preparation before you bring them home.** Speak with us so we can discuss in detail what it is like to own a gun dog and it will also help us to pick out one of our wonderful dogs that would fit the bill.

Just because your dog loves to chase or sniff out Game and fur on your walks doesn't mean you need to be concerned he has aggressive tendencies or will be difficult to live with. In the working world, Prey drive is a very outdated term and now replaced with work ethic/hunting instinct, as gun dogs exhibit no predatory intentions. They are simply working in a controlled manner.

So having covered off on what the term "prey Drive" means let me give you some of my thoughts and experiences of living with gun dogs.

It is a fact that certain breeds have been engineered to perform certain tasks, expanding on this I would say that any working dog, herding dog, search and rescue dog, sight dog, service dog etc etc has been purposely bred to perform a task that helps us in some way. The dogs involved in the tasks are at their absolute happiest when performing them. I would go so far as to suggest that their working instinct helps them to complete the tasks at hand day in and day out. I am of course referring to dogs that have been bred over hundreds of years to work in some way. We now see in the dog world that certain breeds have a stronger presence in the pet or non-working world than others. This does not mean that the owner should not focus on the dog's mental requirements for simulation in some form of working or hunting. After all, we have rescued a dog to enrich our lives so we should be prepared to understand and provide for our dogs needs as we would for another family member.

Does a strong hunting instinct equal aggression?

A strong hunting instinct can look like aggression in some instances, there are key differences that will enable you to start understanding your dog's behaviour. A dog's aggression is driven by a number of emotions whereas hunting instinct is instinctive. In general terms an aggressive dog will look to increase the space between them and the focus of their aggression where a dog with a strong hunting instinct will look to get closer.

So as an owner or handler this is great news as hunting instinct is much easier to work with and correct over an emotional response.

Does hunting instinct lead to any behaviour problems?

Hunting instinct in ANY dog can cause problems and safety issues. It's a mixed bag and can be fun when you are in an enclosed space playing fetch, but a very different matter when you are out in a public space with busy roads. So as with any other breed of dog we have to have a solid base of commands and rapport.

This is an absolutely essential step for any rescuer or adopter to make sure you have the base commands in place before the dog is let off lead in any areas where there may be danger for the dog.

Can hunting instinct in dogs be a good thing?

Absolutely, the term refers to the dog's motivation to perform a task given to it by their owner such as chasing a ball, retrieving a dummy, training for an agility class or even just simply fetching your slippers.

As we have mentioned, the hunting instinct has been genetically engineered into your dog's DNA. It's the reason sheep dogs do what they do and Gundogs do what they do. To be perfectly clear, because a dog has hunting instinct does not mean it will not make a good pet. Personal experience has shown me that the dog will be more playful and active, keen to learn new tasks and jobs and extremely trainable as they have the drive to please and perform.

Managing Hunting Instinct

This is something that is easily done by setting out a solid boundary structure in the house and garden.

You are in charge of what your dog does whilst in your company, a simple command will re-focus the dog on you and what you want it to do. We as a charity have transitioned close to 1000 dogs from the field to the sofa and we very much see this as a work in progress. In my mind, a dog is like a computer where you can programme it to do certain things only when required. The remainder of the time the dog can focus on having fun, interacting with you, and generally leading a great life.

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