

# FEEDING THE HUNTING DOG

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**T**here are as many philosophies about feeding hunting dogs during the hunting and field trial season and the off-season as there are people who participate in these activities. Following are my observations and suggestions on feeding hunting dogs.

Regardless of the feeding program during the off-season, dog performance is enhanced by proper diet, training, and conditioning. Conditioning the dog for extended periods of running and jumping needs to start about eight weeks before field trials and/or hunting begins. Just as humans experience sore muscles and stiff joints when initiating an intense exercise program, dogs also experience sore muscles and stiffness after periods of intense exercise, and even more so without adequate conditioning. It's no wonder that some dogs just seem to "run out of gas" by noon (or earlier) if they have not been adequately conditioned and trained.

Most working dogs should be fed a diet containing 27-30% crude protein and 15-20% crude fat starting eight weeks before field trials or hunting season begins. Adaptation to this diet should be done over a five- to seven-day period. A one-day change

in any diet may result in gastrointestinal upset and loose stools. At the same time, the dogs (and trainers) should begin a conditioning program of one to two hours per day, three to four times

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per week. The amount of time spent trainings should be increased relative to the closeness of the field trials and hunting season. Consider this a marathon training program – one can't expect to finish a marathon unless one puts in the time and effort needed to get into shape and have the physical stamina to be able to compete. A working dog is no different; it must also be conditioned over a period of time to develop the strength and physical stamina needed to compete.

During training, feed the amount recommended given on the dog food label. It is preferable to divide



the recommended feeding amount into two equal feedings, one-half in the morning and one-half in the evening during training. Expect some weight gain in the form of muscle mass, but don't allow too much weight gain as fat. The feeding recommendations may need to be adjusted up or down somewhat to maintain desired body condition. Typically, one should be able to feel the dog's ribs but not see them. It has been well demonstrated that dogs are more efficient in converting fat into energy during intense exercise if they are trained and conditioned as compared to "carbohydrate loading" that is commonly practiced by human athletes. Stated simply, dogs will perform better and have more stamina with a high-fat diet than with equal calories of a high-carbohydrate diet.

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During field trials and hunting, it is preferable to continue with the twice-a-day feeding but with different proportions –  $\frac{2}{3}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the food in the evening and  $\frac{1}{3}$  to  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the food in the morning at least two to three hours before the start of the field trial or hunting.

The comment is frequently heard that owners don't like to give their dogs water during hunting and field trials as the dogs appear to waste time stopping to urinate. Think about this: "How well do you do during exercise with no water?" Having some water available during training, field trials, and hunting is a good idea. Frequent intake of small amounts of water is much better than consuming a large amount of water in only a few breaks. Just think about how one's body responds under the same working conditions. A few swallows now and then during a workout is much more effective in maintaining stamina than a whole bottle of water either before or after a workout.

Some trainers recommend keeping dogs on the same high protein-high fat diet during the off-season, while others recommend switching to a low protein-low fat maintenance diet to reduce cost. Arguments can be made for both practices. If a dog is kept on the same high protein-high fat diet, the thought process is that body's

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metabolism is maintained to maximize utilization of the high fat diet. This is acceptable as long as the dog doesn't gain much weight in the form of fat during reduced exercise periods. This usually means reducing food intake. My personal philosophy is if one has to reduce feeding rate of a high-fat diet by more than 20% (example - five cups per day to four cups per day) to maintain body condition, the dog will likely do better with a diet change to a lower protein-lower fat diet (24-27% protein, 12-15% fat). One reason for this is the reduction in calories allows a similar feeding rate to be maintained, and the dog feels full and is not always hungry. A second reason is that vitamin and mineral levels are typically based on feeding rate and reduced feeding of a high-fat diet may decrease the amount of vitamins and minerals the dog is actually consuming.

Dogs should not be switched from a high protein-high fat diet (27-30% protein, 15-20% fat) during training and working to a low protein-low fat diet (18-21% protein, 6-8% fat) during the off-season simply to save money. This switch will result in significant changes in the body's metabolism. The body now adjusts to high carbohydrates and may need longer than six to eight weeks reconditioning before the next hunting season to readjust to a high-fat diet (remember: fat is more efficient for energy utilization during exercise stress). A low protein—low fat diet may also reduce the dog's ability to detect scents even when switched back to the high protein-high fat diets during training and working.

**The bottom line:** If Proud Paws® Performance 27/18 or Ultra-Select 27/15 is fed during training and hunting, either keep the dog on the same diet formula or switch to Proud Paws Hi Pro 26/11 for the off-season. If the dog is going to be used during the next field trial or hunting season, it should **not** be switched to Proud Paws Adult 21-8 formula. If the hunting dog will be retired at the end of the season (will no longer be trained and used for field trials or hunting), then Proud Paws Adult 21/8 would be a good option.

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