

## REDUCING CRIPPLE LOSS – PART III

By Howard N. Ellman

In the first two parts of this series, I concentrated on avoiding cripple loss by better and more careful shooting and the use of the best available ammo. We could spend a lot more time on avoidance issues – learning to hide and call more effectively, for example. Indeed, the whole range of waterfowling skill applies to that issue. Highly skilled hunters bring down few crips and do a better job recovering those few.

But let's now turn our attention to the recovery issue. You've scratched one down and it's on the move. What now?

First, as a matter of respect for the resource, try treating all downed birds as part of the bag, whether you recover them or not. Oh sure, you can't brag to your buddies about birds that are not on your strap, or enter them in the club log, or report them to the guy who checks you out of the public area. But between the great spirit and yourself, you have made the appropriate accounting. As a footnote, this approach may quicken your enthusiasm and persistence in the quest for the hiding crip.

If you can see the bird, get after it as quickly as possible. Take the first safe opportunity for a shot on the water. Don't hesitate to take that shot – assuming a safe opportunity – even if you have a good dog. The best dog trainers and handlers generally agree that it's best to save heroic dog work for those occasions when you have no other choice. Whenever possible, anchor that crip right now. The dog will enjoy the retrieve just as much and you will be sure of cleaning up the mess you have created.

Several different strategies can be used for those that just disappear. I prefer moving slowly in that situation, checking out every likely place with care. A hard hit bird will dig into the closest available cover. Others will head for the closest available dry ground, such as a ditch bank. Even those that have merely suffered a broken wing will generally try to get to dry ground and hide. Remember that crippled ducks try hard to get under something – a tangle of tules, willow branches trailing in the water, something of that nature. Stop often as you skulk along and watch carefully for any surface disturbance caused by the bird trying to burrow in a little further as you approach. It is amazing how often you will recover birds you think are lost simply by spending five extra thoughtful minutes in your search. You owe them that extra effort.

Finally, there's the dog issue. Without doubt, a well-trained retriever will find more birds than you ever will and will do it more quickly. Good dog work greatly enhances the hunting experience. The problem, of course, is that a poorly trained unruly dog can spoil your hunt and that of every person within earshot.

It's an unusual animal that can serve both as a good retriever and a family companion – and yet you must care for the dog, deal with its needs every day of the year and train it regularly to keep it sharp for the hunt. It takes real dedication (and no little expense) to do that, even for someone who hunts twenty or more times in a season. You have that dog the other 345 days of the year. So, while I firmly believe in using a dog whenever one can, it is simply unrealistic to advocate that as an imperative, or something akin to my feelings for the right shotshells.

On the other hand . . . I cannot leave this subject without a personal anecdote. Seven years ago my Lab Sally died. She had hunted into her fourteenth season and been a serviceable, albeit unspectacular retriever, the sixth that I had owned. My wife decided that she had had enough black dog sheddings, scratched doors and chewed furniture edges to last a lifetime, so I went dogless. (After forty some years of marriage, one makes concessions).

I retrieved my own birds, except when shamelessly mooching hunts with friends who had good canine assistants. (I could make a joke here about asking my wife to retrieve as a stand-in for the dog she forbade me but gave that up when she got hardmouthed....) You see, my problem is that I don't think that one can properly bond with a dog and gain the type of control over it and spirited cooperation you want from it unless you live with it and work with it several times a week, every week.

Anyway, last summer, one of my daughters stood up for me and my wife relented. Shortly thereafter, a trainer I knew through mutual acquaintances came up with a five-year-old trained Lab with three hunt tests and the bloodlines of a national champ. He's got a good nose, great eyesight, takes dead straight lines and hand signals out to 200 yards with the softest mouth I have ever seen on a big male and an insatiable hunting heart. It was blind luck – and I feel as though I have won the lottery. He is an amazing animal in general and a wonderful hunter. My wife puts up with black dog sheddings because the dog is otherwise a model citizen and my previously questionable disposition has improved considerably as a result of his companionship. (Now I find shameless guys mooch hunts with me. Indeed, they would prefer that I stayed home if they could use my dog).

What's the point, you ask? Simply this. If you love to hunt but don't use a dog, consider adding that element. At least look into it seriously. The companionship magnifies the joy of the experience for most of us – and proves to be well worth the effort. I swell with admiration and pride every time my big guy goes roaring out after a downed bird and delivers it gently into my hand before resuming his place. He gazes intently at the sky as though attempting to conjure up another target, another retrieve. Unlike many retrievers, he holds totally still – except for his tail that wags nonstop, advertising his joy at life in general and hunting in particular. It can make your heart sing. And you get the crips. All of them.

Thus, we come to the end of this series by circling back to where we began. The ethical hunter works hard to minimize crippling loss, to the maximum extent possible, out of respect for the game and the fact that each bird is a live thing, capable of suffering. It is a matter of simple humanity. You may not agree with my specific approaches to the issue – and I have no problem with that. If you take the principle to heart, you will do what is right. This is, after all, a state of mind and state of heart issue.

---

If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.

---