

# **Advanced Hunting Aptitude Evaluation (AHAE) Protocol**

## **VHDF-Canada**

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## **1. Field Subjects**

The upland component of AHAE involves seamless work from the time the dog is sent to hunt to having 1-3 of the planted birds in the game bag. The test, as does a day of hunting, starts with a search, unless weather, the site or logistics suggest otherwise.

The evaluation of Field Search is similar to HAE but more maturity and purpose is expected from the dog. In AHAE, a dog will have learned to distinguish between songbird- and game bird scent. This advanced dog will also show appropriate range and speed that corresponds to the type of cover, searching promising habitat more completely than is expected in HAE. The dog will have handled wild and/or planted game birds. It will shift on its own from a purposeful search to stop-to-wild-flush and cooperative pointing of a bird at the first encounter of scent without crowding it. The dog's style on point can vary as long as the intensity and demeanor can convince the hunter that a bird is pointed.

The handler can facilitate cooperative handling by not walking immediately next to the dog on the flush and by not stepping into the dog's line of sight where possible. For the safety of the dog and safe shooting generally, the dog is to stay steady through the handler's approach to flush, the flush itself and through the bird taking flight. The dog can break on its own once the shot has been fired whether the bird is hit or not.

Whether sent to retrieve or the dog going on its own, the dog should have marked the fall and proceed to it directly. Time is of essence in case a bird is crippled. Hence accurately marking the fall is a useful trait in a dog. If the fall was obscured, the dog will be given a bit of time to work out the challenge. Failing a prompt recovery, the handler should coax the dog downwind offering only as much help as necessary. Such exceptional circumstances are part of hunting. They are an opportunity for the dog to shine and earn 11 or even 12 points. Such circumstances are considered exceptions and will be judged accordingly in a positive light.

Once the bird is found, the cooperative dog will pick up and return without delay and deliver to hand standing or sitting.

## **2. Water Subjects**

Unlike the field subjects, the VHDF-Canada water subjects are tested in a modular fashion, with a duck track, independent water entry/expansion and a marked retrieve examined separately.

For Search Behind Duck, a temporarily flight-impaired duck is released to lay a track a short distance on land, then on open water and finally in marsh vegetation where the duck is out of sight. A few feathers mark the beginning of the duck track. The track begins on land 3-5 m from the water's edge unless marsh vegetation is so dense that the duck might disappear sideways or backwards and not enter the water as intended. This layout provides the realistic situation for the dog to cope with habitat transitions from land to open water to marsh vegetation.

As soon as the duck disappears in vegetation or is far out in the pond (dogs use their noses, less their eyes), the dog is shown the feathers and in a smooth release urged to track. Especially on a windy day, the delay between the duck entering water and starting the track should not be more than a minute or two. Wind mixes the water layers and obscures the scent.

As with the pheasant track in HAE, the capable dog follows the track on the downwind side. If the dog crosses the track, desire to work and concentration is shown by how soon the dog returns to re-find the scent and proceeds along it in the duck's direction. Once in the marsh, a tracking dog can be heard if not seen.

The elements of a successful duck hunt can be shown by a dog that makes prompt progress along the track in the direction of the duck. Similarly, if a dog loses the track, it will apply its nose and desire-to-work to re-find the track. If the dog accidentally encounters a wild or previously released duck, a young dog in AHAE can be forgiven for this confusion. Ideally, here should be no other scent in the water, although this rarely happens when hunting. The field marshal should ensure that the pond is visited ½ before the search and all birds are hazed out of the pond.

If the dog moves the duck back out into open water and it becomes a duck chase, the judges may ask to have the duck shot by the handler or gunner, if a safe opportunity presents itself.

The dog does not need to recover the duck but if the dog finds it, it is expected to retrieve to hand. A dog that makes prompt and continuous progress along a duck's track has satisfied the goal of this test. In an actual hunting situation, the hunter would then follow the dog and as a team ensure that the duck is recovered.

On the flight-impaired duck the tape or paper becomes water logged and breaks away freeing the duck. Semi wild Call Ducks are desirable for testing and once free of the tape on the wing the ducks can live normally, strengthen their flight muscles and migrate in due course.

### **3. Blind Water Entry**

Blind Water Entry is a test of the dog's water aptitude and its desire to find and recover game from water. A dog that readily enters the water in the direction it is sent and moves to expand its search is an asset in hunting waterfowl. At the AHAE stage, unlike HAE, a dog is expected to enter water directly without deviating needlessly right or left, or checking out peripheral scents on shore. Time in waterfowl retrieving is of essence.

The blind water entry was once a component of search behind duck but was moved to become segment of its own to allow more targeted evaluations. Blind water entry is the middle part of a continuum in testing with water aptitude evaluated in HAE, direct entry and expansion in AHAE and a blind retrieve in PE.

### **4. The Marked Retrieve**

The Marked Retrieve evaluates how well a dog can control its desire in the face of a falling duck. This sequence also tests a dog's tolerance to a gun shot while its feet are not enjoying the security of firm ground as in HAE. Once the dog is set up on shore, a dead duck is thrown within gun range into a swimming-depth pond. The dog is expected to be steady through the throw, similar to a bird taking wing in the field. The steady dog is then sent for a retrieve. Once the dog is swimming and within a few metres from the duck, one blank shell is fired and the dog's response to the shot is recorded

The co-operative dog will pick up the duck and return to the handler. Once sent to retrieve the dog is expected to swim directly to the duck. On the return the dog can decide to return via the shore if this saves the dog significant time. If the dog shakes water from its coat while still holding the duck, this can be OK at this early stage of testing in a dog's career.

The dog should deliver the duck to hand, standing or sitting.

### **5. Game Drag**

The Game Drag is primarily a test of the dog's cooperation when out of visual control of the handler. The ample scent of a dragged duck easily followed by any dog.

A few feathers mark the beginning of the drag track that is 150-300 metres long and includes a gentle bend. As in the pheasant track in HAE, a handler can walk with the dog a metre or two and release the dog in a smooth transition onto the track. The key component is that the dog is out of sight of the handler either over a hill or in vegetation when encountering the dragged game. The judge who drags the game will simply remove the string, leave the bird lying and then walk on. The judge will position her/himself fully out of sight and wind of the approaching dog but still be able to see what the dog does on finding the bird.

If the dog runs past the bird to the judge, s/he will simply talk to the dog in a calm voice and otherwise ignore it, expecting the dog to return to the bird it had found but temporarily ignored

and retrieve it. Once the dog is out of sight and well on its way back to the handler, the judge will return to the team.

The dog is expected to deliver the duck to hand. If the dog returns without the game, it can be resend which naturally affects the evaluation.

## **6. Cooperation**

Cooperation is the hallmark of the domesticated dog and nowhere more important than in versatile hunting dogs. Cooperation should be mature and evident throughout the day in AHAE.

Cooperation is evident in a dog that exhibits a purposeful and even wide-ranging search and still stays in visual contact with the handler and follows with no or only subtle commands a new search direction taken by the handler. As in HAE, when judges are in doubt, they may ask a handler to veer away giving the dog a chance to clearly display cooperation.

Cooperation is evident in a dog picking up a bird without delay, and returning it directly to the handler. A cooperative dog makes periodic eye contact. This sometimes happens in contexts where the dog encounters difficulty and is asking the handler for help.

## **7. Obedience**

Obedience reflects the response by the dog to commands from the handler. Obedience is a learned motivation that interacts with desire and cooperation to varying degrees depending on the setting. Obedience is the primary motivation when the dog is in close proximity of the handler, while desire and cooperation take over to varying degrees as the dog hunts or retrieves.

Full and non-slip obedience is not expected of a young dog at this AHAE stage. A dog must be manageable to be safely handled at the site, around people and other dogs, and in testing. A dog is also to exhibit enough obedience when birds are shot and beyond that obedience plays a minor role in the dog's evaluation.