

MARKING

Marking is a vital skill in any lurcher except one used solely for lamping – and not many of us keep a dog just for that. But there is no great mystery to marking – any dog will do it. Not just any lurcher but any dog at all. The difference is not in the dog but the owner, for the owner has to interpret the mark. Furthermore, the owner must not encourage or praise the mark, for fear of teaching the dog to ‘false mark’ that is, produce the marking stance because it wants to please its owner rather than because it has discovered game. So what exactly does the newcomer to lurcher work look for and do in order to unravel the mysteries of marking?

Tiny pups will mark right from the start. When you take your pup out for a toddle about, take it to where there is game, watch it following scent, and watch its body language. Everything is new at that stage, and so the pup’s reaction to each scent will be similar. Let it follow the rabbit scent to the bury and sniff down the hole. Do not do anything more yourself except watch the pup. Let it sniff the tuft of fur on the barbed wire, the fox scat (no rolling allowed!) the deer and hare droppings, the pheasant feather, for it needs to record all this in its mental scent directory. Some scents will be more appealing than others, which is a feature of how the dog is bred – for instance, the Bedlington Thing was crazy for fox scent right from the word go.

Later, when your pup has seen and chased a few rabbits, maybe even caught one, it will have linked the scent with the prey and its behaviour. Now its marking will become much more positive. You still don’t need to do anything except expose your youngster to as much scent as possible. The pup should be detecting rabbits in cover as well as underground, but the full map is not in place yet. Should you put the pup on

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the trail of hidden cold game? Absolutely no point – dead game from the freezer smells different and is far less exciting than live game, and your dog has a different job to do from a gundog. Remember that finding live quarry is a matter of ears as well as eyes, and I often see a dog freeze, flicking its ears and swivelling its nose until it has pinpointed whatever attracted its attention in the first place, whether a tiny noise or an eddy of scent. Work such as finding squeakers in growing crops will hone the dog's skills at locating quarry, producing the instant reward of a chase, and you must watch. See the angle of the tail change: some dogs curl the tail and raise it, others wag slowly, some spin the tail in a circle. Watch how the body quivers as the dog locates the prey. See how the ears move, and watch out when they are forward over the dog's head in what I call the 'hunting hat'. Is the dog air-scenting or ground -scenting? I have never understood why 'trackers' only allow the dog ground scent when air scent is so important. Watch your young dog learning to read the wind, going downwind, often a long way, to drink the scent coming back up. And while you are watching all this, you are learning that a whole lot of things you have read or been told are nonsense, for a sitting bird, a pregnant vixen, a squatting rabbit and a hare in its seat all carry scent, and lurchers regularly find all of them. The essential extra is experience, and that is what your sapling is getting now. You are learning patience and observation, two skills that separate the true hunter from the rest.

A summer of finding fieldmice, stoats, baby rabbits and so on, and your pup is ready to start ferreting. You have a much better idea of how it marks now, but the job has a fair way yet to run. Walk across the buries with the pup, and see the differences in its posture as it checks the holes. For some, it will be very interested, others it will

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sniff at and move on. Often the only discernable difference is the briefest of looks to catch your eye, for it does not yet know that anything more can happen.

Now you go out with the ferrets, with which your youngster is familiar and steady, a few nets, and a great deal of excitement no matter how many times you have ferreted or how many pups you have brought on. Wait for the mark, however subtle, net a few holes, leave a few open, in goes the ferret. With the first bolt, whether into a net or out of an open hole, the dog finally has the full picture. Keep the lesson short: if the dog can have a catch or hold a netted rabbit, so much the better. Dogs need time to assimilate lessons. When you go out next, you will see more decisive marking over the buries.

After a season of light work, you will be able to tell what category of game your dog is marking in cover, and when ferreting, whether the rabbit is deep underground or close to the surface, whether there is one, or a couple, or many, simply by watching and reading your dog's posture. Marking style is individual to each dog, and some are much more subtle than others – I did have one that would run up to me and put her paws on my shoulders if the bury was a good one! There is a great deal made about the skills of marking dogs, but in truth, all dogs have the potential to produce and develop these. The real skill, as is often the case, lies with the owner.