

# BIRD MANAGEMENT AND CARE

The purpose of the following guidance is to provide host clubs some potential protocol for the care and management of pen-raised birds used in hunting tests for retrievers licensed by the North American Hunting Retriever Association (NAHRA).

NAHRA requires the use of live and/or dead birds in a licensed hunt test event. Member clubs hosting these events have a responsibility to provide adequate quality and quantities of birds to ensure that all participants are fairly and effectively evaluated. Failure to do so may result in the undue or premature disqualification of dogs participating in a given event and will cast a poor reflection upon the host club and NAHRA.

It is in the water marking series where birds are repeatedly thrown into a pond or creek that the breakdown usually occurs and can have a serious effect on the evaluation of a dog. Fresh, high floating birds are preferred to create a fair and adequate test. Low floating or sinking birds impose an unfair standard usually to the dogs at the end of the running order. Low floating or sinking birds in a water test can usually be broken down to three major causes.

1. **Immature birds.** Younger birds are usually very poorly feathered especially in the breast area and will not hold up to repeated use. Many times they are still replacing their juvenile down and erupting feathers are still in the "pin feather" stage. The result is that they will not float nearly as well and certainly not as long as mature birds.
2. **Dirty birds.** Pen raised birds, especially ducks, are usually filthy upon delivery for a variety of reasons. Particularly, pen raised ducks are usually produced in large numbers and held in outside pens where the lack of vegetation coupled with the accumulation of manure and constant access to water, will cause muddy conditions that create very dirty birds. In addition, during shipment, the birds are usually subject to tight quarters do not have access to water and therefore are not able to clean themselves. Water absorbed by the accumulation of manure and dirt in the feathers will cause the birds to sink quicker.
3. **Poor Care and Management of Birds.** While this situation is usually self-inflicted, the results can be the same. Clubs and judges who do not wisely care for or manage the use of the birds during an event are their own worst enemy and can have a serious impact on the quality and quantity of birds available.

If clubs consider these factors and plan ahead, several or all can be overcome. Simply being aware of these factors as well as knowing the provider(s) and their products will go a long way in providing good birds for an event. The following are some recommendations that may help clubs prevent future problems. The recommendations are primarily targeted at pen raised ducks since most of the problems encountered center around keeping them floating during a water series.

# BIRD MANAGEMENT AND CARE

## PROCUREMENT AND PLANNING

All clubs should have a bird steward to receive, care for and manage their birds for an event. It is the job of the bird steward to know the product they are receiving from a given provider, what the potential problems are and remedies for all situations. The bird steward should advise the club on quality and the quantity of birds required for an event.

- The bird steward will develop a good working knowledge of the product they are receiving from various providers. They should know what the provider's inventory is likely to be at the time of their event (age of birds) and must make adjustments to remedy potential problems. If the providers are likely to have young birds at the time of an event, several options may be available. These options are covered below.
- The bird steward should meet with the providers well in advance to the next event. Identify the product required (mature birds) and determine what quantities can be delivered at the time of the event. If possible, order birds well ahead of time. Some clubs order birds for the entire following year as much as six months in advance. This may be preferable to the provider also.
- If it is likely that a suitable quantity of mature birds will not be available at the time of the event, clubs may wish to attempt to contract with the provider to hold mature birds until the event or until they can be received by the club and held. This will require additional expenses but may remedy a given situation. Clubs will defer the additional costs by getting the most out of mature birds and properly caring for them.
- If a club has the means, it may wish to obtain mature birds to be frozen until an event or as a backup. Several clubs have indicated that they have freezers available for this purpose.
- If young birds must be used, it is recommended that clubs order an additional bird per entry. Assuming they are receiving adult birds, clubs generally order on average, 1.5 - 2.0 birds per entry. Therefore, if young birds must be used, clubs may want to order up to three birds per entry (young birds are usually several dollars cheaper). Clubs should also seek a new supplier if they are continuously provided with young birds.
- Whether it is 24 hours or several weeks, clubs should make every attempt to take possession of birds ahead of time. Clubs can significantly decrease their worries if they can secure a holding area prior to an event.
- NAHRA strongly recommends that a host club, in addition to its major supplier, have a backup supplier on hand in case a last minute problem occurs. Have several other sources on hand that can deliver large (100+) as well as smaller (25-50) bird orders. Especially knowledge of providers who can deliver birds at the last minute. It is also recommended that clubs consider having frozen birds held in reserve for unanticipated problems.
- As a bird steward gains experience with various providers, they should know what to expect in terms of what the general condition of the birds will be upon arrival. Providers deliver birds and are not usually concerned about them being dirty. Bird stewards should assume that the birds will arrive dirty and they should be prepared to take measures to remedy this.
- Finally, clubs who skimp on bird orders are flirting with disaster. With the exception of the conditions of the grounds, there is probably no other factor that will affect the quality of a hunt test than the quality and quantity of birds available. Clubs that schedule last minute tests or those that routinely accept late entries should keep all of this in mind.

# BIRD MANAGEMENT AND CARE

## CARE OF BIRDS

- Upon delivery, birds and/or crates should be cleaned and kept clean throughout the event. The optimal situation is to take early delivery (several days to weeks) and provide a holding area, which is as clean as possible with lots of available water. Fact is, clean birds will float higher, fly stronger, last longer and give the club the most for its investment.
- Whether it is ducks or upland birds, they should be cared for humanely. This means not letting them sit in stacked crates especially in hot weather. Ventilation is a key factor in keeping birds alive and in good condition. They should be given water immediately, and if they are to be kept for any period of time, adequate food also. Remember, this is an investment on the part of your club, which will directly effect and determine the quality and success of your event.
- NAHRA recommends that clubs must make every effort to take possession of ducks from a provider at least 24 hours before an event. This is the minimum amount of time required to clean the birds and dry them out before use in a test.
- If clubs are faced with the minimum time frame, they should at least hose down the birds and their crates. The more applications the better. A source of water is generally available on the grounds (streams, ponds, etc.) where the crates can be partially submerged. This will allow the birds to get the dirt and manure out of their feathers and to apply oil before they are used. A small stream is preferable as it allows a constant source of clean water.
- Bird stewards should ensure that the birds have ample time to dry out before use in a water test. If it is raining, cover should be provided to allow them to dry out.
- After the birds have had time to clean up, bird stewards can keep them clean by putting wood shavings in the bottom of the crates for the drying out period. Do not use sawdust, as this will have the same effect as dirty feathers. The wood shavings will absorb manure in the bottom of the crates keeping much of it off the birds. The shavings can be used in the holding pens also. A bale of wood shavings is a pretty inexpensive preventative measure to have good birds.
- Birds to be used in the second or third day of an event should be in the best shape of all. Clubs will have had ample time to clean and care for them provided they take the responsibility to do so.

# BIRD MANAGEMENT AND CARE

## MANAGEMENT AND USE

In theory, it is equally the responsibility of the host club and the judges to ensure the proper care and management of birds during the course of an event, but the club should take the lead here. The presiding judges will not be the ones remembered for bad birds used at an event.

- Once birds have been dispatched, keep them in closed containers (bags, buckets, etc) to prevent their access to flies. If bags are employed, it may be wise to "double bag" as flies will lay eggs on the bags and eventually travel through the mesh. Buckets with lids and drainage provided are a much wiser alternative.
- Birds that have been dispatched and are to be used in the next day's event should be thoroughly inspected for fly eggs. Pay special attention to the openings like the mouth (check inside) and the nostrils as well as the wing attachment areas. One egg mass will ruin an entire bag of birds in less than 24 hours. This is where the addition of a gun captain at each stake comes in handy to ensure birds are inspected and cared for properly.
- The use of fans in a building overnight can salvage wet birds as well as prevent flies from laying eggs on them.
- While in use and especially after they have been retrieved during a water test, birds should be hung to dry in a screened enclosure with mesh small enough to prevent the entry of flies. It is recommended that the club provide a worker at the line to ensure the birds are properly cared for even though the presiding judges should assume some of that responsibility. "Drying boxes" are relatively easy to construct and generally a one time expense. Towel drying the birds as they are put on the rack is a way to increase the longevity of your birds.
- Wet birds in use, particularly in a water series, should never be piled on the ground, or in a container. As stated, they should be hung up to dry before being rotated back into use. If they are thrown into the mud, they should be rinsed or dunked upon return before hanging them up. If they must be put into a container before they are dry, then containers with bottom drainage should be used. Another remedy is to add several inches of wood shavings in the bottom to prevent the birds from lying in accumulated water and becoming saturated much quicker. The shavings will draw moisture from the feathers also.
- As birds become saturated, they should be removed from any rotation that requires a floating bird. They can be used for blinds or marks thrown on land. Thoroughly soaked birds should be removed altogether as they can often tempt an experienced dog to bite down!
- Where possible, bird stewards should attempt to ration birds early in the event or a given stake (i.e. land series) to ensure adequate birds are available for the water series later.
- Judges are in a prime position to increase the longevity of birds. They are generally in control of which birds are sent to each station when re-birding. They can select the birds and give instruction to the throwers as to where to and how to throw birds throughout the course of a test. It is usually not of primary importance to a thrower to examine the birds and make a decision as to whether or not the bird will make an adequate or fair presentation to the dog being evaluated, so judges must be vigilant to ensure quality is maintained.
- Judges can also increase the mileage of birds by choosing to throw some marks in "dry" locations or onto supporting emergent vegetation. Particularly, if they have young birds to work with. Even the most inexperienced judges do not want to see a dog unfairly evaluated because of a low floater.

## BIRD MANAGEMENT AND CARE

- For events where the weather pattern is forecast to be unusually wet, judges would be advised to run the water series first as the birds are likely to be wet anyway due to the conditions. Saturated birds will be much more favorably received if it occurs during a land series.

### CONTINGENCY PLANS

In light of the past problems associated with the use of birds in licensed field tests, it is imperative that all clubs have a contingency plan to prepare them for an emergency. While we all hope that the need never arises, all clubs should have backup plans to handle an emergency situation. This is going to fall directly upon the club leadership who should discuss the potential issues and develop a plan to handle the situation. Until a few years ago, emergency situations have been an after thought.

A situation may occur where, at the last minute, birds are lost, stolen or otherwise unavailable on the eve or a short time frame before a scheduled event. This would cause absolute panic among the members of a club if there were no contingency plan in place. For situations where birds are not available before the start of a test, the following may offer some potential solutions.

- Obviously, where possible, clubs may wish to cancel an event. That itself may be the best solution for the host club.
- However, significant resources may have already been committed and the club is faced with coming up with some solutions in a very short time frame. In this event, clubs should be prepared with some of the previously mentioned alternatives such as having access to multiple providers or by taking possession prior to the event.
- Clubs may wish to purchase freezers and keep frozen birds for such an emergency. Long-term storage facilities might also be an alternative. Several hundred birds can be kept in freezers giving you a safety net in the event of the loss of your birds.

Secondly, in the event of another round of bird flu outbreaks either locally or on a much more widespread level, quarantines may severely handicap procuring or even using birds in field tests. Quarantine situations take this to another level that will eventually have to be addressed not only by the NAHRA BOD but the other competing programs as well. With a few exceptions, most clubs will know well ahead of time that the imposition of quarantine is imminent or in place. Therefore, a contingency plan in this situation is even more imperative.

Clubs should take the time now to find out what agencies will be involved and what the regulations are for their state in a quarantine situation. They should know what the guidelines for the purchase and transport of birds are as well as what options are legal and what the penalties are for violating regulations. NAHRA will not condone the unauthorized or illegal transport or possession of birds in these situations. This is especially true when one considers the potential effects on the health of the public and the livelihoods of poultry producers.

Not only should clubs recognize that live birds might not be possessed or transported in a quarantine situation, but that frozen birds may be subject to the same standards. The bottom line in this whole discussion is that NAHRA clubs should be prepared for the above situations and not to wait until potential problems become a reality.