

# Hunting Dog Condition & Care



## Nutrition, housing and health for working retrievers and hunting dogs.

### 1. Body Condition

Optimising your dog's body condition is one of the most important things you can do for your hunting dog. Too lean and they run out of steam. Too fat and they struggle to work. Working dogs naturally carry less fat than pet dogs, which can look alarming to people who are not used to it.

#### Understanding lean working dogs

- Visible ribs alone are not a sign of malnourishment in a fit, short-haired dog.
- Dogs that exercise regularly do not carry much fat. That is normal, and healthy.
- The real difference between dog types is muscle, not fat. A Pointer and a Labrador are built differently, like a marathon runner and a rugby player. Both can be fit and lean.
- Hunting dogs will burn through fat reserves quickly doing heavy water work or long days in the field. Getting the feed right keeps them going all morning.

#### Signs of poor condition

- Wasted muscles along the backbone (the 'backsteaks') and over the hips.
- Narrow shoulders and bony hips.
- A chalky or dusty-looking coat. If you are seeing this, the dog has been underfed for a while.
- Losing interest in work or a change in general behaviour.

#### Signs of good condition

- Good muscle development in the forelegs and shoulders.
- A coat with a healthy sheen.
- Keen and willing to work.

**TIP** If you are not sure, get an experienced vet to check your dog's body condition. A vet used to working dogs will know the difference between a fit hunting dog and an underfed one.

### 2. Nutrition – What To Feed

Dogs are carnivores. What looks like a very fatty diet to us is exactly what a hard-working dog needs. Cheap, bulky food can leave a dog unable to eat enough to keep up with its energy needs during the season.

#### Key nutritional targets (high-energy sporting dogs)

Nutrient	Target Range
Protein	28-30%
Fat	18-20%

#### Premium dog biscuits (kibble)

- Good quality dog biscuits are a reliable, complete option.
- Cheap dog biscuits are often full of fillers and low on protein and fat. You get what you pay for.
- Some hard-working dogs need more than dog biscuits alone. The volume of food they need to get enough energy can be more than they can digest overnight.

#### Raw food

- Raw food is a good option, especially if you have access to farm or hunting produce.
- Good choices include fatty beef brisket (soft cartilage, no sharp edges), raw mutton and fatty beef.
- Mighty Mix frozen concentrate is an easy, high-fat option for topping up energy.



**WARNING** Never feed cooked bones. They go brittle and sharp and can perforate the gut. Throw out leftover cooked bones. Venison is also very lean and not a good main protein source for dogs.

### Mixed diet

A simple approach that works well: half good quality dog biscuits, half raw fatty meats, or high-fat frozen concentrate, fed once in the evening.

## 3. Nutrition – When to Feed

### Once-a-day feeding

- Feed once a day, in the evening. This lets the dog rest and digest overnight.
- Eating causes an insulin spike that slows the body's ability to burn fat. Timing your feeding matters.
- Feed at least 10-12 hours before exercise. The night before a hunt is ideal.
- Feeding within 6 hours of exercise reduces stamina and energy.
- If you need to feed in the morning, keep it small and give the rest in the evening.



**BLOAT RISK** Deep-chested dogs can get bloat if they exercise after a big meal. Dog biscuits expand with water and can cause the stomach to flip over and seal. This is often fatal. Never exercise a dog straight after feeding and let it cool down fully before feeding after exercise.

### Adjusting feed through the seasons

- Cut back portions over summer. Dogs do less work and need less food.
- Start increasing feed and training at least 8 weeks before the season. Do not suddenly ramp things up.
- Wind both feed and exercise back down at the end of the season too.
- For retrievers, add more fat as the season gets close to build up insulation and energy reserves. But do not overdo it. An overweight dog is slower, unhealthier, and harder on its joints.

## 4. Housing & Energy Conservation

A dog that stays warm at night burns less energy and has more left for hunting. Small changes to the kennel setup can make a real difference.

### Kennels

- Insulate kennels. Even a plywood lining with some expanding foam goes a long way.
- A fabric flap over the kennel entrance holds heat in during winter. Remove it in summer for airflow.
- Bare iron kennels are too hot in summer and too cold in winter. Line them.
- There are some great commercial kennel options available now if you want a ready-made solution.
- Position kennels in the shade in summer and out of the prevailing wind year-round.

### Bedding

- Blankets are great but remember to wash regularly.

## 5. Health Considerations

### Parasite management

- Keep worming up to date. Worms drain energy and condition over time.
- Stay on top of fleas and lice. A dog that is scratching all night is not getting good rest.

### Sheep measles – your responsibility on farmland

A lot of our best hunting is on private farmland. Farmers are generous in giving us access. Sheep measles (*Taenia ovis*) is a tapeworm that lives in dogs. An infected dog leaves eggs in its droppings. Sheep eat the eggs while grazing. The result is cysts in the meat, which gets condemned. It only takes one dog to cause an outbreak on a property.

- Treat all dogs with Praziquantel (Droncit or equivalent) at least 48 hours before going onto any sheep property, and within one month of the visit.
- The 48-hour window lets the tapeworm segments pass before the dog arrives on farm.
- This is a legal requirement in New Zealand, not just good manners.
- Being able to tell a landowner your dogs are treated makes a good impression when asking for access.
- If you hunt on sheep farms regularly, add Praziquantel dosing to your pre-season routine.

**KEY POINT** Sheep measles treatment takes five minutes and costs next to nothing. It is one of the best things you can do to keep access to the land we rely on.

### Water

- Give dogs constant access to fresh, clean water. Refresh it regularly.
- Dogs on kibble need a lot more water than dogs on raw food.
- Stainless steel or concrete bowls are best. Only use plastic if it is UV-stable and your dog does not chew.
- Some dogs tip their water bowl. Check it still has water in it rather than assuming they drank it all.
- If dogs are in adjoining runs, make sure males cannot urinate into a neighbour's bowl.

### 6. Day-of-Hunt Care

The hunting day is hard on a dog. A few simple habits before, during, and after the hunt will keep your dog healthy and performing well for years.

#### Before the hunt

- Your dog needs to be fit before the season, not on opening day. Build up fitness over the weeks before with walks, runs, or light retrieves.
- Do not feed a big meal before hunting. Feed the night before. If you give a small amount in the morning, allow at least 2-3 hours before work.
- Offer water before loading into the vehicle.

#### During the hunt

- Offer fresh water regularly. Wetland water is not always safe to drink. Dogs working hard in cold or windy conditions can dehydrate faster than you would expect.
- Watch for early signs of tiredness: slowing down, less drive, heavy panting, or not wanting to get in the water. Rest the dog before it gets to that point.
- Check paws during the day. Burrs and grass seeds can work their way in and cause lameness if left.
- Look for cuts from fences or rough ground. Treat small wounds in the field before they get worse.

**OVERHEATING** Even on cold days, a dog working hard can overheat. If it is panting heavily, stumbling, or looking for shade, stop and give it fresh water straight away. A tired dog is much more likely to get injured. Always bring a litre of water with you and a container for the dog to drink from.

#### After the hunt

- Check the dog over after every hunt. Ears, paws, coat, and skin for ticks, cuts, thorns, or swelling.
- Clean small wounds before kennelling the dog.
- Let the dog cool down fully before feeding or offering water.
- Feed a good meal in the evening to start replenishing energy.
- Rest matters as much as food for recovery. Do not expect a full effort two hard days in a row without downtime.
- A good dry dog box on the way home dries the dog quickly and warms it up on the trip back.

#### First aid

A good quality basic first aid kit for your dog out on trips is good practice and is good to keep in your vehicle year-round.

The kit should include:

1. Tweezers
2. Vetwrap bandages
3. Gauze squares
4. Antiseptic liquid
5. Cotton buds
6. Eye cleaner liquid
7. Electrical tape

Check with your vet if it doubt as injuries can worsen quickly without treatment.

**Quick Reference Summary**

Topic	Key Point
<b>Protein target</b>	28-30% for high-energy sporting dogs.
<b>Fat target</b>	18-20% for high-energy sporting dogs.
<b>Feeding time</b>	Once daily, evening – 10-12 hrs before exercise.
<b>Season ramp-up</b>	Start 8 weeks before season – gradual increase only.
<b>Bloat risk</b>	Never exercise after a full meal. Allow cool-down before feeding post-exercise.
<b>Worming</b>	Keep general worming up to date. Flea/lice control ensures effective rest.
<b>Sheep measles</b>	Dose with Praziquantel 48hrs before (and within 1 month of) any sheep farm visit.
<b>Kennel insulation</b>	Reduces calorie burn – more energy available for hunting.
<b>Hydration</b>	Offer fresh water before, regularly during, and after every hunt.
<b>Post-hunt check</b>	Inspect paws, ears, coat and skin after every hunt. Clean wounds promptly.
<b>Recovery</b>	Cool down before feeding after exercise. Rest between high-intensity days.
<b>Dog first aid kit</b>	Always have ready an accessible basic kit.