

Gun Dogs in the Maimai



Gun introduction, maimai setup, keeping your dog warm, and retrieval training.

Besides being a great companion, a good gun dog will help you find and recover more game birds. Dogs that mark well and retrieve quickly mean fewer birds are lost and less disturbance to the area. But it takes some preparation to get there, for both the dog and your maimai setup.

1. Introducing Your Dog to the Gun

Gun shyness is common but easy to avoid if you take it slowly. The key is making sure the dog always links the sound of a gun with something good.

Step-by-step gun introduction

- Start by letting the dog see and sniff the gun with no noise at all.
- Introduce sound gradually. A primer-only loaded shell works well. Use it while the dog is doing something it enjoys, like chasing a bumper.
- Alternatively create a clapper by hinging two pieces of wood together which makes a sharp bang sound when shut.
- Always follow the noise with a retrieve. The dog will start to connect the gun with getting a bird.
- Build up to louder and closer shots over several sessions. Never rush this.
- The end goal is a dog that stays steady at heel while you shoot overhead.

KEY PRINCIPLE Never fire a gun near a dog without a positive reward straight after. You want the dog to see the gun and think 'good things are coming', not flinch.

2. Introducing Your Dog to the Maimai

Get your dog into the maimai before the season starts. A dog that has never been in one will find opening morning overwhelming.

Pre-season familiarisation

- Put the dog in the maimai where it can see what is going on: the sky, decoys, callers and incoming ducks.
- Give it a spot from which it can take everything in: sounds, movement and the sight of birds working.
- Do this a few times before the season. The dog will be much calmer and more focused when it counts.
- If not fully ready it may be better to introduce the dog to hunting from a maimai after Opening Weekend, when the excitement and noise is a lot less.

Working dogs in boats

If you use a boat as well as a maimai, give the dog extra time to get used to it beforehand. Getting in and out of a boat is a skill on its own. Think about where the dog sits to reduce muzzle blast and make retrieves easy.

3. Positioning Your Dog in the Maimai

Where you put your dog in the maimai affects how well it marks, how much gun noise it cops, and how many birds you get back.

Viewing platform setup

- Build a small platform or side extension where the dog can sit or stand comfortably.
- Give side access from the platform to where you stand, so the dog can bring birds back to you.
- The front of the platform needs a clear, easy drop to the ground or water. No steps or obstacles.
- Even a small detour at the start of a retrieve can put a dog well off course by the time it gets to the fall area. A clear exit line makes a real difference.

Protecting hearing and steadiness

- Keep the dog's shoulder level with your knee or behind you. This cuts down its exposure to muzzle blast.
- Watch out if the dog's exit point is at the front of the maimai. Dogs creep forward to get a better view and can end up right under the barrel.
- If your dog is not yet steady, use a tie-out with a quick-release collar. You can let it go quickly when it is time to retrieve.

SAFETY Never let a dog swim with a standard collar on. It can snag on branches underwater or a leg can get caught in it. Use a quick-release collar around water at all times.

Camouflage

- Camo the dog's spot, but make sure it can still see the sky across a wide arc in front.
- See-through camo netting on the front edge of the maimai roof lets the dog watch for birds without being spotted.
- The dog needs to see where game birds fall. That is the whole point of giving it a good viewing position.

4. Keeping Your Dog Warm in the Maimai

Duck season means cold mornings, wind, rain and regular swims. A wet dog sitting still loses heat fast. That heat is energy that could go into retrieving. It is easy to overlook, but keeping your dog warm between retrieves makes a real difference to how it performs over a long morning.

Before you leave home

- A dog that slept dry in a warm environment will arrive in much better shape than one that was cold and damp overnight.
- Put a blanket in the dog box/ute tray for the trip. It dries the dog and keeps it warm on the way there, and on the way home.

In the maimai

- A neoprene vest is the best option for cold water work. It maintains warmth even when wet.
- Get the dog out of the wind where you can. Even a small amount of shelter makes a difference to how fast it chills.
- A raised platform keeps the dog off cold, wet ground. A piece of closed-cell foam or a waterproof mat underneath adds extra insulation.
- On slower mornings, a quick towel-dry between retrieves helps keep the dog's temperature up and keeps it sharp.

Breeds and cold tolerance

- Chesapeake Bay Retrievers and Labradors have a double coat and handle cold water well. They are tougher in the cold than most other breeds.
- Spaniels and lighter-coated dogs feel it more quickly. A neoprene coat makes a big difference for them.
- Even the toughest breeds will get cold during a long session with lots of swims. Watch for shivering, stiffness, or a reluctance to get back in the water.

TIP Keep a dry towel in your kit. A quick rub-down removes surface water and makes a neoprene coat work much better.

5. Marking – Helping Your Dog Find Birds

Marking is when the dog watches a bird fall, remembers where it landed, and goes straight to it. It is one of the most useful skills a hunting dog can have, and your maimai setup plays a big part in how well your dog can do it.

What good marking requires

- A clear view of the bird from the moment it is shot.
- Focus and steadiness, built up through regular training.
- Memory, including remembering where several game birds came down in a busy flurry.
- The ability to run a straight line to the fall, called lining, without getting put off by cover or water.
- A good nose to pin down the exact spot once the dog gets there.

Dogs with a clear view mark better, find more wounded birds, and get more enthusiastic about retrieving over time. Your maimai setup is not just about comfort. It directly affects how many birds you bring home.



6. Basic Retrieval Training

You do not need much to train a dog well before the season. These exercises can be done on a walk with a couple of dummies. Multiple short sessions works better than a few long sessions.

Memory retrieves

- While walking, throw a dummy into cover. Do not send the dog yet.
- Walk on 50-60 metres, then send it back to find the dummy.
- Once the dog is reliably finding one, add a second dummy and walk further before sending.

A blind retrieve is when the dog is sent for a bird it did not see fall. This happens often in real hunting, when a game bird comes down in thick cover or at distance.

- Place a dummy in light cover where the dog cannot see it from far away, but will find it once it gets close.
- Line the dog up facing the dummy (spine pointing toward it) and send it.
- Build the distance up over several sessions. Work toward around 70 metres.
- Once the dog is good at that, start sending it for dummies it has not seen placed at all.
- Lining is everything at this stage. The dog will run wherever it is pointed.

Quick Reference Summary

Topic	Key Point
Gun introduction	Always pair noise with a positive retrieve reward. Start quiet, build gradually.
Maimai familiarisation	Introduce the dog to the hide before the season: sound, space, and setup.
Dog positioning	Shoulder level with hunter's knee or behind. Clear exit to ground or water.
Hearing protection	Keep dog away from muzzle blast. Never position directly under the barrel.
Water safety	Use a quick-release collar. Never let the dog swim with a standard collar on.
Keeping warm	Neoprene coat. Raised platform, shelter from wind, towel on hand.
Cold signs	Shivering, stiffness, or reluctance to enter water. Warm the dog before continuing.
Marking sightlines	Dog must see the fall. Clear view of sky and 180 degrees forward is essential.
Camouflage	See-through netting on the maimai roof lets the dog watch the sky unseen.

