

# Old Black Dog

*Every inch the pro, he accepted his retirement from the field with grace. Why, then, couldn't I? by Donald Hamilton*

Young Black Dog burst out of the rear of the car when I pulled the seat out of his way. It had been a long, dry drive and he went straight for the river, flying off the bank and landing with a lovely splash in a pool he'd checked out on our visit a couple of weeks earlier. He may not be the best retriever in the world, but fear of the water is not one of his problems. Having had his swim, he came racing back to the car and shook water on me.

"I'm ready, Chief," he said in his doggy way. "Let's go hunt some ducks."

I uncased the 20-gauge Magnum, a Remington 1100 that's kind to my ears and neck, areas that have given me a few medical problems. I slung the shell bag around me and shouldered the little pack full of decoys, hung my shooting stool from my belt, and headed down the dirt road, gun in hand, with Young Black Dog charging off across the field to see if he could have some fun with the covey of desert quail he'd flushed the last time. But today the birds were not at home.

It was a short hike to a riffle where the river was wadable, calf deep and not too swift. Emerging, with my bouncing black escort scouting for hostile life forms ahead, I climbed the bank and made my way a couple of hundred yards downstream to the place where tall tamarisks shadowed a long quiet pool. Here, after shedding my load, I put out the inflatable decoys, a dozen of them, in no particular configuration since I've never yet discovered a sure-fire scientific way to arrange them. (You'll gather that my hunting, like my dog's retrieving, is a pretty relaxed and informal business.) I loaded the gun, stuck a handful of shells into the pocket of my down jacket, and hid the decoy pack and shell bag out of sight. I put the three-legged stool at the end of the row of tamarisks behind a screen of willows, and sat down with the gun across my knees, facing the downriver.

Young Black Dog stopped racing around like a puppy and came in to sit beside me, knowing that play time was over and it was time to go to work. He's not a bad dog, you understand. He's had a little professional training and a few years of experience. His big problem, I guess, as far as I'm concerned, is that he simply isn't Old Black Dog, his sire, who's Old Gray Dog now; at 13, too slow and arthritic to go duck hunting any longer. This year I hadn't even taken the old guy out for doves although I suppose I should have. Perhaps I simply hadn't wanted to watch him suffer-

ing the humiliation of not seeing so well any longer, of having to be helped to the birds that fell and which he could no longer mark down in his old unerring fashion.

Well, it was a quiet and comfortable evening on the Rio Grande, far different from some the old guy and I had shared, and Young Black Dog, whose name is Ricky, suddenly tensed and whipped his head around to look off to the right, behind us. I whirled around, raising the gun, but it was only a small blue kingfisher landing on a half-submerged driftwood stump stranded upstream of the decoys.

"Dumb mutt," I said. "Your papa had more sense. He wasn't forever sounding off with false alarms. No bird, stupid. No."

Old Black Dog, whose name is Shadrach of Whiskey Creek, worked out our hunting method for us one day, in a dove field we were hunting alone, just the two of us. I had him sitting neatly beside me facing forward, picture-book fashion; and the doves kept sneaking in from behind us and getting by before I could shoot. (As already mentioned, I have a slight neck problem, limiting the sector I can keep under observation.) The next thing I knew, Old Black Dog had turned himself around to keep watch astern while I looked ahead; whenever he froze to rigid attention staring at the sky behind me. I knew it was time to turn and shoot. After that, we used the system for years, but I hadn't yet been able to teach it to the youngster, who'd been trained in the conventional manner.

I remembered that at the time I'd tried to pat the old guy—not so old back then—and praise him, but while he was affectionate enough at home he was having none of it there. Not in the field. Buster, he'd said quite clearly. Never mind the schmalz, keep your mind on your business, our business. We're hunting, dammit. Old Black Dog was a pro.

I raised the gun again, as Young Black Dog looked around sharply at something coming in over the tamarisks behind us, but it was only a small grayish hawk gliding down river, wings set.

"No," I said. "No bird. You know what a duck looks like, Dumbo; now concentrate, please. Ducks, not kingfishers or  
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*Old Black Dog is Old Gray Dog now; too slow to hunt ducks any longer. Still, he's my measure of what a retriever should be.*

## Old Black Dog

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hawks. Okay?"

Old Black Dog. With a family tree of field-trial champions, he'd really been too much dog for a dilettante amateur like me; he should have been handled by a tough working pro like himself. Our first couple of years together had been a ding-dong battle until we'd finally fought out a compromise: he wouldn't tell me how to shoot and I wouldn't tell him how to retrieve. After that we got along just fine as long as I performed adequately. But I remember very clearly the day I'd missed five doves in a row, and he'd given me a look of total disgust and gone off to retrieve for my dog-less partner of the day, who was shooting well. Later, Old Black Dog had come back to me and indicated that, well, if I finally managed to scratch something down, something I couldn't find, he'd condescend to find it for me. And he had. A pro.

"Okay, what is it now?" I asked resignedly as Young Black Dog came to attention again, turning his head to look behind us. "What have you got now, a robin?"

But it was a duck, a lone mallard drake that had come in from the rear and was

passing barely within range. I hesitated, hoping it would see the decoys and turn for an easier shot; but apparently it had already seen the decoys and decided they were not the kind of ducks with which it cared to associate. I decided it was really too far away and let it go.

"Sorry about that," I apologized. "I guess I was daydreaming. Good dog. . . . Whoa, hold everything, he's coming back after all!"

We watched the big mallard, its green head shining in the evening light, cruise back up the far side of the river, interested but suspicious. Again I weighed the long shot and held off, hoping for a better chance, and again it was the wrong decision. The duck swerved sharply away, seeing something it didn't like—perhaps a man and a dog hiding in the willows. And for a while everything was quiet along the Rio Grande.

Old Black Dog. I'd almost lost him once. It was at the head of the big impoundment not too far upstream from where we now sat. With an impromptu blind out in the marsh, I'd dropped a passing gadwall and, thinking it dead, failed to give it a second shot. Then it was too late, and Old Black Dog was in the line of fire, crashing through the mud and brush toward the crippled duck that flopped away ahead of him, leading him out into the swamp. I had a pretty good idea what was out

there—people have disappeared out there—and I blew the recall whistle frantically. But with a duck practically under his nose he was stone deaf, of course. He began to sink ever more deeply into the muck, heaving himself out of it again and again and settling back, as he labored grimly after the escaping quarry. Finally the duck found swimming water and paddled away out of sight among the drowned willows. Old Black Dog allowed himself to hear the whistle at last and struggled in the thin gluey stuff till he could see me. He lay there panting, buried almost to the shoulders.

I was out as far as I dared go, almost knee deep, having to shift my boots constantly to keep from getting totally stuck, myself, and there was no way I could reach him. I had a dreadful vision of having to leave him there while I went for help, but what help? The nearest town was at least an hour away. Old Black Dog was still watching me steadily. I started to talk to him, whistle at him, encourage him, and after a little he gave three mighty heaves that gained him, perhaps, a yard. Then he rested again. It took me the better part of an hour to talk him in. With a poor exhausted dog on my hands, I got out of there, of course, giving up for the day. As we were climbing the bluff to the car, somebody fired a gun back out in the marsh. My poor exhausted retriever took

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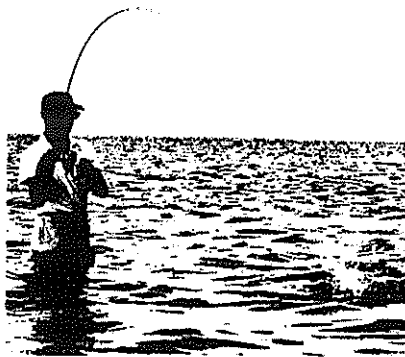
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off like a rocket, hurled himself into the lake, and paddled out eagerly looking for something to retrieve. . . .

He was two when he came to me, and we've now had 11 years, 11 hunting seasons, together. Well, call it ten; we hadn't been out for the past year, except for the short morning walks that are all he could manage comfortably nowadays. A decade of wonderful autumns. Not that he wasn't an infuriating pigheaded prima donna when he wasn't allowed to do things his way; but when he took off, the bird was in the bag, and it was always a heart-stopping experience to watch that magnificent head-long charge right on target. Quicksand aside, it didn't matter where you dropped it. He had it, and to hell with anything that got in his way.

I looked down at a movement and said, "What the hell are you doing?"

Young Black Dog had switched ends and was now watching the sky behind me. I started to speak again and stopped. It was as if the youngster had been reading my thoughts. His attitude said clearly that maybe he was no elder statesman of retrieverdom but, hell, he was no dope, either. He'd spotted a kingfisher and a hawk and a duck from that direction; so why should he sit looking down the lousy empty river from which nothing whatever had come? Anyway, I was looking that way and it didn't take two. He'd worked it out in his head like his sire before him.

I reached down to scratch his ears approvingly and he permitted it and was even pleased; this was a different dog with different standards. It occurred to me suddenly that I'd been treating him very unfairly. I'd been making no allowances for his relative inexperience, and I'd been making him suffer for the sense of grief and loss I was feeling at reaching the end of my long hunting partnership with the tough old guy at home.

Young Black Dog shook his head abruptly, and I took my hand away. I realized that he was staring over my left shoulder with an intentness that was painfully familiar. He was locked on something back there, tracking it. Moving very cautiously, I got a good grip on the gun and turned my head a fraction of an inch at a time and there they were, two of them, losing altitude fast, big ducks coming in out of the sun, obviously intending to sweep around the end of the tamarisks and land in the decoys. I couldn't make them out clearly against the light but it didn't matter. There were no ducks flying along this river that I wasn't entitled to two of; and if that pretty well filled my limit according to the point system, well, it was almost the end of this shooting day anyway.

"Easy, boy," I whispered. "Easy now!"

They made a wider sweep than I'd hoped, but they did turn, and as they turned I rose and swung on the far one. The 20 gauge barked sharply and rapped my shoulder and I was aware of a black

streak leaving me as the duck fell out of the sky. Okay, that one was being taken care of. I swung hard right where a drake mallard was now fighting for altitude, and the gun fired again, and the duck folded. I watched him down; this one was my responsibility according to the relaxed retrieving system by which we operated. I could hear a crashing in the willows and a splashing in the sluc beyond as Young Black Dog went for his mark; but I watched the greenhead hit the water at the tail of the quiet pool and lie there a moment before the current took it and swept it down into the rapids below. I started to run after it and checked myself, remembering the strict division of labor I'd been taught by a canine pro. Shooting was my job, retrieving wasn't. Union rules.

Young Black Dog was coming back at a breathless gallop with his jaws full of hen mallard. I took the bird from him and sat him down beside me and got him aimed downriver.

"Dead bird," I said, waving him away.  
"Dead bird. Back, Ricky. Back!"

He started off a little uncertainly, but wheels were turning in his head. I saw him remember that there had, after all, been a second shot. He lined out at a dead run, splashing through the shallows and racing down the riverbank, alert for whatever might be there to be found. This is not formal field-trial retrieving of course; and maybe you are a good enough handler to make your dog sit steady and mark down everything that falls before he goes; but Old Black Dog and I fought that battle many years ago and I lost. (His argument was that, the lousy way I shoot, he had to go with the gun so my cripples wouldn't have too much of a head start.) We settled for his keeping track of the first bird and my keeping track of the second and telling him about it later. Rather than wage the same doomed war with his pup, I'd just continued handling doubles that way.

Young Black Dog was slowing, clearly thinking that if there was anything out there he should have come upon it by now; but he kept going. At last, searching his surroundings as he ran, he spotted something in the chute of broken water to his right. He made a flying leap into the pool at the foot of it, came up swimming strongly, grabbed the big mallard drake as the current delivered it to him, and carried it ashore. Then, duck in mouth, he was bounding gaily back toward me, a gentler and happier dog than the stern dedicated professional with whom I'd spent the past decade, and perhaps not quite so magnificent a retriever, but maybe you only get one of those in a lifetime and just how magnificent a hunter am I?

*Donald Hamilton's work has previously appeared in Sports Afield, but he is best known as the author of the Matt Helm suspense novels. The Revengers, the latest in the series, will be published by Fawcett in September.*

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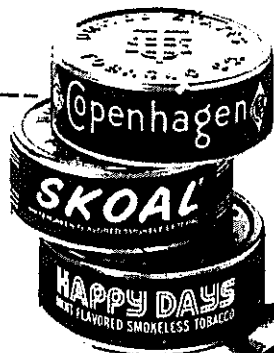
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