

Basic Feeding Considerations for the Highly Active Dog During the Hunting Season

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Having a feeding program that optimally complements your hardworking canine is a great way to help ensure that your dog's season, performance, and health will be in peak form. There are several concepts to discuss and why they work. Some things to consider include, feeding a performance food formula with greater caloric density, the optimal time to feed, how often to feed daily, and how to adjust feeding amount relative to your dog's needs. This first article will discuss some initial feeding and nutrition concepts to consider.

For many of you that have sporting dogs, having a dog that is very active during the hunting season and much less active in the spring and summer may be the way of life. For others, training, competitions, and hunting may be a year-round passion. With any hardworking dog, providing a performance food containing 30% protein/20% fat versus a maintenance formula containing 24-26% protein/12-16% fat has been shown to optimize many physical and metabolic characteristics important to exercise in nutrition studies with dogs. To briefly summarize, a performance food provides two major benefits. First, it is more calorie dense, which is important when more food is needed to meet the dog's higher energy demand of increased activity and cooler temperatures. Second, and in my opinion more importantly, a performance formula appropriately provides a greater proportion of nutrients delivered from fats and protein to significantly increase a working dog's metabolism that favors exercise. This article's discussion will focus more on the importance of adequate calorie delivery and optimal daily feeding strategies. Whereas, a previous article, entitled "Optimal Nutrition for the Working/Sporting Dog", discussed this second point in greater detail along with the benefits of feeding a performance food all year.

Did you know that a hardworking dog's energy needs can double or as much as quadruple over the course of the season, compared to its resting energy needs in the off-season? Of course, the change depends on the intensity, frequency, and duration of exercise that the dog participates in, as well as the terrain and environmental temperature while not exercising. So, what does this mean? As an example, if your dog consumes 2 cups a day during the lazy summer, you may have noticed that you have to increase the amount of food during the hunting season to 4, or even up to 8, cups a day by the middle or end of the season just to keep the dog's weight stable. However, this significant increase in caloric need does not occur overnight and will vary for each dog. This is a gradual shift that occurs over several weeks as the season progresses, time in the field increases, and physical conditioning improves. Therefore, the increased caloric needs will increase accordingly as metabolic rate and exercise frequency increases.

The question often comes up, "how do I know how much more or less to feed, and how do I best adjust the amount". Ultimately, there are two rules of thumb to have in mind. First and most importantly, always feed an amount to maintain a stable body weight and ideal body condition. And second, always add or subtract in small incremental changes, such as $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ cup amounts every few days as appropriate to promote a stable body condition.

For making incremental changes in feeding amount, it is a good time to mention that an actual measuring cup filled with a level amount of kibble is the best tool to know exactly how much food you are giving daily. This will be helpful in making it easier to adjust the feeding amount on specific increments. I have noticed over the years that when asked, many pet owners use a variety of scoopers or containers to measure out their dog's food, or is heaping over the sides of the container. Using an un-marked container can make adjustments more challenging and less consistent. In addition, having a standard measuring cup will aid communications between you and your veterinarian during routine health visits, in which topics relating to maintaining a healthy body condition and feeding practices are likely to come up.

This strategy is recommended because it is significantly easier to understand and practice than trying to calculate a specific caloric energy requirement that is an estimate based on your dog's body weight, how much time it's exercising a day, and level or unlevel terrain, etc., etc...To the sporting dog in the field, everyday or week could potentially be different terrain, different game (ducks vs. pheasants), different duration and intensity. Consequently, trying to fit you and your dog's field experience into an equation would not be the most beneficial. Plus, keeping your dog's body weight and condition stable as the effects of the season wear on is the best indicator that the caloric and nutritional needs are being met. Finally, large and abrupt increases in food volume could result in an incidence in diarrhea. Therefore, gradual changes to food intake would be the most appropriate approach.

Our hunting dogs are nothing less than elite athletes in every way. We expect high performance when they are afield and we train them for success, so it is important that we consider how providing the best nutrition and feeding strategies support our canine athlete. This is critical to complement the training and breeding of your pet. Taken together, all these suggestions can contribute each in simple ways to develop an optimal feeding program for your hardworking dog. Good luck.