



Cold Weather Canine Care



THE SUN IS CLEARLY OVER THE HORIZON as a flock of mallards starts that familiar cork screw into your decoy spread. You pick a greenhead, fold him cleanly and he splashes into the frigid water. On command your Lab takes a couple of tentative steps towards the water where it had been bounding only a few minutes before. Is it fatigue, or something worse?

It may not occur to many hunters and other dog owners whose pets exercise or work during extreme cold conditions, but cold-weather preparation starts at home.

“As temperatures get cooler a dog burns more calories to maintain its body temperature, thus needs to eat more calories,” said Dr. Brian Zanghi, an animal nutritionist with Purina. “We recommend feeding sporting dogs a calorie dense ‘performance’ food once a day after finishing the day’s hunt. This will maximize digestion before the next day and they will have a more optimal exercise metabolism in a fasted or unfed state.

Zanghi, a life-long hunter and Labrador retriever owner, said, “It is most advantageous to have a dog on a performance formula all year long and not switch to a maintenance formula in the off-season. All year long removes the 2 – 2.5 month of transition and back. Our sporting formulas also have sufficient Omega 3 fatty acids for joint health.”

At a grass-roots level, Zanghi suggests using a dog’s body condition as barometer: Can you see the dog’s ribs when it’s breathing and feel them at rest? Can you see the tuck at the belly? When viewed from above does your dog have a slight hourglass figure? These are all characteristics of an ideal body condition score of 4-5, with 9 being the max of severely obese.

Proper nutrition is paramount to keeping a dog healthy and warm in cold conditions. Don’t feed before heading afield, and let the dog rest before feeding in the evening. And remember, the more a dog eats, the more water it needs.

Bob West concurs. As director of sporting field operations for the Purina Professional Engagement Team, West brings 40 plus years of dog and dog training experience, including training multiple Versatile Champion dogs in the North American Versatile Hunting Dog association along with scores of field trial titles and retriever titles.

“An Idditarod dog may burn 6,000 to 8,000 of calories a day,” he said. “A hunting dog can burn 3,000 to 4,000 calories a day. Depend-



ing on the work and temperature a dog may need an increase of 70 to 100 calories to satisfy the dog’s requirement for energy.”

West said that for every 10 degree drop in temperature the caloric need for a dog increases 7 to 7.5 percent. You can decide the baseline temperature. (This is a rule of thumb.) You must take into account factors like stress of travel and the excitement of hunting or other activity.

And then there’s hydration. During cold weather, you say? Absolutely. Water is a requirement for digestion of food, as well as helping the body absorb nutrients. It cools the dog’s body and removes wastes through urination.

The sight of a panting dog on a hot summer’s day is a common sight, and human nature is such that we probably pay more attention to hot weather hydration than cold, but a dog needs water all of the time. West said two factors affect hydration: change in ambient temperature and activity.

“A dog pants to cool,” said West. “Warm, moist air comes from the lungs and cools the tongue and the back of the throat, which act as a radiator for the dog. The cooled blood goes back to the core to thermoregulate the dog. There is less humidity in winter so the cooling effect is better.”

Frequent watering also acts to “clean the radiator, as West puts it, of mucous, slime and feathers.

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West said the best substance to hydrate a dog is plain old water. There can be an obvious attraction to use something like a sports drink, but water is best.

“A dog’s body has a certain balance of electrolytes in its digestive tract,” said West. “When a dog loses body moisture through panting the amount of electrolytes becomes more concentrated. A product like Gatorade will super saturate and suck more moisture out of the muscle.”

Zanghi advises against using ice-cold water in the sweltering summer, as it could cause vascular constriction in the back of the throat, but when the outside temps are below zero, the water will be cold.

An easy way to hydrate dogs in the field is to carry plastic squirt bottles of water with you. Periodically, hydrate the dog by putting the tip of the bottle against the back of the lower jaw and gently squeezing. The dog will swallow without choking. Many high-drive dogs simply don’t want to take a break for hydration when there are birds to be hunted or other tasks at hand. Some dogs may respond better to a collapsible bowl or pouch for water breaks.

Giving the hardworking dog a break about every 15-20 min for a drink will help to minimize dehydration and allow them a breather to cool their elevated body temperature, as some dogs will not immediately drink after exercise or may need baiting with a few kibbles or broth in water.

Cold weather brings on other concerns for performance dogs. Dr. Joe Spoo a veterinary sports medicine specialist in South Dakota with a passion for upland bird and waterfowl hunting. He is owned by an English setter and a field-bred cocker spaniel. The opening scenario for this article came from him, and he offers some other pointers for cold-weather care.

“We don’t see much as see much hypothermia. Heat stroke is more common,” he said of extreme temperature maladies. “Signs of hypothermia could be a dog easing into the water or reluctance to retrieve. Keep an eye on their mental state. Shivering is not a reliable indicator of extreme cold, nor is teeth chattering as many dogs will do these things out of excitement. Gum color can be an indicator as pale gums can mean a restrictive blood supply.”

Spoo recommends some simple things to ward off the cold-weather issues. Neoprene vests are vital to cold-weather hunts as they do a great job of keeping a dog’s core warm. It is important to ensure proper fit as vests that are too tight can cause restrictive movements and one that are too loose allow cold water to enter and heat to escape. Dry dogs off after coming out of the water and offer a source of supplemental heat. That can be a blanket in the blind or a heated truck cab in more extreme cases. In the blind, have something under the dog’s paws and keep a dog from standing in water or snow for extended periods of time.

Snow and ice can also offer issues. Crusty snow and frozen ground can cause paw injuries. Spoo uses booties and in deeper, crusted snow will put additional wrap above the top of the boot to lessen abrasions on the dog’s leg in deeper snow. He buys in bulk from www.dogbooties.com.

When it comes to cold conditions, it ultimately depends upon the individual. There is no minimum “too cold” for performance dogs.

“That is situational,” he said. “A lot of it depends upon acclimation, housing and training conditions. A dog that spends his days outside is likely going to acclimate to the given temperature quicker than a house dog. Temperature tolerance is highly individualized and it is important to know your dog’s comfort level whether it is heat or cold tolerance we are talking about. When we are dealing with extremes in temperature I’m extra vigilant with the house dog, or the dog kennelled in a well-insulated kennel as they haven’t had the time to adjust to extremes and so they warrant close observations as the weather changes.”

In order to cut down on other injuries, Spoo points to other factors. Housing between hunts and in between hunting is important. Warm, dry and with comfortable bedding helps prevent injuries whether you are transporting between hunting sites or between hunting days as it allows your dog’s body to focus on recovery and rest. If the conditions are cold and drafty in the crate, trailer or dog box that dog is continually having to expend injury and calories to stay warm, isn’t relaxing and isn’t allowing the body to recover.

“Other factors we see in injured dogs are unconditioned dogs in early season and heavy workloads in late season,” he said.

Ultimately, cold-weather dog care is much like cold-weather human care. Treat the dog like you treat yourself. We’re pretty sure you eat well, hydrate adequately and stay as dry and as warm as you can. Do the same for your canine partner. We’re also pretty sure he or she is going to work much harder than you are.

~ *See more at:* <http://www.akcchf.org/canine-health/sporting-field-dogs/cold-weather-canine-care.html>

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