

Getting Started with Beagles



There are several types of beagles available today and a little research is needed before you run out and buy a pup. Some dogs are fast chasers and “push” the rabbit ahead at a faster pace. Some are so slow they are nicknamed “walkie-talkies” because while trailing, they merely walk along tonguing all the while. And, of course, there are the dogs that chase rabbits at a medium pace. You will need to decide which type of dog with which you want to hunt before buying one. The best way to do this is to actually go hunting with someone who already has beagles and get a feel for how the dogs work. If that’s not possible, my recommendation is to stay away from the faster dogs and the walkie-talkies and go medium speed, which is what the vast majority of hunting dogs are anyway.

Ok, so let’s say you’ve decided to get a rabbit dog. If you buy a pup and train it to hunt, it will no doubt bring you many hours of enjoyment afield. But if you think that you may want to someday join with other hunters and their dogs, you might have a problem if one dog is all you have. This is because as your dog chases rabbits, it learns to focus on the rabbit trail alone. If another dog is added to the hunt, your dog will not know how to work with the other dog and you will most likely have different chases going on at the same time. I experienced this with my first beagle, Jenny. Jenny was an excellent rabbit dog, but I like to hunt with friends and when they brought their dogs along to a hunt, I found that Jenny would be doing her own thing as the other dogs cooperated in chasing a single rabbit. It became very frustrating. Jenny had never learned to hunt with others as she should have and as a result she was a loner. For this reason, I recommend you buy two pups and train them together so they learn to hunt with other dogs. You’ll quickly see that they will readily work together and when one finds fresh rabbit scent and becomes excited, the enthusiasm will spread and the other will join in to help. Then later, if other dogs are added, both beagles will know what to do. Let me tell you, there are few things as exciting as listening to a group of beagles coming toward you while chasing the rabbit back in your direction!

If you would ask what time of the year is best to buy a pup I would have to say the spring, since if you get one from a spring litter, you will have all summer to train. As we all know, rabbit populations peak during the summer months and putting your pup on the scent of one of those bunnies that are always sitting at the edge of the yard in the summer evenings is a great way to get them started.

Here’s one final tip about getting a beagle. If someone offers to give you an adult beagle, don’t take it. No one gives a good beagle away, but there are quite a few problem dogs out there looking for homes. I prefer to always train my own pup so that I know of what it’s made.

Training your new pup to chase rabbits is not as difficult as you may think and can begin when your pup is only a few months old. If you obtained your dog from good hunting stock it should already have what it needs packaged inside and all you will need to do is to show it what it was born to do. I’ve found the easiest way to do this is to construct a “chase pen,” an enclosed area with chicken wire and wooden stakes. I make it rectangular in shape about 25 feet in length and maybe 12 feet wide. Put some brush and maybe a log or two inside the enclosure. You want enough brush that you create dense cover adequate enough to allow a rabbit to easily hide from your pup.

Once you construct your chase pen you'll need a domestic rabbit. I prefer brown-color rabbits since they look more natural and they are able to hide more easily. Most livestock auctions have them available at their weekly auctions and they're cheap so you can get one for only a few dollars or perhaps you know someone who will let you borrow one. Remember, though, if you buy one, you'll have to find a home for it once the training is complete.

Place the rabbit inside the chase pen and keep it there for a week or so, just long enough that it familiarizes itself with the tangle of brush that's inside the enclosure. Another benefit of leaving it there for this length of time is that it will become wilder as time passes. Of course, you will need rabbit food pellets and some drinking water for your bunny during this time. Once bunny feels at home, it's time to bring in a pup.

Your pup may begin sniffing the ground immediately, or it may just run around looking for a way out of the enclosure. You want it to be oblivious to the presence of the rabbit when you place the pup inside the enclosure. Now, it's time to introduce the two. You will need to scare the rabbit so that it runs past pup, making sure the pup sees it as it passes by. Many times, one such encounter will be all that's needed to turn the pup on and to ignite its instinct to chase. Once the dog sees the rabbit and chases it, the rabbit will dive into cover to escape. That's crucial since you don't want your pup to "sight chase" the bunny, but rather to begin using its nose.

I had a pup once that had seen the rabbit a few too many times and as a result all she wanted to do was romp around the pen with her head held high searching for the rabbit. I finally had to remove the rabbit and place her inside where she at first continued to look for it, but eventually began using her nose. It is very important to not overdo the training in the chase pen. Two or three trips to the pen should be sufficient for your pup to get the idea. Remember, the only purpose of this exercise is to get your pups all fired up about rabbits. Another tip, if you have more than one pup, trips to the pen should be taken individually or they'll become too easily distracted by each other and won't focus on the rabbit scent.



Joe Kosack/PGC Photo

It's now time to start taking your pups afield. Pennsylvania does have a few restrictions on training dogs, so make sure you are aware of them before going out. These regulations can be found in the *Hunting and Trapping Digest* that is provided to you when you purchase a hunting license. Taking your dogs out the first few times simply involves flushing a wild rabbit and placing your pups where the rabbit was so they can find the fresh scent. You must have patience during this period because not all pups catch on to this whole rabbit hunting thing at the same rate. Some will show promise right away, while others will take longer. I once had two pups from the same litter that caught on months apart. Toby started chasing fairly early, but it was several

months before Sadie got the idea. She finally did, though, and has been a good hunter ever since. It bears repeating, have patience.

Field training should be done often. The more you take your dogs afield, the more experienced they become and the better they get. You can run your dogs year-round but I would stay away from training in the hot summer months because dogs overheat and tire quickly then. The early mornings of late summer are good times to go out, since the air is cooler and the dew is often heavy on the ground. I'm not sure why, but the rabbit scent seems to hold better when the ground is moist, so going out when there is dew or after an overnight drizzle is good.