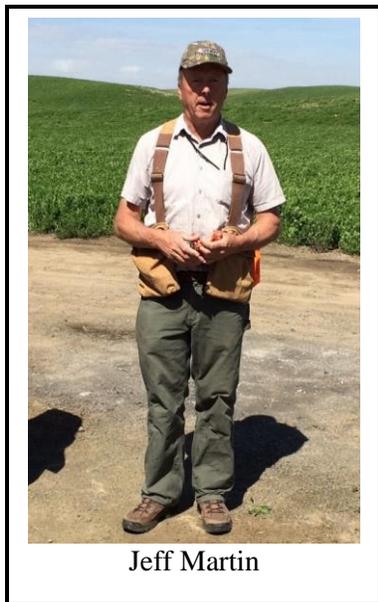


# Mastering the water blind (aka the memory mark)

by Jeff Martin



This article is to help those handlers training for the Solms water tests. By necessity it is not a book version and for clarity, I will list the steps in point form.

**The Fundamentals:** You as the trainer control the training situation, where EVERY lesson should be set up for success. That is the dog breezes through the exercise where he gets his duck or rabbit and his handlers praise. It goes so smoothly he thinks it's his idea and the lesson is crystal clear. The dogs love of working, his confidence, and training, progress very rapidly under this regime.

The worst type of training is when a dog is asked to do more than he understands, he gets into trouble, he is punished or corrected for his efforts (sometimes very heavily if the so called trainer is constantly blaming the dog). The end result is a confused, dejected dog that has no confidence or love for what he was bred for.

It's absolutely critical that every task expected of a finished versatile dog is broken down to its SIMPLEST components, each then taught and mastered separately before ever expecting the dog to put them all together. For instance a simple marked retrieve requires entering water, swimming to the game; taking hold and returning to the start position; to then sit in front of the handler without shaking and gently holding the game without dropping until the handler takes it.

This simple mark retrieve should be broken down and trained in its separate steps of having a dog sit, it can swim, it has been taught on land to hold game without dropping, it will come when called and turn back immediately once grasping the game, it will exit water without shaking and will sit in front of the handler automatically within his reach to take the game. I routinely see dogs avoid picking up game at the end of the drag, some bury it, some runoff 200 meters to then dump it, standoff or hesitate 30 meters from the handler if they do return, drop the game at 30 meters and panic realising their in trouble. All these are dogs avoiding their inept trainer and are symptoms of a dog where the trainer has tried to train on

the the whole task without ever mastering the individual components!!! Coming back to the handler with game always means trouble in the dogs mind.

The underlying purpose of what I'm going to explain is to establish one memory blind, where every time the dog is brought to the exact same starting point on the edge of the pond it knows exactly where the duck is placed and will go across when sent to retrieve it correctly. This creates a hot spot or pickup area and creates good habits, with confidence built through success.

You can later establish 3 or 4 separate memory blinds so that when you're actually in a Solms test doing a cold or unknown blind, the dog will go with confidence to the other side of the pond, just like the habits established in this training.

**Water training grounds:** It's important that the pond where you establish a memory blind is long, preferably a river or stream. This is so the dog never gets into the bad habit of always wanting to exit on the opposite side and trying to run back around, the fast way on land. Remember in the test you cannot command come, the dog that is out of sight running up and down looking for its usual easy way back nearly always drops the game or eats it, gets disoriented and fails the test. Train on small round ponds if that's the end result you want.

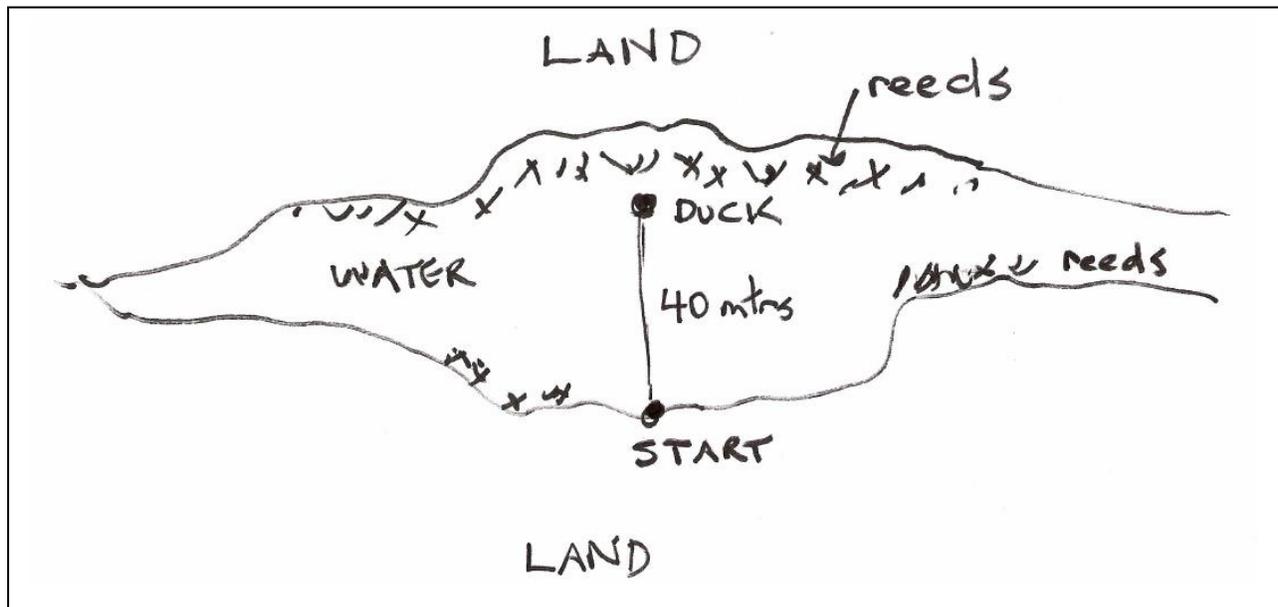
Always try to setup a memory blind straight across the pond to establish good habits, avoid angling or lining entry or exit into water. Angles are the realm of retriever trials not training a hunting dog.

**Duck placement:** The rules state the dog should have to swim across open water to find the game placed on the edge of cover, usually at shotgun range i.e. 40 meters max. Always, always always place the duck in these memory blinds in the same pickup spot on the edge of light cover that the dog will find easily. Remember we are establishing good habits not testing his reed busting abilities every time. If you can place it so the wind is carrying duck scent to the dog, even better. If you place the duck on land, you will establish the bad habit of leaving the water. This is why I always shackle the feet and wing tape live ducks (used in a live duck search) so they remain relatively close to where they were placed, they cannot dive and the dog will be successful every time, remember "nothing succeeds like success".

In a hunting situation a shot duck that is wounded will always make for the safety of cover. The dog that follows the edge of cover in the water will always intercept the path of the wounded duck and has a far better chance of recovering the duck

than a dog trained or allowed to hunt the bank. The habit you're establishing is the payoff for the dog i.e. catching the duck, always in the water.

After the initial training the dog should never see you place the duck, it is training the dog to go hunt based on confidence in your cueing sequence.



**Assumptions:** The dog should have a grasp of the following before embarking on this training. Retrieving is complete whether by force fetch or a dog simply taught to hold, carry, then sit and give on command (remember these dogs love game, going out and picking up to retrieve is for themselves, holding it correctly and returning to give up their prize to you is generally trained, even for retriever breeds). Correct retrieving training is another article in itself.

The dog should understand sit and come commands as well as swim or be familiar with water.

**Cueing:** It's extremely important with versatile dog training that you cue them to remind or help them understand the specific task you're asking them to do. The cues you establish at Solms level will be built on and expanded if you ever attempt the 36 separate tests at VGP level.

Just some examples of where cueing come into play:

- a) a blind retrieve straight lining across open water versus continuous searching or tearing up the cover when sent on a live duck search
- b) hunt close under the gun in the buschieren versus go tear up the forest hunting all corners in the stobern or independent forest search or

c) the dog being sent on a field search to locate and point game versus being sent on a drag to track and retrieve .

I use a cue sequence that confirms or puts the dog in the picture about what I require, it's called putting the dog in the chute from my retrieving trial days.

The key here is be absolutely consistent in your cueing, don't forget you are also training yourself to be accurate and consistent!!

Dogs see everything in pictures, and it's very important that they get a good "snap shot" to see what or where they are being sent. Marking is a matter of eyes, don't ever develop the bad habit of the dog taking its eyes off the mark to look up at you waiting for the fetch command. The picture we are going to create is the dog always going across open water to find game on the edge of cover in water along the opposite shore .

In sending for a blind, sit the dog with its backbone lined up to where it's going (note the dog doesn't have to heel to the start and can wear a flat collar so steadiness isn't required at Solms level as you can hold the collar ). Your standing straight up, holding the collar if necessary, the free arm is placed at 45 degrees from your shoulder in front (your hand should then be about a meter in front of the dogs head) , visible to the dog but high enough NOT to be ruining his vision of the picture (have someone do this to you to understand what I'm talking about). When the dog looks out correctly I confirm with a drawn out "good boy" just before commanding the release or "fetch" command. A drawn out "good boy" confirmation really focuses a dogs eyes and where he's going in anticipation of the "fetch" release.

This sequence may sound difficult but it can be trained twice daily sending your dog to his dinner bowl, it's very simple. Much of versatile training can be accomplished at feeding time, if you have time to feed your dog you have time to train it !!

At your routine feed time , have your dog on lead & tied to a stake , you then walk out with the dogs usual meal and place the bowl in plain sight 30 meters across the yard preferably on mown lawn . You then go to your dog and use the exact cadence you are later going to use to send your dog off your hand to a blind. That is hold the flat collar, tell your dog to sit with it facing the food bowl, he most likely will be focused on his food bowl, place your hand out in the direction of the food, the moment your dog is looking at the bowl immediately confirm with "good boy" and send with "fetch". Your dog will be quick to learn that focusing on the

dinner bowl will be rewarded with being released and him getting his food. Be very careful with the timing of this confirming and sending, avoid bad habits like your dog looking up at you to go, remove your hand and start the sequence over if need be. Another common bad habit is moving your hand or arm like your 10 pin bowling, any minute movement of your hand or arm distracts his eyes from the target of where he's going. Later in training if he is looking in the wrong direction, remove your arm as you growl "no", repeat the sequence until he will look out where you are pointing and want him to go. You can repeat this training multiple times for a couple of small meals or twice daily so it shouldn't take long for your dog to be relying on the sequence and running off your hand with confidence on command. You are now ready to start blind retrieves.

**The memory mark sequence:** This is the initial start to achieving a blind retrieve and I think the easiest method, step by step, set up to succeed. Most people try forcing a dog across a pond in their blind retrieve training, with lots of unclear expectations, unknown outcomes, too much force and needless punishment.

When you've found a good spot to create a memory blind with the features I've outlined, take your dog on lead to the start point (preferably close to the water's edge with a clear view of open water). Tell your dog to sit, while holding its collar, facing the direction of the blind. Have a friend inconspicuously hidden in cover waiting on the opposite side, so he can throw a dead duck to land in what will become the pickup zone. He yells a quick "hey hey" as he throws the duck. Your dog sees the loud water splash and you send him to retrieve it. Avoid your friend moving around and distracting as your dog is completing the retrieve. In training command come just as your dog picks up the duck but remember you will be trying to avoid any command at all as training progresses. After a few minutes repeat this mark a second time, then put your dog away in its crate to think about the clarity of that lesson. Most pro trainers believe putting a dog away for 2 hours without further distractions, to absorb a clear lesson, it's a good idea.

Return to that exact spot the next day & have your friend throw a third mark in the exact same sequence as you did previously. You then have the dog establishing or visualizing the start point with the payoff zone across the pond, he even thinks it's his idea he's been so successful.

The next step is to throw a fourth duck with you still holding the collar. Give him 10 seconds or so to absorb the picture of where the duck landed and without ANY further commands to distract him, walk the dog away behind a tree or into cover for say a minute or so. The memory of that duck will be burning a hole in his head. You then return to the exact start point, sit him facing the pickup zone, he

will be re-establishing the picture of the mark from only minutes before but this time continue holding his collar as you go through the blind sequence you taught him in the yard sending him for his dinner. Send the dog and he should go having linked the memory of the mark and the payoff zone together. As the dog is at the pickup zone I always praise with “good boy” which helps to anchor him to a spot. You can also praise “good boy” as the dog is about to pick up the duck as this establishes you are pleased with him and also that you are still watching him. Remember you can praise your dog during retrieving at a test BUT if he is doing something wrong you can’t be blurting out a series of commands such as fetch, hold, come etc. The rules state “a dog must retrieve of its own accord, any game encountered in the field” and that’s the goal completed training should aspire too and what the judges are expecting.

The next day, you may have to repeat this delayed memory mark but this time retire to cover and stay a bit longer before returning to the start to send him with your sequence. The last step is placing a duck yourself without your dog ever seeing you do it (leave him in the crate in the truck). You bring the dog out to the start point excitedly cueing him “where is it”. Sit him and send him exactly with the same sequence as you did in the memory mark previously. He should go retrieve without problems, if not you may have to back up to doing a few more delayed memory marks. The goal is to have him run off your hand with confidence for an unknown blind retrieve, every time you use this sequence.

Once this is mastered you can establish a second or third memory blind in different locales that you can return to when training for your Solms and your dog will complete these tasks easily with confidence .

A common mistake I have seen is people sending the dog into water and then throwing a bumper to retrieve. This creates the annoying habit of the dog entering water but then turning and waiting for the blind to come from the trainer!! A bad habit and easily avoided with smarter training.

**Extending the blind retrieve:** Dogs have an amazing sense of place, you can use this to build on this blind retrieve training. Once your dog knows a pickup zone you can bring your dog to the start point but this time instead of using the cueing sequence for a blind retrieve , you say repeatedly “where is it” which is my cue for go search as there is game to find. I use it for the live duck search but also later in the stobern or independent forest search on land. Your dog is familiar with the area and assumes the duck is always across the pond in the known established pickup zone. This time however you have placed a shackled wing taped duck say 20 feet from the usual pickup zone. Your dog will go there but not finding a duck

or a “good boy” anchoring cue will search further afield (normally across the wind or cover where you have placed the live duck). The dog extending its search will result in him finding the duck and being successful and again he will think it’s his idea. Next time maybe a few days later, cue him at the same starting point for the live duck search with “where is it” but this time the duck is placed another 20 feet further from the previous training session. Your dog will extend its search in water even further this time to be successful. In no time at all your dog will be searching further and further along the edge of cover in water without any commands (the ideal habit to create) ensuring success and the whole time thinking it’s his idea. I like to use a live shackled duck as they are the ultimate reward for a dog, they stay where they are placed, can be used repeatedly, they ensure the dog is always successful and it avoids any frantic chasing a free live duck that can lead to frustrating the dog and possible hard mouth problems.

This is my sequence to training for blind retrieves, it isn’t as difficult as it may sound and usually progresses quickly with the dog making minimal mistakes.

Good training , waidmensheil  
Jeff Martin