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Predatory Behavior

What is Predatory Behavior? Predatory behaviors are a sequence of instinctive actions that a carnivore-predator engages in for the purpose of catching food. Because it is instinctive, the animal is born with a “blueprint” for it in their head and something in the environment triggers it to happen. In the case of dogs, the sequence of behavior is “hunt >> stalk >> chase >> grab-bite >> shake-kill >> dissect >> consume”, although not all dog breeds have the full sequence. Sheep herding dogs, for example, “hunt >> stalk >> chase” the sheep, but ideally don’t bite, kill, or eat them. What usually ends up being the biggest problem for pet owners is the chase part of the behavior (and potentially the bite-kill parts) and because the behavior is part of a chain of actions, it is important to intervene as early in the chain as you can.

Tips for Troubleshooting Predatory Behavior

Tip 1. Teach your dog basic commands such as “come” and “stay” and “look at me”. The more solid those behaviors are, the more they will help you manage the behavior. Don’t expect your dog to stop and come to you while they are chasing a wild hare, but if you are able to call them before they see the hare, you can grab them and distract them while the hare runs off.

Tip 2. Keep your dog on a leash in areas where you are likely to run into other animals. If your dog pulls on leash, you will need to teach them to walk on a slack lead because if they pull, they are already very excited and it will be difficult to get them to be calm when they see another animal.

Tip 3. Teach your dog to “Leave it” on cue, so that you can let them know when they need to leave an animal alone.

Tip 4. Be sure any area your dog has access to is secured and they cannot escape to chase after the neighbor’s chickens. You can be held liable for any animals your dog injures or kills if they get loose. In most states (including New Mexico) it is legal for farmers to shoot stray dogs that enter their property and threaten them or their animals.

Tip 5. Always walk your dog on secure equipment and consider teaching them to wear a headcollar such as a Gentle Leader® when walking. A headcollar will help you to get your dog’s attention in emergency situations.

Tip 6. Implement a structured interaction program such as “Nothing in Life is for Free” in order to increase impulse control and make it clear to the dog that you are the source of food and other resources and they may be less likely to hunt on their own.

Tip 7. Ensure your dog gets enough exercise and mental enrichment to meet their needs. A dog that has lots of pent up energy is more likely to find ways to entertain themselves and hunting may be one of those ways.

Changing Predatory Behavior

This can be particularly difficult to set up because you can't exactly ask squirrels or rabbits to show up and stay in a particular place because you need to train your predatory dog.

Additionally, it can be very traumatizing for a smaller prey animal to see a predator and not run, so borrowing your neighbor's pet rabbit isn't a good idea either. Some dogs will respond to stuffed animals as if they are real animals, so if you can get a hold of a realistic looking toy rabbit, your dog might treat it like prey at a distance and you can start your practice with that.

Before you begin. You will need to teach your dog the word “YES!” means they get a treat. Practice saying the word “YES!” and feeding your dog a treat without asking them to do anything else. The goal is to reach a point where they will be looking away and you say “YES!” and they immediately look at you for their treat. Also, be sure to use high-value treats for training such as cut up hotdog or chicken.

Step 1. Set your “animal” up in a yard or open space where your dog will be able to see it at a distance when you bring them out.

Step 2. Bring your dog out into the space on leash and slowly walk toward the stuffed animal until your dog notices it. Don't do or say anything to point the animal out; we want your dog to find it on their own.

Step 3. The instant your dog notices the stuffed animal, say “YES!” and feed your dog a treat.

Troubleshooting: If your dog ignores the treat or does not look at you when you say “YES!” you may be too close for your dog to focus and you will need to back up a bit.

Step 4. Continue saying “YES!” and feeding a treat anytime your dog looks at the stuffed animal, and over several sessions, you will notice that they will begin to look at you on their own after seeing the animal. When this starts happening, begin saying “YES!” after the dog has looked at the stuffed animal and they looked back at you. Repeat for several sessions.

Step 5. Begin teaching the dog to not only look at you but turn to face you when they see the stuffed animal. You can do this by taking 2 or 3 steps back after they look at the stuffed

animal and then look at you (and you say “YES!”), but BEFORE feeding the treat.

Step 6. Repeat until your dog is consistently and reliably looking at the stuffed animal and then looking back and following you. Be sure to practice at different distances and in different places so the behavior will be more likely to work no matter where you ask for it.

**Because predatory behavior is partly instinctive in nature it is very difficult to get rid of completely. Prevention will always be a necessary part of having a predatory dog as they can never fully be trusted not to chase prey. Additionally, it nearly always requires professional assistance to bring under control. Seeking the help of an experienced trainer or behavior professional is strongly recommended.*

***The information presented here is for supportive and informative purposes only; it is not intended to diagnose, treat or cure any behavioral issue and is not a substitute for professional help. With any behavior problem that persists or worsens, please seek help from a qualified behavior professional.*