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## Rabbit pens

**There's more to using a rabbit pen than simply steadying a dog, and a single session won't fix all your dog's issues in one sitting. Ryan Kay explains how to use one to its full potential**

**G**et that dog in a rabbit pen, that'll sort it out! Apparently...! I can't tell you just how many times I hear this. Some people seem to believe that rabbit pens are the answer to all the problems that a handler is having, especially when it comes to spaniels.

Rabbit pens can be a great training tool, but I feel that they must be used with the right objective in mind, and for many handlers that goal is to simply steady a dog up. Some go as far as stating that this is purely what the pen should be used for! In my mind, it's just not that black and white.

I'd never had the luxury of owning a rabbit pen, but with the move to our new spot last spring, and a little more room to play with, a training/rabbit pen of sorts was high on the wish list. In fact, soon after moving in, I made building one a priority. Having decided on the best spot, I got out

my old trundle wheel and marked out a large rectangle, hammering in a temporary post at all four corners. The land is fairly flat, rough grazing that hadn't been grazed on for several years, harbouring grasses, rushes and sedges. The actual area I'd allocated measured close to 1.2 acres. With such a sizeable space to encompass, building the pen would be no mean feat and was going to take some man hours.

### The build

Taking in as much information as possible from other pens I'd seen, I ordered the materials – 12 rolls of rabbit wire, over 70 round posts, wood preserver, postcrete, a whole kilometre of line wire and several thousand hog-rings. Plus, staples, hinges and locks for entrances etc, and anything else that would help get the job done. The 8ft posts were

tanalised as you'd expect, but I added a preserver to the bottom 3ft and brushed a bit on the top in a bid to increase their longevity. The heavy clay soil here means many of the posts will sit in water during the autumn/winter months, so I'm hoping that the preserver will decrease the chance of rot where the post meets the earth at ground level.

The corner posts were the first to go in, and these were the only posts to be braced and concreted in place, as they would be the anchors and take up the strain for the line wire. Starting at the top of the posts, the first line wire was secured all the way round, followed by a section of rabbit wire, another line wire, then the second level of rabbit wire; half of which is turned in towards the inside of the pen at the bottom and laid flat. Prior to that, the grass along the bottom and in between the posts, was mowed as short as possible, so this flat foot and a half of rabbit wire

**REMEMBER**  
There is no such thing as a magic 'cure-all' single session in a rabbit pen. Several visits will be needed

**The wild grasses in Ryan's pen provide the perfect hunting ground for spaniels**



PICTURES: LILY KAY

**PEN BUILD**



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can then be stapled close to the ground using bent lengths of line wire. The grass then grows over it and ties it in. And finally, another line wire is attached at the very bottom of the posts – this time from the inside in-order to help secure the rabbit wire to the ground. Aside a little help from other family members here and there, the whole pen was built by my son Fred and I – knocking every post in by hand. The post knocking is actually the easy part compared to the tedious work of hog-ringing the wire together.

**Stocked**

There are just four rabbits in the pen. That’s all! It’s as natural as I can make it – after all, all I’ve really done is fence-in some organic grass land. Along with the flora and greenery, there’s accommodation, food and water and additional sheltered areas. So here’s the thing – how many people own a hunting dog and take it for a wild walk in the countryside, or a walk anywhere where there’s game? Many of my clients arrive with tales of chasing and catching game, stating that they just need to steady their dog up on game and stop it chasing rabbits. The answer really lays with where they’re continually taking it for a walk in the first place. Just don’t do it! You have a hunting

dog and it doesn’t know what a walk is. Your human walk in a gamey area is the dog’s hunt – learning its trade by itself. We have a responsibility to train our gundogs not to chase game, but it must start with not exposing it to such a place without control in the first place. Those that know this, and choose to responsibly hunt their dog only when hunting it themselves, as opposed to the self-employed type of hunting on a walk, will get the most from a rabbit pen.

**Usage**

The point of this pen is that it’s a secure and natural place where I know there are rabbits hiding all the time. I can go there and train dogs not to chase, but to be steady. Not only that, and perhaps more importantly in my mind, the pen provides a place for a dog and handler to learn to hunt together. It provides a safe level of controlled exposure and a place that I can develop a young dog to hunt using the wind. The four rabbits in the pen provide enough scent to excite the mind of any young gundog worth its salt. If I chase the rabbits off their seat at one end of the pen, I can then use that fresh scent to start hunting a dog over it, and as it progresses, we can develop an habitual hunting model where the dog learns

about transferring scent messages; which ultimately result in flushes as its reward. But it brings me back to my first point about your training objective. Since building the pen, I’ve had some customers arrive saying: “I want to use your pen because he just needs steadying that’s all, then he’ll be good to go!”

**Let me give you an example**

The objective is a spaniel used as a peg dog. The very basics of which may be going against the grain as we have first and foremost a dog designed for hunting, then retrieving. Fundamentally the duties of a peg dog are those

**As Ryan’s pen is fairly large, he is able to use it to teach a dog to hunt as well as to steady it up**



**‘The pen provides a safe level of controlled exposure and a place that I can develop a young dog to hunt using the wind’**

# ‘The danger you have by subjecting a dog to rabbit scent and revealing what all the scent is about, is that you ignite the passion within’

of patience as it sits (not screwed to the floor), marks falling birds and retrieves dead birds on command at the end of the drive – with perhaps ‘runners’ during the drive. That straightforward duty should be ingrained and should run like clockwork; instilled throughout its training as something it ultimately enjoys. So aside from looking for a lost bird at the end of a drive, (where it may encounter rabbit scent on any land) why would I want to subject it to hunting on rabbit scent?

The request goes something like this: “Can I just run it through your pen to steady it up on rabbits?”

“Do you plan to hunt rabbits with it?”

“No, just peg duties on driven game”

So why expose it to rabbit scent at all? The danger you have by subjecting it to rabbit scent and revealing what all the scent is about, is that you ignite the passion and the hunting DNA from within. Hunting it on rabbits or just the scent of rabbits will be something that it will enjoy above everything else and will make sitting at a peg second choice.

So, for this scenario/objective a dog sat quietly observing a rabbit running past is perhaps the only exposure needed and obviously this situation can be replicated in the pen. I would never want

## HUNTING



During a session, Ryan walks an area of the pen first to ensure there is plenty of scent, but to avoid engineering a flush straight away.



A pen this size provides a great place to work on the handler/dog hunting relationship and help a young dog to find its feet.

to hunt a dog on rabbits, whose sole purpose in the field is going to be peg duties.

### Multi-use

There’s an argument that a pen should only be used for steadying and that if it’s used for getting a dog going, then that’s not natural ability at the forefront. I used to think along similar lines myself, but because of the size of this pen, I see it as more of a hunting ground, where a young dog can find its feet and get going and learn its trade with its handler. Due to the inherent size and natural state of the pen (plus with the feed I occasionally scatter in there), it tends to attract a few wild pheasants that fly in and graze. This added bonus helps with the hunting also. For me, the main idea of the pen is to encourage a young dog to go and find game in a controlled environment – a place where I can be given the chance to praise

desirable actions or to check any transgressions. It is also a place where I can avoid transgressions altogether by building the lessons slowly and helping the dog to achieve.

Which brings me on to my last point about the apparent ‘magical uses’ of a rabbit pen and the misconceptions about what half an hour spent in one will do. If you want to teach hunting together, encourage steadiness or even retrieving with the added distractions that a pen can provide, you’re going to have to visit the pen more than just once! I believe for many dogs, a block of several short lessons over a few days is really what’s needed for the message to start sinking in; followed by a few days or a week’s gap before the next block of sessions. It’s no good travelling miles and spending one session in a pen, thinking that will help. You may find that it will add to your problems and only make things worse. ■

## THE FLUSH



When the dog makes a flush, your ultimate goal is get him to sit to it – nice and steady.



Once the dog has seen the rabbit away, take a step back and allow the dog to refocus on you before casting him off again.