

14 December 2017 | Peter Hargreaves

**Object Guarding:** This is the act of aggressively protecting objects such as toys, pigs ears, rawhide chews and other treasures. It can also be the dog's bed, the dogs space, the dogs body, or approaching a sleeping space, or touching the dog when it is at rest, or even just stroking. It can also happen whilst approaching the dog when it has bones or articles that it has found, been given or stolen. Items such as socks, shoes, underwear, tissues, and high-value human food.

The ears going back will be part of typical body language relating to this behaviour, and he may go very still and rigid. The dog then will go into a crouch over the object, displaying a whale eye that is the head turned away but the eyes are swivelled back towards you. It is you that is the perceived threat to his possession. The whites tend to show as he looks back at you. You may also find the dogs lips are slightly pulled back almost in a grin and the eyes dilated or hard. Look at pictures of whales and you will see why whale eye gets its name.

**Breed Specific:** I am often asked if this is a trait of their type of dog or breed, the answer is not quite as simple as it may seem. Though I would say that Cocker Spaniels tend to resource guard more than any other dog, nearly 78% of all the work I do with object or resource guarding is with Cockers. These cockers are almost all solid colours golden being at the forefront. Generally, bi or tri coloured cockers do not suffer from this, it generally shows in the show breed rather the working strain. I believe that the owners are rarely to blame for this problem. I think the breeders that may be breeding Cocker Spaniels for their looks and not their temperament can sometimes be the culprits. Therefore, they are in some instances breeding from parents that genetically resource guard. This is evidenced by the high level of Cockers that are prone to this problem. Therefore, it must have genetic implications. Why breed a dog that is a resource guarder, knowing that it will probably be passed on to the pups? Madness.



Having said that, it could be that this trait could also be a throwback to the genes of the Sire and Dam. Therefore, they may not be displaying the guarding instinct themselves. I think it is important that all Cocker breeders should try to look into their dog's backgrounds, to hopefully see if there have been any guarding instances in any of the forebears.

What is vitally important is to seek treatment from a recognised expert in this field, as soon as the dog displays and tendencies towards guarding. Delaying treatment could mean it may go too far and is irreparable. They do not grow out of this trait, it always gets progressively worse without professional intervention.



I have also written a top article on **Cocker Rage**. Just type in Cocker Rage into Google and I come normally 1st. Other gundog breeds also tend to be at the forefront of this problem, especially Springer Spaniels who are the second most common breed I have to treated for this disorder. Followed by German Shepherds and English Bull Mastiffs then the pastoral flock guarding breeds. Having said that any breed can food or resource guard and most will have learned it from a young age, without treatment this problem will get progressively worse. This is a very different problem to bowl guarding and needs to be worked with different techniques. I have written an article on **Bowl Guarding** which also explains how to treat this fairly simple problem.

**Mine! all Mine:** So why would the dog want to protect these objects? The simple answer is that it's normally either a genetic trait passed on from the mother or father or a learned experience. Either it is a reaction from their siblings or breeder taking and tugging objects away at an early age. It can also be the owner who stimulates and creates this behaviour by our actions and reactions to the dog in a number of circumstances. As a puppy, your dog will have wandered through parts of the house, picking up and investigating any little object left lying around. However, as soon as he picked up something we did not want him to have we immediately snatched this precious possession away.

Before long, our intrepid pup would pick up an object then run away so we couldn't take away his find, he would scamper either to another room, the garden, under or behind a table, settee, or chair, anywhere where we could not easily relieve him of his treasure. So what do we do? We follow him to wherever he has hidden shouting and yelling at the top of our voices. What does the little monster do, he whale-eyes you, and stands over the object and starts to growl. He has now learned a couple of very valuable lessons. When you give a command, he does not always need to obey. If he shows aggression, you back off.

And by our actions, we have successfully taught him to resource guard. However especially in Cocker this can also a genetic disposition, so early touching, training and socialising are absolutely vital. Follow the guidelines as early as you can with all your dogs.

**Advice:** Well-meaning friends and of course the inimitable doggy experts. You will find these in abundance in any park, street, pub or internet forum, they will tell you to grab the dog by the scruff of the neck then forcibly remove the object, put the dog into an alpha roll position, or give it a good thump. The tips and advice are endless. If you analyse them all you will find that nearly every suggestion will be confrontational or recommend neutering, these methods will inevitably have the exact opposite effect to what you are hoping to cure. What you will rarely be told is to train the dog so that it wants to give up the object, that the dog will think it is fun and rewarding to let you have these treasured articles back. But this must be started as soon as the guarding starts at whatever age.



**Start Early:** Your puppies and adult dogs should be used to having their mouth touched when you then wish to remove something it isn't seen as confrontational.

From the day you get your dog, either as a puppy or adult dog, brush his teeth. Play with his flews (the floppy bits on the upper lip), open his mouth, check his tonsils, look down his throat. Do this in a positive fun way with lots of praise and the occasional treat. Purchase a special treat like Beef Jerky Sticks or Beef Jerky for dogs See

all **Natural Treats for Dogs**. Hold onto one end of the treat while the dog chews on the other end. He may want to play tug, but just hold the treat try not to do not pull away In time he will get used to your presence and relax and just

chew. Train the dog the "OFF" command. When I am working with bowl aggressive or object aggressive dogs this is the first thing I teach. This allows you to stop your dog picking things up off the floor without your permission See [The Jangler](#) for further information It is important for your dog to view you as the provider of all good things. You can do this by tightly controlling the dog's environment. Keep all but one or two toys up off the floor and take the others down only when you want to play. Make sure you offer an item with a command "Good" "Take it." When you are tired of the game (you that is, not the dog), tell the dog to "**Drop**" or "**Dead**" Give him another item or treat in exchange, and then put the first object away.

Do you know your dog's likes and dislikes? Compose a list of all the things your dog really enjoys, including food, toys, treats and activities, rank them in a hierarchical order, In exchange for dropping the first item give your dog a second, "better" item. For instance, if tennis ball retrieving is third on your dog's list, reward him with my high-value treats for dropping the tennis ball.

If your dog attempts to pick up a bit of rubbish in the street, command him to "drop" and then throw or give him his tennis ball. I think it is prudent to point out that not all Cockers are resource or food guarders. Jet (above) a working Cocker Spaniel s one of five Cockers that I own. He is one of the gentlest dogs you could ever meet and does not have a bad bone in his body. However, early desensitisation work is essential to make sure your dog does not start this problem. This article only covers possession aggression resource guarding.

**Give a Cue:** Teach the word dead, drop, or give, do it in a fun way with a happy high silly voice. Start by allowing him to have something that is not so valuable then you can trade with him for his favourite treat, what is his favourite treats or game? Do you really know your dog's likes and dislikes? This is fine for teaching young pups or dogs that are not presently guarding but what about ones that are already way down the road of resource guarding. Training a young puppy is relatively easy. Re-training an older dog is more difficult, but not impossible.



**Trade and Reward:** Firstly take away all objects the dog is guarding, that could be toys, tissues, chews, bones, pigs ears or sleeping places, that can include beds, sofas or chairs. You may not be able to move the latter but you can cover it, put a box or something else like dining chairs on them so it will restrict access. Do not allow access to these precious resources a number of days. You need to prepare for the next stage if the guarding is articles such as toys chews bones etc, prepare some of the dog's really favourite treats, cheese or frankfurter tends to be high on the list.

Then get a low-value object, it may be a tissue or a sock, a pig's ear, for instance, may be perceived as high value. Try to be to the side of the dog, rather than face on and relax, take the tension you may feel out of your body as the dog will both smell and sense your fear and this could trigger a reaction.

Offer the object to the dog but try and keep hold of it as the dog takes it, use whatever release command you have decided on it could be "dead" "drop" "leave" or "trade" immediately produce the tasty treat from behind your back and exchange. Praise when the exchange takes place and give back the object you first exchanged.

Set scheduled times to repeat this exercise at least four times a day but also just do it at inopportune moments. Gradually up the anti of treasured goods. Over a period of time, the dog will start to look forward to your approach and game. It is at this time that you give your dog the object and walk away, at first come back immediately and trade gradually making the time and distance you walk away longer until you clearly see the dog is having no problems with your approach whatsoever. Then only give a treat every third time, then every tenth, take the object away and immediately give it back extending the period on this until the guarding behaviour disappears. As with food guarding, you want to build a positive association with people approaching the objects being guarded. The dog needs to understand that people approaching and the removal of objects can be positive and rewarding.

**Touch Sensitive:** In this scenario, the dog is guarding its own body space and may be overly sensitive to contact and touch. You may be stroking the dog or giving it a treat and suddenly it will growl, lunge, show teeth or bite. There appears to be no reason. However, like most aggressions, there is normally a key or trigger for the behaviour. The dog may be a bully and enjoy threatening, or he may suddenly feel threatened or dislike the touch. If the dog is a bully then you need to change the way you deal with the dog. See my article on the [Alpha Myth](#). If the dog is resource guarding his body space then you need to desensitise the dog to touch. To do this you may need to introduce a soft mesh muzzle (See website) so you can touch and treat in relative safety. Start by touching the dog and say “Good” Take it. Good is the equivalent of a clicker and is marking the behaviour you want and Take it is permission to share your treat (See The Alpha Myth). Do this two or three times a day for a couple of minutes each time so that the dog becomes desensitised to the touch treating and praising as you go along. This may take some time. The same thing should happen if the dog is overly sensitive to the collar being touched or the lead being put on.





**Location or Bed Guarding:** This is not always as simple as it may seem as the severity or incidence may be related to who is approaching.

It may be that a woman can approach the bed or sleeping place but not a man, an adult but not a child. It is not always tied to the object being guarded, but more to the relationship or lack of it of the person approaching the resource. Sometimes this behaviour manifests itself when we try to move the dog off a sofa or when we handle or stroke the dog. It is worth in these cases making sure the dog is not ill or in pain as this could stimulate aggressive reactions.

As with other forms of guarding, make this a positive experience. Gauge how far you can approach before any aggressive reaction occurs. Initially, keep to this distance and as you pass throw a treat, praising the dog at the same time. Make sure you do not praise or treat if there is growling or any show of aggression. Gradually decrease the distance over a period of time, do not rush the exercise, if the dog starts to react go back a few steps and start again. Change your angle of approach and the person who is approaching. Always try not to approach head-on try to come in at an angle from the side, give lots of verbal praise for a calm and passive reaction from the dog.

**Maintain the Status Quo:** Over time, your pet will come to realise that your approach is a positive experience and the guarding will hopefully cease. However, if it starts up again repeat the exercise. You should practice once a week exchange or trade, for the remainder of the dog's life. If you are already at the point where the dog has actually bitten you, then I would suggest you get professional help. This should be a behaviourist or a trainer who understands and regularly treats aggression, and especially resource guarding.

You should look for one that comes to your house. I never understand how professionals can assess your dog's behaviour anywhere other than the where the problem occurs. Dogs react very differently when out of their own environment.