

# Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

## Golden Rule Training

### Counter Surfing

All dogs do it at some stage, whether it's counter surfing in the kitchen, stealing the garbage, begging or taking items from around the house it is a perfectly natural behavior for your dog! We have to **teach** them that this scavenging behavior is not appropriate.

Although these are annoying behaviors, there is also a safety issue with this behavior for your dog to develop, it is also **potentially a very dangerous one** (stealing something poisonous, a sharp item or knocking over a boiling saucepan).

### Why Do Dogs Steal Things?

There are **many reasons** why your dog may be stealing food and other household items. Take a look through this list to determine your dog's specific trigger or reason for the counter surfing behavior:

Stealing food and other items is a *self rewarding behavior*. When your dog steals something the result is gratifying, something yummy to eat or something to chew. It could also provide attention (even negative attention) from you. The *behavior is being rewarded and now reinforced* each time your dog steals something, and is likely to continue.

Other reasons could be:

- Some dogs steal items of food simply because they don't know any better, and they have never been properly taught that it is inappropriate behavior.
- For other dogs it could be a symptom of canine separation anxiety. Dogs will often steal things like socks or shoes which have the scent of the owner they are missing on them.
- Many dogs use it to receive attention from you. They learn that as soon as they pick up a shoe or cushion it gets you to chase after them, and that is a fun game!
- Dogs have a natural need to chew, so if there is no doggie chew toy around then your dog will find something else to chew.
- A lack of obedience training can lead to this type of behavioral problem. Your dog may not respect you or may see himself as above you in the family pack, so he is entitled to help himself to anything around the house.
- Boredom and a lack of exercise can lead to all kinds of unwanted behaviors.
- A young puppy that has not been taught proper household etiquette is not equipped to be left alone around food and other dangerous chewable items.

## How to Stop the Counter Surfing

There is no straightforward answer and you may need to implement more than one method to stop the behavior. Below are some general tips to help stop counter surfing and other stealing behavior:

1. **Keep food and other items out of reach** - prevention is always the best option in dog training. This involves clearing all counter tops and locking garbage bins. By doing this you are removing the thing that is motivating and then reinforcing your dog's stealing habit.
2. **Supervision is key:** When you are present you can provide your dog with instant feedback regarding his behavior. This includes both positive and negative feedback.
3. **Feed your dog from his dinner bowl** and never throw scraps from your dinner plate or when you are preparing your dinner.
4. **Physical and mental stimulation** is important to keep your dog from getting into all kinds of mischief.
5. **Never yell or hit your dog!** He will only learn to be afraid of you and will not learn to stop surfing; some dog's think the yelling is attention and that would increase the behavior.
6. **Never chase your dog!** Chasing becomes a game to your dog and it is really hard to break this habit once it starts! Instead trade a toy or treat for what your dog has in his mouth. If your dog thinks you always take things away he will not be willing to drop whatever he has.
7. **Reward desirable behavior.** If your dog is sitting calmly on his bed while you are preparing your dinner praise and reward him with a tasty DOG treat. This is really an obedience training exercise so it's ok to give your dog a reward in this situation. When a dog is rewarded that behavior is reinforced and is likely to continue in the future (which is what you desire in this example).

## Proven Strategies

Depending on the specific behavior problem, pick out one or more of the following methods. Continue to implement the general points listed above and then add one or more of the specific strategies listed below:

1. **Obedience training** is the key to preventing and solving most behavior problems; this builds respect and strengthens the bond you and your dog share.
2. You can also use **Bitter Apple or Yuck** (found at pet stores) on food and use it as "bait", then wait for your dog to try to steal it. This will tell him that food from counters is awful!
3. Ask for an alternate behavior from your dog in situations where he may be tempted to steal. If your dog knows "**Sit**", then redirect him to sit, and when he does, reward that behavior. You could also teach your dog a new cue, such as "**go to your mat.**" Make this spot the most special and appealing place in the whole house by giving him a Kong filled with kibble or a little peanut butter. If you get this one right your dog will spend a lot of time on his mat.

If the mat is your dog's normal bed, then he can be taught "go to mat" fairly quickly. Simply wait until your dog lies down on the mat on his own, then say "Yes!" and give him a treat. If you toss the treat a short distance away from the mat, you will set up the next

step. When your dog is reliably going back to the mat to lie down, put it on cue, "go to your mat!"

Once you have the "go to mat" behavior on cue, start working in a longer duration. Keep the mat in the kitchen or, if space is tight, just outside the door but still in view. When you have 30 seconds of duration on the mat, try asking your dog to "go to mat" the next time you prepare food in the kitchen. Say, "Yes" and give him a treat (toss the treat to your dog on the mat) every 5 seconds at first, then start to build duration.

When your dog is staying on the mat while you prepare food for 30 seconds, try leaving the room. Only leave briefly at first, return, and if your dog is still on the mat and say, "Yes" and treat. Again, build duration slowly, at a rate where your dog will succeed.

4. Try setting up a safe **"booby trap"** for your dog; you dog will learn to associate stealing food with an undesired consequence (not cruel or painful). This works best for dogs who thief from one specific place, such as your kitchen counter.
  - When you are going to be home to catch him in the act, place something really tasty (chicken or steak) on the kitchen counter. Tie some cord to the meat and at the other end tie some empty tin cans with some pebbles or coins in them. When your dog counter surfs to grab the meat he will get a startling surprise! Act quickly, say, "ah ah!!" in a firm voice and grab the meat away before your dog eats it (most dogs drop the meat when the cans come crashing down).

## Conclusion

This is a difficult behavior for your dog to learn because dogs are natural scavengers and the consequence of the behavior is so gratifying. Going through obedience training is highly recommended; this gives you and your dog a foundation and is helpful when teaching your dog additional skills.

As with all training, be patient and consistent so your dog can be successful.

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### Sources:

How to Put an End to Counter-Surfing  
By Aidan Bindoff on 12/01/2008

DogTrainingCentral.com