

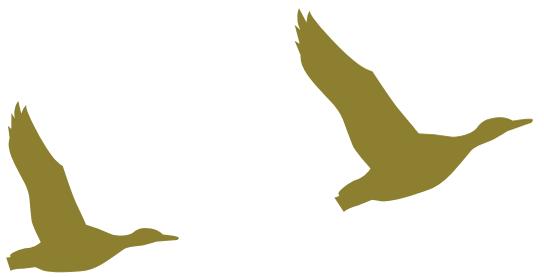


Showing their

RUFFS

Though not the first breed people think of as hunting dogs, standard poodles are respected for their good memory, perseverance and enthusiasm.

John Coelli



New York hunters discover some unusual gundog breeds

by Elaine Bloom and Colleen Kimble

The air is crisp, the sky clear. The lake sparkles blue as a trio of mallards wing above. On cue from his owner, a dog flashes through the reeds to intercept a fallen duck. It's a classic scene, except—there's something different about the dog. Is it a lab? A golden? It looks like...it can't be...

The dog emerges from the water, carrying the bird. One shake and the trademark curls spring back. Yes, it is a poodle—a black standard poodle named Jackson, owned and trained by Sally Eller of Ovid, N.Y. But who ever heard of a poodle as a hunting dog?

While Labradors and golden retrievers still dominate waterfowl hunting, breeds such as poodles and Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers are starting to show up in New York marshes and lakes. Among upland hunters, several unusual breeds are making inroads amidst the traditional ranks of pointers, springer spaniels and Brittans.

HIDE

Standard Poodle



Standard Poodle

Although many people are surprised to see a poodle retrieving a duck, hunting poodles are actually returning to their roots. The breed was developed as a duck dog by the French and Germans, the thick crinkly coat protecting it against the icy North Sea. Later, as the poodle became a nineteenth century status symbol and earned a reputation as a family companion, its origin as a hunting dog was all but forgotten.

But poodles are making a comeback. Sally Eller says that ten years ago poodles competing in hunting tests would draw odd looks, but now that's rare, although some people still refer to them as "curly labs."

In fact, "At one of the first hunt tests we went to," explained Eller, "a man stopped to say that he was pleased to see standard poodles in the field. He said that it was about time poodles got back to work."

"Standard poodles are known in the field for their ability to see and remember where a bird fell, their perseverance, and their style," says Eller. She also describes them as athletic, enthusiastic, devoted and "driven retrievers."

Jackson certainly showed those qualities when he earned his Junior Hunter title doing a difficult water retrieve when a duck fell in a pond overgrown with dense cattails. It was tough going, but Jackson persevered for many long minutes, with Eller getting more and more worried. Jackson finally found the duck, navigated back across two submerged logs, and came to heel looking, Eller reports, "very proud."

As working dogs and pets, poodles are famous for their intelligence, trainability and sociability. But, Eller warns, don't mistake them for couch potatoes or dogs content to languish in the backyard: "If you let them get bored, you can be in for trouble." In general though, Eller describes them as calm inside the house and raring to go when outside. For hunters, Eller advises looking for a reputable breeder whose dogs have been bred natural hunting instincts.

Size: Over 15 inches at the shoulder, average 22-27 inches, 45-70 pounds

Coat: Dense, coarse and curly

Color: Black, silver, brown, white, red

Grooming: Because poodles have hair—which doesn't shed—rather than fur, regular clipping is required. For hunting, a short "kennel clip" keeps burrs and weed seeds from sticking. (Note: poodle hair is low in dander and so is considered somewhat hypoallergenic.) For more information: www.poodleclubofamerica.org

American Water Spaniel

"People have guessed poodle mix, cocker mix, even labradoodle," Gerda Smith of Penn Yan, N.Y. says about her eight American water spaniels. This compact breed, of which there are only about 3,000 in existence, is small



American Water Spaniel

Susan L. Shafer

compared to most bird dogs and is covered in crisp, dark chocolate curls. Despite its size, Gerda maintains that this little-known breed "does it all"—from rabbits and grouse to ducks and geese.

"It doesn't seem possible that a small dog like this can handle a goose, but actually they can," says Gerda. "Water spaniels are very powerful dogs and have such a desire to retrieve birds that they won't give up until the bird is in their possession. If Twist, my first water spaniel, gets bit by a goose, it just brings up his desire to bring the bird back even more. At 10 years old and 42 pounds, Twist picks up geese with no problem."

Water spaniels are just as talented on upland game. Gerda says that's because they have a great nose that hasn't been meddled with by breeding for the show ring. That, in addition to her husband Bill's desire for a smaller dog to pull into the duck boat, was a big factor in choosing water spaniels.

Tenacity is built into the breed. In the mid-1800s, before waterfowl conservation laws existed, midwestern market hunters used huge, ten-foot-long "punt guns" to kill as many as 100 ducks at a time for big-city markets. The dogs they used to retrieve them had to be tough, independent and tireless.

Twist is all that and more. Besides being Gerda's "best buddy," every year Twist helps out with the Middlesex Conservation Club's Youth Pheasant Hunt. Gerda says, "He has flushed and retrieved hundreds of birds for the youth over the years."

Bringing out the best in a water spaniel takes experience and finesse. "You need to train them without a lot of pressure. If they are pushed too hard, it takes away their heart and the merry little attitude they are known for. If you make training fun, they will give you all they can."

Size: 15-18 inches at the shoulder; 25-45 pounds

Coat: Marcelled (uniform waves) or close curls

Color: Brown

Grooming: Regular brushing

For more info: www.americanwaterspanielclub.org



Irish Red & White Setter

Andrea Pokrzywinski

Irish Red & White Setter

“Bite your tongue!” Bill Farrell of Huntington, N.Y. tells fellow hunters when they ask if his Irish red and white setters are English setters or Brittanys with long tails. Bill’s eyes are twinkling, but he’s serious. “This breed has a better nose than any other dog I’ve ever hunted with. They are incredibly adapted to finding game.”

The Irish red and white setter is, not surprisingly, related to the familiar Irish setter, but much less common: only about 2,000 exist in the whole world. That scarcity did not make it easy for Bill to get one. He had to wait three years for a breeder in Ireland to send him a pair, but the wait was worth it.

“Red and whites are natural hunters and they look good doing it,” Bill says, who now hunts with Glendaloch and Ned, sons of his original pair. “They are very athletic and energetic. When I’ve had enough, they still want to go.”

Finding pheasant and quail is the speciality of this aristocratic pointing breed. “They will look under every bush and every leaf,” says Bill, and they are so thorough that other hunters will often ask to join their hunting party. Some red and whites are natural retrievers. Bill has hunted with pointers since he was in his teens, but he likes the closer hunting style of his red and whites. “These guys hunt at 100 feet. When they point a bird, you can be in shooting range within 15 seconds.”

As pets, these handsome dogs are kind, friendly and loyal, with a great memory. Bill fondly recalls visiting one of his original red and whites, who had gone to live with

his daughter in Arizona and hadn’t seen him in a year and a half. When Bill came through the door, his old companion’s eyes lit up and he did a “happy dance.” The dog spent the rest of Bill’s visit with his head pressed against Bill’s knee.

Size: 22-26 inches at the shoulder
Coat: Short and flat on body with silky, fine, longer fur called “feathers” on tail, legs, ears, flank, chest and throat

Color: White with red patches
Grooming: Regular brushing. The “Teflon” coat sheds mud as it dries.

For more info: www.irishredwhitesetterassociation.com

Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever

Ray Corey of Berkshire, N.Y. has a bumper sticker on his truck that reads “It’s A Toller.” Even so, he gets a lot of questions about his six Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers. That’s because few Americans are familiar with these medium-sized, red retrievers.

Developed in nineteenth century Canada, “tolling” dogs ran and played along the shoreline to attract ducks to the hunter. In the U.S., Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers have stirred interest only in the last two or three decades and remain relatively rare.

High-drive, active and intense is how Ray describes the breed. “You have to give a toller a job,” he says. “They need something to do.” Ray’s dogs have plenty to do; between Ray, his wife and his son, the dogs compete in hunting tests,

dog shows, and obedience and agility trials. And that's in the off-season.

During hunting season, Ray and his 12-year-old son Adam hunt pheasant, grouse, woodcock, fall turkeys, ducks and geese. On upland game, a toller works close to the hunter, its lashing tail indicating that it's on a bird's trail.

Waterfowl are the toller's specialty, and, though it is the smallest of the retrievers, the compact, powerful toller retrieves goose and duck in any conditions. Ray often hunts the cold, open waters of Cayuga Lake and appreciates the toller's smaller size when pulling the dog back into a boat.

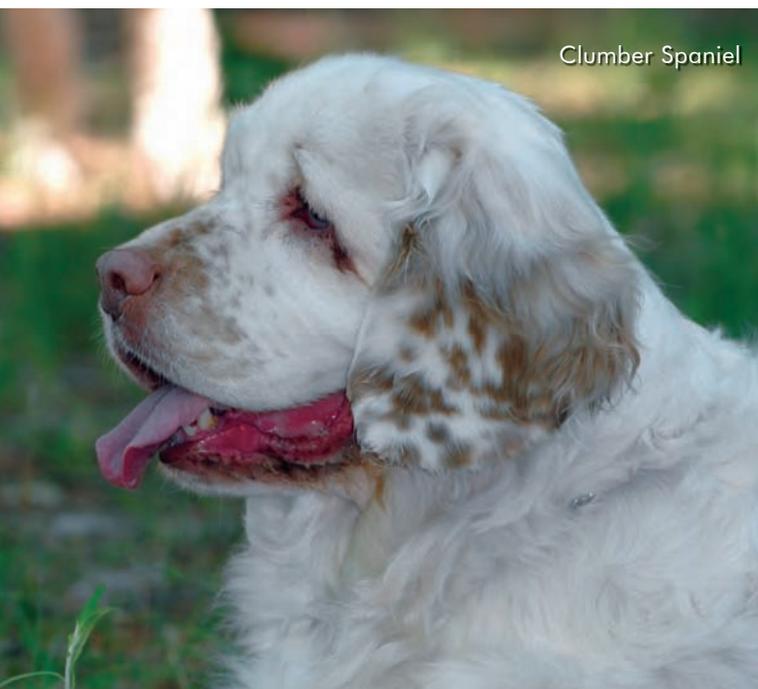
With their medium-length copper coat and feathering, many people assume that a toller is a small version of a golden retriever. Not true, toller owners warn. Although they are good family dogs, they tend to be aloof with unfamiliar people. Training and lots of exercise are musts. Tollers like to please but will fade under heavy-handed methods or repetitive drilling. Training sessions must be kept short, light, fun and challenging.

Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Facts
Size: 18-19 inches at the shoulder; 37-50 pounds
Coat: Medium-length, water-repellant double coat with moderate feathering
Color: Shades of red; sometimes with a few white markings; nose and lips flesh-colored
Grooming: Regular brushing
For more information: www.nsdtrc-usa.org

Clumber Spaniel

Short-legged but massive, with gleaming white coats, Ray and Joanne Smith's two Clumber spaniels, Woody and Sophie, are built for power and endurance, not speed. But the Smiths—native New Yorkers living in Vermont—like it that way. After years of keeping up with fast, far-ranging English setters, they have come to appreciate the benefits of the long, low-set spaniel's slower, more methodical pace.

Susan L. Shafer



Clumber Spaniel



Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever

Susan L. Shafer

Although their numbers in the U.S. are small (they rank 122nd in popularity out of AKC's 158 breeds), Clumber spaniels are esteemed for their willingness to plunge into the heaviest cover to find and flush grouse, pheasant and woodcock. The thick white coat makes the dog easy to spot and protects it from the most punishing brambles. For all their size, strength and determination, Clumber spaniels have one of the softest mouths of all bird dogs, a trait prized by hunters.

Calm, trainable and affectionate, with a noble look, the Clumber has a happy disposition and is a good family dog. Clumbers tend to be "characters," and put their own spin on everything they do. Ray and Joanne get a kick out of watching the different approaches their two dogs take to hunting. Woody bowls over and through the brush, while Sophie thinks her way around obstacles. Or as Ray puts it, Woody is the type who "likes a beer, while Sophie prefers tea."

With its heavy-set body and distinctive rolling trot, Clumber spaniels work close to the hunter and maintain a slow but steady pace all day. Hunting with a Clumber allows time to reflect, observe and simply enjoy the outdoors and the companionship of a good dog.

For Ray Smith, that's more important than speed or the number of birds in his bag. "Nothing is more beautiful than a sunny October afternoon and Woody lumbering back to me with a woodcock in his big maw and gently laying the bird in my hand without ruffling a feather...or Sophie carrying a ruffed grouse with a look of great pride in her eyes over our accomplishment and the trophy she's retrieving. When I hunt with Woody and Sophie, it makes me smile."

Size: 17-20 inches at the shoulder, 55-85 pounds
Coat: Weather-resistant, dense, straight and silky, with feathering
Color: White with lemon or orange patches
Grooming: Regular brushing and occasional trimming
For more info: www.clumbers.org



Spinone Italiano

Phil Perham

Spinone Italiano

Unlike some folks who look for a breed to match their hunting style, sometimes it's the dog who leads its owner into the sport in the first place. That was the case for Phil and Lydia Perham of Hamilton, N.Y. After seeing a large, bearded, rough-coated dog at a dog show, the Perhams became enchanted with the Spinone Italiano's happy, upbeat, easy-going temperament, which contrasted with the dog's gruff appearance.

They now have a male named Marco and a female, Piccola. Neither Phil nor Lydia had ever showed, trained or hunted with a bird dog, but now, with two Spinoni, Phil says, "That's all we do!"

An Italian breed that dates back to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, Spinoni are being "discovered" in the United States as versatile hunting dogs specializing in pointing and retrieving game from the field or water. Their close, businesslike style in the field, along with a quiet, gentle nature at home, appeals to today's hunters. Phil says that the Spinone's

even temperament makes it a good choice for someone who's never owned a dog before or for a family with children. Phil, who comments that the Spinone seems to need a "reason" to perform their tasks, recommends against using harsh methods to train this intelligent dog and instead focusing on rewarding the right behavior.

Size: 22 to 27 inches at the shoulder

Coat: Wiry, dense, hard-textured and weather-resistant; ½ to 2 ½ inches long on the body with feathers on the legs

Color: White with orange or brown marking or orange or brown roan (speckles distributed more or less evenly over a lighter background color).

Grooming: "Wash and wear"

For more info: www.spinone.com

A Contributing Editor to the *Conservationist*, **Elaine Bloom** enjoys walking in the woods with her dogs. **Colleen Kimble** is a DEC biologist as well as a dog aficionado for 13 years.