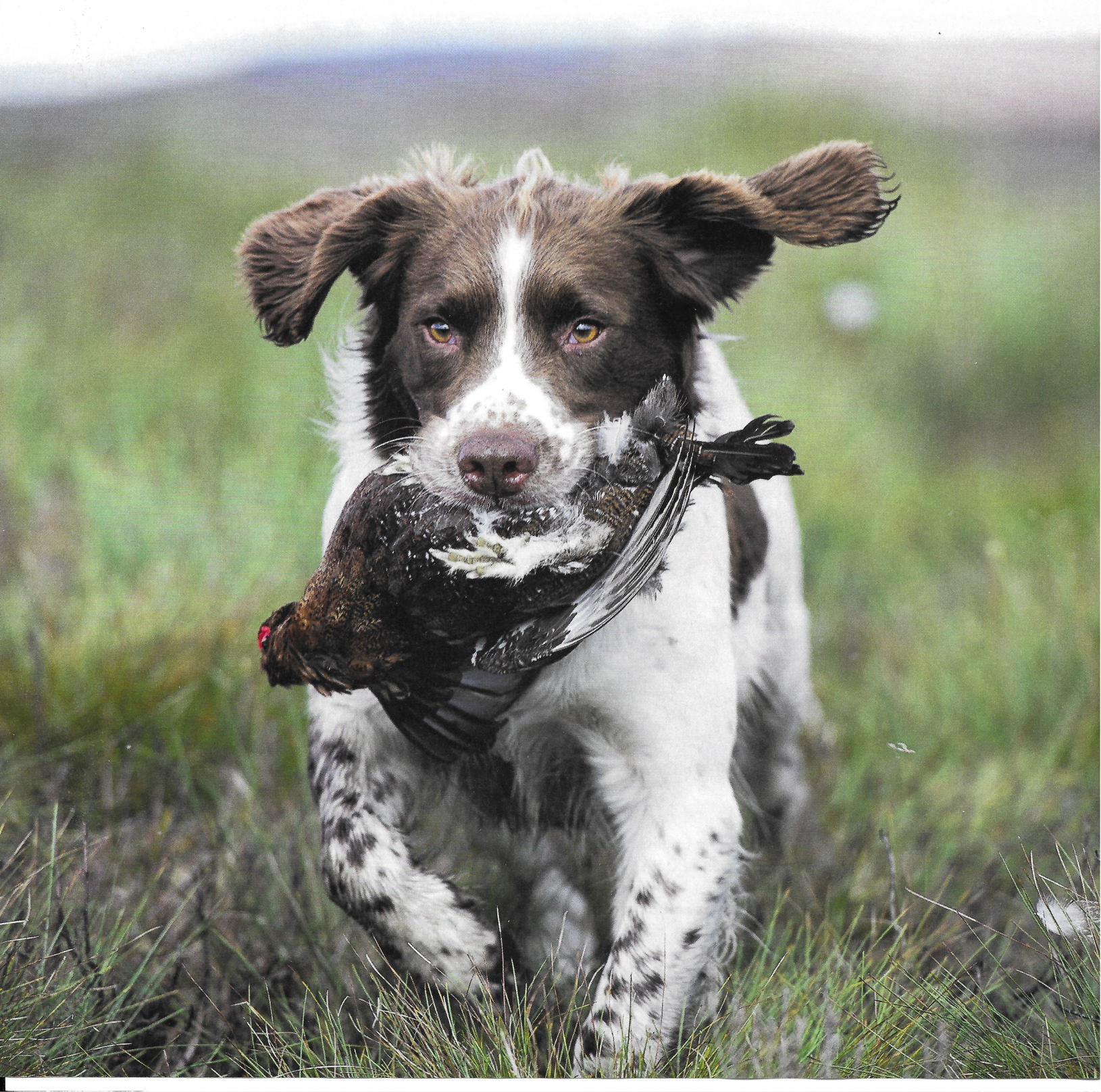


Under the spell of spaniels

Our favourite working breed comes in a variety of shapes and sizes, all of which have successfully carved out their own special niche in British sport

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THERE IS something peculiar about spaniel enthusiasts; peculiar as in distinctive, that is. Once bitten by a spaniel, figuratively speaking, we are unlikely to be satisfied by working a labrador. We like to live a little more intensely, enjoying the adrenaline high of a gundog that is a special combination of attentiveness and affection, almost puppy-like in appearance with a soft coat, domed head and liquid eyes, and a fiery approach to work in the field. There is a restless quality to spaniels that makes them always exciting.

At its best, the spaniel and the gun enjoy a remarkable relationship. When one reflects on what a spaniel contributes to that partnership, the dog's job description can seem surprisingly complex, particularly in comparison with that of the retriever breeds. The spaniel can

manage the retrieving part capably but its prime task is the hunt. In field trials, this is where 90% of its assessment is judged.

The handler decides when they will go out and where, guides the dog over the ground being worked and keeps its manners under check. All that is easy compared with the spaniel's part. The dog's pace and punch is employed to discover and capture game, forcing it to risk escape within sight and range of the gun. Then there are its retrieving skills, over land and water, without which too much of what we shoot (and fail to kill outright) would be lost.

As well as using their eyes and ears, spaniels practise a magic denied to man; the scenting power of their nose is something that we can only marvel at. They can make fine distinctions that we may not always fully appreciate. Take the example where the dog winds a rabbit (body scent), turns and enters thick cover to find it,

Left: a good spaniel is a blend of hot-blooded hunting and a cool head. Above: a Welsh springer

move it and pursue it (foot scent) until he flushes it within sight of the gun. It is then shot, but is wounded and still moving. Up to this moment, the dog has been working at a gallop but is now seated. Off it is sent, quickly. The spaniel then has to adjust his pace to pick up and follow the trail (blood scent). The sequence, maybe none of it with a view of the quarry, involves the dog in a series of instant decisions, each of them on the borderline between what is required and what is forbidden. It ends with a protesting rabbit captured and brought swiftly and firmly, but tenderly, to hand and released. The combination of hot-blooded hunting and a cool head in such changing, tempting and distracting circumstances is a wonder to behold.

What, then, is the spaniel's prime task? To hunt, be steady and retrieve. Yes, all these make up its job. But the first purpose is to give pleasure. Efficiency and productivity are important but it is style, above all, that we look for. So, what does 'style' mean? What is this quality that counts →

“ There is a restless quality to spaniels that makes them exciting ”



Above: the cocker spaniel enjoys a large and loyal following. Below: time and effort is being invested in restoring the Clumber spaniel to its former glory

for so much, especially in field trials where fine distinctions between equally excellent dogs are made? Quite simply, it is what makes working a spaniel such a delight: it is the ability to get a handler's heart racing and put a lump in a throat even when the dog is not finding the stuff it is looking for and the gun's barrels remain clean. Rough shooting over a hard-going spaniel is the finest of sport. It is about more than taking one or two head of game for the pot. It is about appreciating an ancient instinct shared between man and dog.

Fostering that elusive quality of style is the prime function of the spaniel's trainer, be they an amateur owner or a professional, a novice or an experienced handler. The objective of a fully finished spaniel may take time to develop, and can be reached with tact and guile as well as conditioning. It is not enough to aim for a dog that is perfectly obedient. The fascination of spaniel work is that it demands a much more elegant solution. The goal is for a dog with all the behaviour and control needed to work it – be it at covert side,

in the beating line, at the peg, below the tide line or when rough shooting – but with all those spaniel spirits intact, full of initiative and confidence, and capable of acting independently yet in harmony.

Spaniels of the various breeds have evolved over several centuries to occupy a particular niche in the sport available in the British Isles, where game is comparatively plentiful but needs to be actively persuaded to flush from thick woodland cover, wetlands, beet fields or upland rushes. In all these situations, thorough questing well within range of the gun is demanded; not for spaniels the wide expanses of open ground, such as heather moorland, where pointing breeds cover huge casts to find more widely separated quarry and 'hold' it until the panting gun approaches. The different spaniel breeds do the same work, albeit in their own ways, and thereby attract their own groups of supporters.

Numerically, the largest breed of working spaniel is the English springer. This is the maid-of-all-work *par excellence*. In field trials springers predominate, and the manner of their work has almost inevitably become synonymous with the requirements by which good spaniels of all kinds are judged. Although its origins go



back centuries, to a time before the gun took the place of nets or hawks to take game, the English springer breed only became fixed at the end of the Victorian era. However, within a few years springers were carrying all before them in spaniel field trials, which in the earliest years had previously seen Clumber spaniels taking the silver. The springer spaniel's ancestry is almost certainly shared with the setter – known as *epagneul* in France where these dogs were likely developed – its name distinguishing its function, which was to 'spring' or flush game as opposed to pointing it.

The cocker, or English cocker as the Americans know it, has its own large and loyal following. It is said to have acquired its name from its employment to flush woodcock. This must be unlikely at best: there are few locations with sufficient woodcock to deserve a dedicated breed. Some spaniels were also once known as 'cockflushers', readily shortened to cocker, in contrast to the springer spaniel. Cockers are smaller than springers as a rule, their work typically less flashy and flowing but equally effective. For those, including myself, who have worked, successfully trialed and bred cockers, they are characteristically dishonest but amusing and engaging.

Aside from these two principal spaniel breeds, the others are unflatteringly grouped as 'minor breeds'. This sobriquet should more accurately be 'minority breeds', for they are merely less numerous; minorities are to be cherished and diversity encouraged. Genuinely work-bred examples of Clumber spaniels, in particular, are no longer hard to find as much effort over the past 40 years or so has gone into restoring the breed to its original type: leaner, fitter and exaggeration-free. This initiative by individuals and collectively through the Working Clumber Spaniel Society has really paid off, such



Above: the curly-coated and long-legged Irish water spaniel. Below: trainers must retain the spaniel spirit

that Clumbers now represent a practical, effective, healthy third alternative spaniel, capable of taking on springers in trials and with a reputation, above all, for their nose and also for their stamina.

Their cousins are Sussex spaniels, similar in build but smaller and lower, maintained as working dogs by a handful of devoted owners with an occasional award winner in field trials for the minority breeds. They are few in the shooting field, so it is hard to generalise but their advocates claim their ability to enter thick cover on their short legs is an advantage. The breed is known to give tongue – as indeed many spaniels did in the past, and useful it was too for handlers to know when their out-of-control dogs were hot on the heels of a rabbit – but this is not accepted in trials if it turns to whining or yipping when stationary.

Turning next to Welsh springer spaniels, here is another breed with a

long history that has more or less stopped as far as work is concerned. It is some years since a Welsh springer was the one to beat in field trials for the minority breeds. One or two handlers continue to make the effort, with limited success. They are handicapped by dogs lacking real drive. Yet this is an attractive breed worthy of survival.

Field spaniels are another case in point. There was a time when fields were a common sight; in effect they are an old-fashioned and slightly larger cocker. As with Welsh springers, their adherents as working handlers are few and far between. With one or two creditable exceptions, they have failed to make an impression in competition. These are handsome dogs, reminiscent of a gentler age, and the world of spaniels is the poorer for their passing. →



“ Rough shooting over a hard-going spaniel is the finest of sport ”



Above: the handsome field spaniel. Right: Sussex spaniels can enter thick cover on their short legs

The lesson these three breeds – Sussex, Welsh springer and field spaniels – need to learn is the one Clumber spaniels have taught. It is simple enough in theory, if more difficult to enact: abandon any adherence to the Kennel Club breed standard, to the demands of the show ring or any idea of clinging to a concept of dual purpose. Dual purpose is no purpose. The world of dog shows, and breeding for success in them, is so far removed from the field that trying to bridge the gap is a lost cause. The one and only way to preserve these breeds as working spaniels is to commit to their original working type. This inevitably creates a division with the show interests. That has to be accepted. The result, as evidenced by the success Clumber spaniels have enjoyed in their revival, will be the life-giving future these breeds deserve.

Finally, we turn to Irish water spaniels. Tall, long-legged, curly-coated and rat-tailed, they are a bit of a fish out of water as land spaniels. But as someone who has judged some really good ones as hunting spaniels in working events, it was sad to see that the breed decided to relocate itself as a retriever. Big mistake. They may have struggled to be convincing as hunting spaniels, but as retrievers they have completely failed to make any impression. Brittany spaniels are spaniels in name only, being a hunt-point-retrieve breed most successfully adopted in the US where they particularly work the aspen woods of New England for ruffed grouse.

The spaniel breeds cover a multitude of different kinds of dogs and provide a rich heritage. All will work, if bred and trained for the job. And the job is one to be cherished. As for their advocates, they remain distinctive enthusiasts, as you will no doubt experience in the field this season. ■

