

GROOMING YOUR IRISH WATER SPANIEL  
BY  
THE IRISH WATER SPANIEL CLUB OF AMERICA

A happy, healthy, well groomed Irish Water Spaniel is one of the handsomest of dogs. You provide the happiness for your own special dog, your veterinarian will help you keep him healthy, and this document will tell you how to keep that beautiful double coat of his in top shape. There is nothing difficult about this if you follow a few simple steps.

You will need the following tools, which can be bought at any pet store:

- A wide tooth steel comb
- A medium steel comb
- A slicker brush
- Straight trimming-shears
- Thinning shears
- A mat separator
- A nail trimmer

Regular grooming should start when the dog is a puppy. There is little to be done at this time other than gentle brushing, nail trimming and ear cleaning. Brushing gets out the dead hair and stimulates the circulation, improving the coat. This is the time to get the pup used to being put on a grooming table (or any sturdy table with non-skid material nailed to the top). For the very young pup, use a regular hair brush with natural bristles. He will probably try to play and bite at the brush. Give him bits of biscuit to keep him busy and, by the time he swallows these tidbits, you can be finished. More important than the brushing is getting him to enjoy being groomed. These sessions should last no more than a few minutes, but should be frequent.

The older dog needs a little more work. First get a picture of a well-groomed Irish Water Spaniel. The breed pamphlet has a good outline. "The Complete Dog Book" (AKC publication) has an excellent picture.

Put your dog up on the table under a good light. Let him change position often. Let him sit down at times when you work on the head or front feet. Talk to him. Keep him happy.

Start by giving the coat a good brushing with a coarse brush. A natural bristle scrub brush removes much of the top dirt. Comb through the whole coat with the wide tooth comb. If you come across a mat, try to break it apart gently with your fingers. Comb it out. A mat is a combination of dead hair and dirt. There are several ways to get at mats which do not come out easily. You can use the mat separator, which is a wooden paddle with rows of nails. It is used as rake and will often pull the mat apart. You can also slip the lower blade of scissors through the mat and, pushing outward, force the mat apart. A little vinegar worked into it can soften a mat. Try never to cut a mat out. This leaves a hole in the coat which is hard to hide.

After you have combed and gotten rid of any mats, take the slicker brush, and holding the dog's hair down lightly, brush against the fall of the hair. Start at the back of the topknot, holding the topknot forward, flat to the head. Brush lightly toward the rear of the dog, catching a bit of the topknot with each stroke. Do the same to the ears, brushing against the fall of the hair. Get right down to the skin but be gentle. Now brush the ears straight down again. See how much longer it makes them look? This is a good trick when getting a dog ready for the show ring. Brush the topknot forward again.

Take the front legs and brush the same way. Grasp the leg at the elbow, holding the hair down lightly. Start brushing upward. Move your fingers down a bit each time as you brush the hair upward. Do the same to the hind legs. Brush the rest of the coat against the growth of the hair. The dog will look all fluffy and ragged by now.

When you are sure all the dead hair is out of the coat, you are ready to use the scissors. Hold them point down when cutting. This minimizes the danger of scissor marks.

Starting with the head, take a strand of the topknot at a time and snip a little of the end off; just enough to keep the hair out of the dog's eyes. Never cut straight across so that you get a Dutch bang effect. Try to snip off the sunburned ends, but don't spoil the shape of the topknot to do this. Blend the back of the topknot into the neck and the sides into the ears. Very little trimming is done on the topknot.

Hold each ear/up and forward so you have a clear field under and in back of the ear. Cut the hair short right under and in back of the ear. The purpose of this is to make the ear lie closer to the dog's head. Holding the scissors point down, let the ear hang down again; smooth it with your hand and then snip away any ragged hair on the upper and outer part of the ear which may be spoiling the shape. Very, very little snipping here. Do not cut the curls hanging at the lower edge unless they are particularly ragged looking, in which case, trim just enough to tidy them up without giving up any length.

To finish the face, trim the coarse whiskers off the muzzle and also any fuzz. This will give the face a cleaner look. Be careful not to touch the beard or sideburns, which are a characteristic of the breed. There is very little to do on the face, but a bit here and there can make a great difference.

Put the dog's foot flat on the table. Hold the scissors flat against the foot as if you were using it for a pattern and cut around it. Hold the leg and shake it to fluff out the hair of the foot. Hold the scissors point down and cut straight down. You are trying to make the foot look like a powder puff. You can stay a bit away from the foot so as not to make it look too small and show the nails too much, but this is the general idea. Put the foot down on the table, slant the lower blade inward and trim a bit so that the foot looks as if it were good and tight and the dog is up on his toes. The hair between the pads should be trimmed close.

After doing his feet, trim the nails. If you keep cutting the nails back regularly, the quick will recede to the point where you can get nice short nails without the danger of cutting into the quick. The dog is more comfortable when his nails are short. Long nails can ruin his feet and affect his gait. If you do accidentally nick the quick, a little cornstarch, alum or styptic powder will stop the bleeding and the dog is no worse for it. The nails should not touch the floor. If you start taking the hooked ends off the nails when the dog is a pup, you should have little trouble keeping nails the proper length.

To shape the body, trim off sunburned or frizzy ends, making the coat even. Trim flat on the sides but round out the rear. In front of the hind legs, in that hollow, trim a bit shorter. This gives the body a bit more shape. If your dog is a little heavy, take more off the sides. If a little too high in the rear (our breed has an even topline or slightly elevated) trim a little closer there. Neck a little thick? Take off more there. You get the idea? Stand back and look at your dog and then look at the picture. Go slowly; you can't glue the hair back on.

Now you have the head, feet, top and sides of the body done. Look at the legs. Stand at the side of the dog. Trim the coat on the back of the front legs so that the hair is even. Keep a full leg coat but blend it into the body. Have you a thick bunch at the elbow? Get in there with the thinning shears and take a couple of cuts. Comb. Does it look right or does it need more? One or two more cuts, then comb and look. Trim the rest of the leg.

Stand in front of the dog. Blend the chest hair into the leg. This is where your thinning shears may again be used along with the straight shears. You will probably need to trim down some on the front of the chest. This makes the dog look squarer from the side. Blend the shoulder hair into the leg coat. Is the hair ragged looking on the inside of the front legs? Snip off ragged ends but don't make your dog look wide between the front legs. Is the chest hair hanging down much between the legs? If your dog is leggy, fine, but if he is a compact dog, this might make him look dumpy. Trim off a bit right under the chest.

Look at the dog from the side. Even off the "apron," the side hair which hangs down and the underneath hair. Our breed is not supposed to have a tucked up appearance, but it makes the dog's chest look deeper if you slant the apron up slightly toward the rear. Look at your dog before cutting. Leggy? Leave the apron longer. Short? Trim it short.

Now we get to the rear of the dog. Here again, even off ragged hair. Trim the legs to look neat. Stand in back of the dog. Set him up and look to see if any hair growing at the hocks makes him look cow hocked. Trim it. He should have a nice straight look when viewed from the rear. Stand to the side. Make sure you have not lost the angulation (curve of the leg) in trimming. You may have to trim a bit just above the hock to keep this. Trim the hair on the back of the leg below the hock to give a nice clean look. Blend the rump into the upper thigh.

Most Irish Water Spaniels' tails do not need trimming but, if your dog has a very heavy coat, the tail might need a little cleaning up. Are there any long hairs below the cluster of curls at the base of the tail? Get rid of them. This breed is called the "Rat Tail Spaniel" and should look it.

This is a good time to clean the dog's ears, even though you have been doing it regularly. Take a bit of cotton with a few drops of oil and wipe the ear. Don't be afraid to get down there. You can't get to the eardrum. It makes a bend. Be gentle but keep the ears clean. Any dog with long drop ears can have problems because the air doesn't get down there. From time to time you can use any of the good preparations available for cleaning ears and killing anything that gets in them. Be sure you clean out all this solution with cotton when you use it.

Take a piece of gauze, wrap it around your finger and rub your dog's teeth. This helps keep the tartar off. If tartar has accumulated, have your vet clean it off. It can cause gum problems and bad breath.

Now you can spray the dog with water or let him swim so that his hair curls up again and doesn't look fuzzy. After he dries, check for any ragged or uneven places and correct the trimming.

As for bathing the dog, if you keep him well groomed, you will seldom need to bathe him. If he swims a lot, he does not usually need bathing, just rinse off the salt or muddy water. In the winter the snow cleans him. Of course, if you are going to a show and want him "kissing sweet", groom him first (no sense washing and drying all that extra hair), then use a good dog shampoo. Rinse well, rub with a rough towel and let him dry where it is warm. If practical, let him run around until dry. The curls are nicer. If not, after he dries, check for unevenness and correct. Never bathe him directly before a show; allow at least a week for the coat to get back its natural look. A good brushing the morning of the show, a thorough spraying with water, and walking him around until he is dry, will send him into the ring showing as much curl as possible, which is the proper way to present an Irish Water Spaniel.

With practice you will gain confidence. Don't worry if you have made a few mistakes. Hair grows fast and you'll have another chance to do better. The main thing is to enjoy this time with your dog and to have him enjoy it too.