



Rebuilt by a conservation geneticist from the remnants of Poland's lost Borderland spaniels, the Polish Hunting Spaniel has emerged as a calm, deliberate worker with a natural feel for water and a reputation for clear-headed partnership in the field

The dog moves through the reeds in an easy, unhurried rhythm, nose lifting to catch the breeze before settling back to the line. There is no waste in its stride. It holds a steady distance, checking back without breaking the sweep of its quarter. To anyone used to the fizz of a cocker, the tempo certainly seems economical, but the determination is unmistakable. When the scent strengthens, the shift is immediate: head down, body tightening, a quick look to the handler, then the flush. This thoughtful, measured style has earned the breed a nickname: the thinking spaniel.

HERITAGE AND RECONSTRUCTION

The modern Polish Hunting Spaniel descends from the spaniels kept in Poland's Eastern Borderlands during the early twentieth century. Contemporary accounts describe dogs that worked steadily in mixed terrain, and Princess Izabella Radziwiłł maintained a well-regarded kennel based on spaniels imported from England and France. Much of that population was lost during the Second World War, and by the mid-century only scattered representatives remained.

Reconstruction of the breed began in the late 1980s under Dr Andrzej Krzywiński, a conservation biologist recognised for his work on lynx and capercaillie reintroduction and for peer-reviewed research on dog/wolf hybrids. His interest in the remnants of the Borderland spaniels grew from this wider conservation practice. The foundation bitch, Pestka, combined working ability with notable maternal steadiness, raising orphaned wolf and otter litters at the Kadzidłowo Wildlife Park. Her resilience and clear-headed temperament became early anchors for the programme's direction.

Although the historical record is incomplete, the outline that emerges from Polish sources is not unfamiliar. Nineteenth-century writers such as John Henry Walsh (known as 'Stonehenge') and Rawdon Lee described British water-working spaniels as rectangular, long-legged dogs with strong feet and coats that resisted saturation. They were expected to flush and retrieve within the same outing and to work riverside cover with controlled, deliberate movement. Those spaniels disappeared as British breeds later divided into separate show and working forms, but

the functional shape and manner recorded in these older texts sit close to what has re-emerged in Poland.

In practice, the PSM (Polski Spaniel Mysliwski) aligns more closely with this earlier, general-purpose spaniel type than with the modern cocker or springer spaniel. It reflects the adaptable, all-round working spaniel that existed before British breeds were formally split.

The resemblance helps clarify the Polish Hunting Spaniel's place within the spaniel family. In the modern British shooting scene, spaniels often work within clearly defined roles: high-tempo cockers and springers drive the beating line, while steadier retrievers handle the picking-up. In Poland, the working culture developed differently. Shoots are smaller, ground is mixed, and the handler typically works with a single dog expected to search, flush, retrieve and recover wounded game in the same day. The reconstruction followed that practical logic. Versatility was not a stylistic choice but part of the job description, and the type that re-emerged reflects an all-round spaniel profile that predates modern role-splitting. The Polish Kennel Club granted provisional recognition in 2016, FCI recognition followed in several jurisdictions, and the population continues to expand across northern and central Europe.

From the outset, the Polish spaniel community aimed to prevent the early divergence between show and working lines that characterises many established gundog breeds in Britain. Hunters show their own dogs, and the same individuals often hold championship titles and work throughout the season. Because the conformation and working clubs operate in parallel and share oversight, the points rewarded in the ring still reflect the structure required for practical work. The working side follows the same principle: Poland maintains a utility class for dogs that have earned a working certificate, and many leading conformation winners also hold these field qualifications. The expectation that breeding dogs demonstrate both structural soundness and functional ability has kept the population on a single, consistent track.

FORM THAT SERVES FUNCTION

The type that has settled is a medium spaniel with a rectangular outline and a little more leg than is typical in ➡

Photograph: Doreen Hasenfuß

BREED PROFILE



Photograph: Oliwia Przybyła

familiar British breeds. The proportion gives reach in dense cover, stability on broken ground and an easy, energy-efficient action across long days. The height of limb and depth of chest create a balanced centre of gravity, reflected in a level, economical trot with very little wasted motion. The stride tends to be flatter and more ground-covering than the springier action seen in many modern spaniels, resembling the relaxed, horizontal economy found in longer-legged gundogs.

The coat contributes significantly to working efficiency. It is straight or lightly wavy with a dense underlayer that behaves more like a practical water-working coat than the heavier furnishings common in many spaniels today. Water runs off readily, and the undercoat often stays dry

even after repeated entries. Dogs dry quickly without much assistance, remain warm in cold water and carry less moisture through the day.

Feathering is moderate and rarely mats, debris sheds easily as the coat dries, and routine grooming is minimal. Colours reflect the reconstructed foundation stock: chocolate-based patterns with roaning or patches, typically with a white tail tip. These features are functional rather than decorative and match the terrain and work for which the breed was rebuilt.

The combination of build and coat gives the Polish Hunting Spaniel stamina, temperature resilience and natural ease in water, and these traits have remained consistent as the population has grown. ➡

BREED PROFILE

FIELDWORK: LAND, WATER, AND TRACKING

In the field, the Polish Hunting Spaniel works with a deliberate, rhythmic tempo that suits varied European ground. Its quartering pattern is wide and steady, covering the land in a controlled sweep rather than the fast, high-tempo style often associated with modern cockers. The dog stays within effective range, adjusts naturally to wind and vegetation and maintains quiet contact with the handler.

Scenting behaviour is a defining trait. Many dogs begin with air scent, using upper currents to pick up fresh game before dropping to ground scent when the line strengthens. This ability to switch modes gives accuracy on difficult days and helps locate birds that have moved from their original resting point. The flush is controlled rather than dramatic, and most dogs remain attentive immediately after the lift, allowing for a clean shot and a prompt retrieve.

The breed is well suited to pheasant, partridge and wood pigeon, and many individuals work rabbit willingly. Their level action helps them manage long outings across mixed terrain. When runners are involved, persistence becomes clear: many dogs will follow a wounded bird across considerable distance, holding the line with steady concentration until the retrieve is made. This quality has made the breed valuable on shoots where wounded game must be recovered across fields, orchards or woodland edges.

Water work is a particular strength. Most dogs show a natural interest in water from an early age, entering calmly and with purpose rather than excess animation. At the post they remain composed, react cleanly to the shot and commit to the fall without hesitation. Their coat supports this: dogs shed water quickly, stay warm even after repeated entries and work confidently through dense vegetation, holding the line even when briefly out of sight. Delivery is typically soft and controlled.

These traits combine into a picture of a spaniel that is versatile, co-operative and efficient. The PSM does not waste motion or work at a pace that burns energy for display; it offers a thoughtful, controlled approach suited to mixed European terrain and long days where steadiness matters.

TEMPERAMENT AND HANDLING

The temperament reflects the working style. The Polish Hunting Spaniel is calm and thoughtful, drawing confidence from a close bond with its handler. The cooperation it offers is relational rather than reflexive: the dog works through communication rather than automatic repetition. Its best work comes from a settled, enduring partnership, and it does not readily transfer to a new



Photograph: Sylwia Witasik



Photograph: Przemysław Pawlik

handler who has not built that connection. Sociability follows the same pattern. With their own people, the dogs are warm and attentive. With strangers they may be reserved, especially when young, although true sharpness is rare. The steadiness that serves them in the field makes them reliable at home with familiar children when early interactions are managed well.

Training progresses smoothly when structure is clear. The breed is sensitive to tone, responds well to quiet handling and tends to work best when given time to think as well as act. They enjoy food and praise but are motivated primarily by the task and the relationship. Their problem-solving tendency and measured pace are not signs of reluctance; they reflect the same thoughtful style seen in the field.

A feature that traces back to the early foundation stock is the breed’s gentle maternal nature. Bitches generally raise litters with composure, and some have demonstrated the same steadiness when caring for orphaned wildlife. This contributes to predictable early rearing and stable starts for young working dogs.

At home, the breed is straightforward to live with. Once its exercise and mental work are met, the off-switch is clear, and most dogs settle calmly. The combination of field composure and domestic ease suits households that value a working dog able to rest between outings.

LIVING WITH THE BREED AND VERSATILITY

Although developed for the field, the breed adapts naturally to other structured work. Its concentration, scent discrimination and methodical problem-solving have made it increasingly visible in mantrailing, utility tracking and detection roles. Several individuals now serve in police detection work in Poland, and others work in human-identification teams in Switzerland, Italy and Finland. The same scenting ability gives potential for conservation-style work, where steady pace and careful indication are more valuable than speed.

Retrieving aptitude makes the breed a natural candidate for dummy training on land and water, and its controlled gait suits sports that reward accuracy and balance. Handlers who compete in agility, rally obedience or nosework often find that the dog’s best work emerges from thoughtful, structured sessions rather than from mechanical drilling. The steadiness that defines its fieldwork also underpins its growing use in therapeutic contexts.

Most dogs fit readily into active households provided they have purposeful outlets for their energy. The breed does not require a shooting home, although owners who enjoy structured activity – whether scent work, retrieving practice or hill and forest walking – will find that its work ethic gives them many ways to develop that potential.

BREED PROFILE

HEALTH AND STEWARDSHIP

The population that has grown from the original foundation stock has been managed with notable structure. A doctoral study from Warsaw University of Life Sciences examined hereditary conditions seen in other spaniels and found very low incidence in the developing Polish population. Breeders maintain a low average coefficient of inbreeding, and the breed club uses an AI-supported database to track pedigrees, diversity and health results. The aim has been to expand the population while preserving the type and temperament established during reconstruction.

Reproductive indicators are consistently strong. Most bitches come into season at six or seven months and maintain regular cycles throughout life. In population genetics this pattern is viewed as a sign of endocrine stability in a developing breed.

Litter sizes commonly range from six to eight puppies, and larger litters still occur, signalling reproductive

vigour and helping avoid early bottlenecks. Breeding stock in Poland is evaluated before use: dogs must either qualify through dog shows with high grades or pass an independent conformation assessment to receive approval, a requirement applied to both sexes. This framework has kept the population consistent in type and prevented early divergence between show and working lines.

Outcrosses are used sparingly and under club oversight, guided by the database to maintain diversity without compromising working reliability.

As the breed spreads beyond Poland, field entries are increasing across the Nordic countries and central Europe, and active groups exist in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States. The combination of organised breed oversight, transparent health practice and a growing number of dogs being worked under different conditions provides a stable foundation for the breed’s future.

Breed profile: Polish Hunting Spaniel

Country of origin: Poland

Purpose: Flushing dog for birds and small game; capable retriever and competent tracker; strong water worker.

Size: Males 43–48 cm; females 39–44 cm at the withers. Medium build; rectangular outline; moderate bone; slightly longer body in bitches consistent with the standard.

Appearance: Compact, medium-sized spaniel with enough leg to move easily through dense cover and tall grasses. Rectangular proportions (9:10–12), well-defined withers, straight back, deep chest and long ribcage. Ears set at or just above eye level with moderate fringes. Tail of medium length, often carrying a white tip.

Coat: Straight or lightly wavy, soft, weather-resistant and supported by a functional undercoat. Moderate

feathering on ears, legs, belly and tail. Designed to shed water and cope with fields, rushes, bogs and cold lakes.

Colours: Chocolate roan with patches (most common); black roan occurs; white-based patterns with brown/black patches and slight roaning typical; tan points appear occasionally. Always brown nose in chocolate dogs; characteristic white tail tip.

Temperament: Balanced, self-possessed and courageous at work. Intelligent, steady and easy to train with consistent handling. Attached to its handler; reserved with strangers without true aggression. Reliable with familiar children.

Field style: Free, flexible trot with good joint use; long but economical stride; minimal lift. Works low to the ground with agility, sudden changes of

direction, and controlled jumps when needed. In scenting, may crouch or crawl before flushing on command. Designed to work ‘unnoticed’ in thick cover, with stamina for difficult terrain and water.

Other work: Retrieving on land and water; tracking wounded game; adaptable to practical tasks requiring scent discrimination and persistence.

At home: Quiet, companionable spaniel with stable disposition; suited to active households that provide structure and interaction.

Health and breeding: Poland requires breeding dogs to meet conformation criteria (champion title or independent assessment). Breed population overseen by clubs to maintain type and working ability. Screening for hips, elbows, heart, eyes and genetic conditions recommended.

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