

SPLASHING OUT

Many dogs love a good soaking, while others avoid even the smallest puddle. How can we encourage reluctant paddlers to take the plunge?

Words: Aileen Scoular

Swimming offers many health benefits, as well as being good fun. It is a non-weight-bearing exercise, so it allows dogs to strengthen muscles without putting pressure on joints that may be swollen or sore. The natural density of water also gives your pet's muscles something to work against, so even a few minutes' swimming can be remarkably beneficial.

Before you let your dog dive in, though, it's worth considering whether he is physically able to swim. Breeds including the Irish Water Spaniel, the Portuguese Water Dog and the Labrador are all natural swimmers – in fact, you'll probably struggle to keep them out of the water. But some breeds find it difficult to keep afloat, however much they might fancy a dip, and it is useful to understand why.

Sink or swim?

Brachycephalic dogs are breeds with a short muzzle or flat, wide facial features – think of the Pug, King Charles Spaniel and Pekinese. These dogs find it tricky to float, simply because they have to tilt their heads far back to keep their noses and mouths above the water. As the head tilts back, it pushes the rest of the body downwards into a sinking position. Breeds with particularly large or disproportionately heavy heads (such as Bulldogs) may also struggle to stay afloat but, this

time, it's because the head tips forward, which affects the dog's buoyancy and ability to breathe. Dogs with very short legs, such as Dachshunds and Basset Hounds, also find it hard to swim because they simply can't create enough thrust or paddle hard enough.

If there's no physical reason why your dog can't swim, it may simply be because he has never been given the chance, or because he associates the water with discomfort or danger. Happily, there are lots of ways you can encourage your dog to take the plunge – especially if your pet is still a puppy, and keen to learn new skills.

Hanne Grice, a dog trainer and animal behaviourist, has written a book called *Playing With Your Dog*, which includes some simple but effective tips on water confidence. The first is to bring in an older dog that is known to be a safe and competent swimmer. 'Young dogs are often happy to follow older ones and may copy what they do,' says Hanne, 'but always be aware that even the most water-loving dog can tire or panic.'

Another way to help your dog enjoy the water is to get in alongside him. 'Support his body until he starts swimming alone,' advises Hanne. 'And have a friend or family member close by in the water, to encourage him to swim over to them. And always use plenty of praise and reward.'

If you don't have a safe, shallow pond nearby, Hanne suggests a large paddling pool. 'Let your dog experiment to understand that playing in water is fun,' she says. 'Toss some treats or a toy ►

TOSS SOME TREATS OR A TOY IN THE WATER AND ENCOURAGE HIM TO POP HIS PAW OR HEAD IN TO RETRIEVE THEM



in the water and encourage him to pop his paw or head in to retrieve them. Once he gets the idea, you can try games such as bobbing for balls, and see how many your pet can collect.’

If your dog is happy to swim or paddle in shallow water, always remember to check the surface below for rocks or debris before you throw in toys or treats, and choose your water-fetch toys carefully. They should be large enough that they can’t be swallowed by mistake, and small enough that they don’t hamper your pet as he swims.

Safety outdoors

So, where can your pet safely take the plunge? For dog-lovers in Barcelona, the answer is the Resort Canino Can Janè – an amazing pooch-friendly water park near the Spanish city that boasts a large shallow swimming pool, water slides and super-tough inflatables. In the UK, though, your pet is more likely to swim at the beach or in a local lake or river. He may also take a dip in a neighbour’s pool or a garden pond when you’re not looking, so it’s really important to think about safety.

‘Always err on the side of caution,’ says Hanne Grice. ‘If your dog has a natural affinity for water, or an adventurous temperament, keep him on a lead near open water. We don’t always know what’s in there – river cruisers and canal boats release oil and chemicals. And at certain times of the year, poisonous blue-green algae may appear in freshwater lakes, streams and ponds. Work on your dog’s obedience – keeping him safe around water will require good recall, along with a bombproof “stay” command.’

SOGGY MOGGIES

Contrary to popular opinion, some cat breeds love water – and they hail from all over the world. From the US comes the large, fluffy-haired Maine Coone. Running water is a source of endless fascination for this breed, and some Maine Coons

have even learned how to turn on a tap. Closer to home, the Isle of Man’s tail-less Manx cat is often described as being ‘dog-like’ and this extends to a love of a regular dip. Bobtails love water, too: Japanese and American Bobtails will play happily

When it comes to the sea, you need to be aware of the strength of the currents – check tide times before you go to the beach, pay attention to the safety warnings, and never let your dog swim if you wouldn’t or if you’re at all unsure of the current. The sea isn’t the best place to start off a dog who’s not used to the water, so it might be better to stick to a brief paddle in the surf – and bear in mind that waves can tire out even experienced, confident swimmers, so keep sessions short. If swimming or surfing at the beach with your dog is a big part of your life, you might want to consider using a life vest for him.

Away from the sea, it’s best to avoid canals and rivers with very steep or straight sides as dogs can find it tricky to climb out.

Also, keep an eye on how much your pet drinks while swimming – too much salty seawater can cause dehydration, so always take plenty of fresh water along for your dog to drink after a dip. And be aware that swimming in very cold water can cause muscle cramp.

Finally, hose down or wash your dog after swimming to get rid of sand, salt and water-borne chemicals. For a guide to bathing salty or sandy paws, turn to page 61. And always dry your pet thoroughly, paying special attention to his ears to prevent the risk of infection. Happy swimming! ●

with a dripping tap. Heading east, Bengal cats love playing in the bath and shower, as do Turkish Angoras. The elegant Abyssinian is endlessly curious about water – particularly if it moves – and the Turkish Van is actually known as

the ‘swimming cat’. Finally, the Norwegian Forest Cat has a thick, water-resistant coat and is an accomplished fisher, while the Savannah from Africa may even join his owners in the shower!