



Please don't let us be misunderstood

Fenton, the deer-chasing YouTube sensation, confirmed some of the worst prejudices about flatcoat retrievers, but this is actually one of the most endearing breeds of dog you could own, argues Charlotte Reather

Photographs by Charles Sainsbury-Plaice



WITH their elegant features, fluffy ears and loving eyes, flatcoats are arguably the most pulchritudinous of retrievers. Their air-scenting skills and soft mouths make them excellent gun-dogs, a job they were bred especially to do. However, their beauty and ability in the field are rivalled by one other attribute—namely, their sense of humour. It's this mischievous streak that compels flatcoats to sometimes veer off-*piste* and land themselves in a whole world of trouble.

No one knows this better than reluctant internet sensation Max Findlay, who burst onto our screens legging it across Richmond Park in pursuit of his errant flatcoat, Fenton. 'Oh, Jesus Christ,' he shouts in disbelief as his dog causes a herd of red deer to stampede across a busy road. How we laughed. How we felt his pain.

My husband introduced me to flatcoats in the form of Minta, the love of his life. His 11-year-old black 'flat-bag' and my labrador, Bandit, bonded instantly, but Bandit and I often found ourselves exchanging puzzled glances at her eccentric behaviour—in particular, the singing. Minta's favourite toy is a plastic caricature of Margaret Thatcher. She squeaks it repeatedly with her paw until, like an amateur mezzo-soprano on opening night in Burnley, she's ready to sing. She throws her head back and howls dramatically with a glance at her audience. How flatcoats love an audience.

To find out if other flatcoat owners have 'special' dogs, I go along to the Flatcoated Retriever Society (FRS) Open Field Trial at Whatton House, north Leicestershire. Twelve flatcoats have been entered, a mix of dogs and bitches, with the winner gaining a B qualification towards the retriever championships. The beaters drive the birds through a line of eight guns, which, ostensibly, is a normal shoot. Roz Bellamy, wife of the field-trial secretary and steward of the line, outlines the rules. 'The flatcoats have to sit still quietly. They mustn't be off their bottoms for a second. No whines, yawns or contact with the dog by the handler is allowed. If a bird is a "runner", a dog is instructed by the judges to pick it up immediately. If a bird hits the floor and is dead, it's left until the end of the drive.'

Within 15 minutes, two flatcoats have 'run in' past the line of guns. They are instantly disqualified.

'A champion flatcoat was once in line for three hours and didn't move. They can be utterly brilliant or can go "self-employed" very easily. But they have a beguiling joy that makes you forgive them anything,' Mrs Bellamy says. She has no shortage of anecdotes about flatcoats running off, jumping in water or bogs and other japes. 'The most embarrassing story during a field trial was when a gentleman's golden retriever nipped off back to the farmyard and brought back a squealing piglet.' Everyone laughs, relieved that, this time, it wasn't a flatcoat.

‘Their beauty and ability in the field are rivalled by one other attribute—their sense of humour,’

Mike Bird, a flatcoat owner for many years, is assisting in the beating line. He explains: 'Because they're such stylish dogs, some people, including gamekeepers, underestimate them in the field. Mine's known as the "show dog". When I'm picking up, the beaters shout "do you want a wheelbarrow so she don't get 'er feet dirty?," but, nine times out of 10, flatcoats will show them how good they are. When it comes to picking-up, all good keepers know that when the flatcoat owner says there are no more birds, there are no more birds.'

According to the FRS, the breed is apparently a mixture of lesser Newfoundland or labrador, and the larger spaniels and setters. One variety, known as the wavy-coated retriever, became very popular, and was the start of the modern-day flatcoat. It's likely that collie blood was



Outstanding in his field

One of the most famous flatcoats, Ch High Legh Blarney, born in 1902, was bred and owned by Mr Reginald H. Cooke. Mr Cooke was once offered 200 guineas for Blarney, a sum unheard of for a sporting dog. The son of Black Quilt—a great Champion himself, and also owned by Mr Cooke—Blarney became a Champion at a very early age, and was subsequently painted in oil (*right*) by the celebrated canine artist Maud Earl. He then appeared in *Hutchinson's Dog Encyclopedia* in 1935 as a perfect example of the breed. Mr Cooke, a prolific field trial and show exhibitor, owned Riverside Kennels, near Nantwich, in Cheshire, and bred more than 10 Dual Champion flatcoats. He kept a fascinating collection of journals about his findings, experiences and anecdotes with the breed. An abridged version of these, *The History of Retrievers: Compiled from the Scrapbooks of H. Reginald Cooke*, was recently published by Judi Seall, and is available to buy for £12 (from www.amazon.co.uk/shops/top_draw_books).





introduced in the 1890s to produce the flatter coats we see today. 'After the Second World War,' adds Mrs Bellamy, 'the breed was greatly reduced in numbers. When the FRS was founded by Dr Nancy Laughton in 1948, there were fewer than 80 registered at the Kennel Club. She restarted the breed, and most flatcoats around the world are from UK stock.'

Simon Howard, castellan of Castle Howard, has been at the forefront of helping the breed to flourish, having owned seven. Devoted to flatcoats, he is patron of the Northern England

Flatcoated Retriever Association (NEFRA), and now has Ella, bred in 2010 by Suzy Wolstenholme in Wiltshire. 'When I got my first flatcoat, Isabella, I fell in love with them. It's their beauty, loving nature and ability as gun dogs that hooked me. I trained Ella myself. She isn't great yet, and is rather more glamorous than useful, but she's still very young. She's selectively deaf—although my wife says the same thing about me!

'Bassey was my best dog [named after Shirley Bassey, who played at Castle Howard the night she was

Above Flatcoats en masse at Castle Howard, home of breed devotee Simon Howard (centre). Preceding pages Striking a pose beside the lake, proving that flatcoats can behave impeccably

born],' he continues. 'However, when I first took her to the in-laws, she disgraced herself. They'd all heard about this wonderful dog and how well-behaved she was. We were sitting down for lunch. The starter was supposed to be lobster mousse. Unfortunately, Bassey had somehow got in the kitchen, so there was no mousse. It didn't go down too well as an opening gambit! Ella's now looking more and more like Bassey. She loves lying on her back looking half-dead, legs in the air, everything on display. She's great fun. We have >

two miniature dachshunds she picks up in her mouth and drags around. It's terribly funny. I really don't think there's a downside to owning a flatcoat.'

‘My flatcoat sits on a dining-room chair beside me as if he's been invited to dinner’

Sadly, there is one: canine cancer, a disease that's sometimes associated with the breed. 'In my opinion, there's no more cancer in flatcoats than other breeds,' argues Jenny Bird, secretary of the FRS. 'Plus, we have an ongoing tumour survey at the Department of Veterinary Medicine, Cambridge University, as we like to keep a close eye on the breed. We're ahead of the pack in this. If a lump is found on a flatcoat, the FRS advises that, should your vet recommend the removal of a tumour, the tissue be sent to Cambridge University for examination. The survey has benefited the flatcoats and other breeds enormously. We're very keen to help the breed be as healthy as possible.'

Finn, a four-year-old liver flatcoat owned by barrister Peter Glenser, appears in rude health. 'He's extremely intelligent,' comments Mr Glenser. 'If he's not getting enough attention,



he does things such as sitting on a dining-room chair beside me as if he's been invited to dinner or carrying our neighbour's chickens around alive in his mouth.

'The most embarrassing incident was on a rainy Norfolk beach. Walking with my wife, Finn spotted something in the distance and was off. He raced towards what turned out to be a father with a child in a push-chair. Finn yanked the child's toy rabbit from its arms and flaunted it on the edge of a rough sea. The child was screaming and it took two burly fishermen to help distract Finn before a very wet bunny was deposited in the sand, just missing a crashing

Above Purdey (back) and Sorrel take the plunge in the Castle Howard lake

Right Finn the liver flatcoat does what he was bred to do

Below The author and her husband, with Bandit (left) and flatcoat Minta (right)



wave. Father and child recovered, but my wife's embarrassment took a long time to fade.

'He's the closest thing to me—bar my wife and daughter, of course,' Mr Glenser adds. 'And, as far as my wife is concerned, although she would profess to be glad to see the back of him some days, I know that if the house burnt down, he might be the one she would go back and save.'

In spite of the carnage they cause—knocking over toddlers, going AWOL, clearing coffee tables with one excitable wag—I doubt there's an owner who wouldn't say that their flatcoat was their best and most cherished friend. 🐾