

Grooming a Briard

The beautiful yet rugged Briard requires a dedicated owner to maintain the appropriate grooming regimen.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. Could you please tell me if Briards need to be groomed and if they shed?

A. Briards may look like big shaggy teddy bears but through the centuries, they have been bred to work, guard and herd flocks of sheep, and distinguish themselves on the battlefields of their native France during both World Wars where they acted as messengers, pulled carts, searched for wounded soldiers and guarded the encampment perimeters. Honored as the official dog of the French army, many of these noble canine heroes became casualties of war.

Also known as the Chien Berger de Brie, the Briard traces its origins all the way back to the eighth century. Early tapestries portray the shaggy dogs with the Emperor Charlemagne, and Napoleon also kept Briards. The Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson were also early fanciers who helped bring the breed to America.

Its appearance is rustic and rugged, the way it should be. Ideally, the coat should not be trimmed and any sign of altering its appearance with clippers or scissors would be frowned upon in the show ring.

The Briard's double coat provided protection in mountainous climates and harsh terrain. The outer layer is coarse and shiny, falling in waves over its lithe body, while the undercoat is fine and plush – the dog's own thermal underwear. Virtually waterproof, if brushed and combed properly – all the way out from the skin at least once a week – dirt and debris will brush out easily so this dog won't need frequent baths.

A well-maintained Briard coat can grow to five inches in length. Yes, it does shed, dropping undercoat profusely in spring and fall, and if not brushed sufficiently, it will form mats. Plan on two to three hours work a week to keep its coat in good shape. Like any other dog, if a Briard gets so matted that its coat becomes a solid pelt, it would need to be shaved down.

Most Briards I have seen are tawny in color but they also come in black and gray. This dog's look is distinctive, long hair cascading down from its upright ears, the face framed by a heavy beard and a forelock that veils its eyes. In the dog grooming shop, we may artfully thin this adornment so it won't interfere with the dog's vision. We also thin or trim its sanitary area under the tail and clipper the hair between its footpads, rounding the feet with scissors but never letting the toes show. Unlike most breeds, the AKC standard calls for double dewclaws on its back legs, thought to give it greater ability to pivot quickly as it herded its charges.

Because this breed still retains its instinct to guard and protect, owners need to establish their leadership early on and make sure their Briard puppy is well socialized and accustomed to lots of brushing and combing. These dogs are not shaggy couch potatoes. They are highly intelligent and independent; as sheepdogs, they were relied upon to make decisions and they still like to do that. They have boundless energy and need lots of time to run and play. So while this spirited dog is handsome and admirable, it is not for everyone. Expect to be thoroughly screened by a reputable breeder before you can take one home. I commend you on doing your homework before bringing any dog breed into your family circle.