

Hand-Stripping a Dog's Coat

Especially in hot summer months, hand-stripping a dog's coat is an essential part of grooming certain dog breeds.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I have a Cairn Terrier who seems to get very hot in the summer months. I wondered if, in addition to clipping her hair, there is a way to thin out her coat? Is that what hand-stripping does?

A. Back in its ancestral Scottish homeland, this tough little terrier needed the protection of its hard wiry coat when it hunted for varmints in the rock piles for which it was named. Since it is a double-coated dog breed, the thorough and systematic removal of its thick downy undercoat with a curved-bristle wire slicker brush is effective in thinning it out to let the air circulate and keep it cooler. Although many of my clients choose to have their pet Cairns clipped short on the back with legs, chest and underskirt trimmed short with scissors in the warm weather. Those who wish to preserve the breed's protective body armor opt for hand-stripping. Over time, using clippers on the coat will soften it and lighten its color.

Hand-stripping is the process of plucking the outer guard hairs once the coat is "blown" – the top coat is pulled out using fingers or a stripping knife. Don't panic – it sounds worse than it is! The knife is not used to cut but only to pull the hair out, held between the thumb and forefinger. When it's ready, that dead coat is easily removed. Using a gentle touch, the groomer maintains a steady rhythm and works the coat a few hairs at a time, keeping the wrist locked and pulling in the direction in which the coat grows. Sometimes chalk or rosin powder is used to help the groomer maintain a firmer grip.

When a terrier coat is overgrown, it usually needs to be stripped right down to the undercoat layer, leaving the dog looking somewhat naked until its new outer coat grows in. If hand-stripped at regular intervals, the groomer can "roll" the coat so that only the longest top hair is pulled out while the new coat is coming in underneath, avoiding that "plucked chicken" look.

Whether clipped or hand-stripped, the Cairn Terrier coat can also be "carded" with a pumice stone, fine clipper blade, or a special tool known as the FURminator, pulling the coat in the direction the hair grows, thinning and de-fuzzing it in the process.

Hand-stripping preserves the natural look of the Cairn. Its head should look tousled but subtly rounded, the top third of its pointed ears clipped close. Thinning shears are also used to thin out the coat, trim the face-framing "ruff" and remove stray hairs near the eyes.

Once a terrier coat has been clipped, it may soften to the point where hand-stripping is no longer an option. Whichever grooming method you choose, be sure to keep your feisty little friend well-brushed at home to prevent mats and tangles from taking over between trips to the groomer.