



Above: A rough-coated lurcher which is a blend of collie, greyhound, deerhound and Bedlington terrier. Right: A rare combination — Doberman × deerhound. Below: A tiger brindle, greyhound × deerhound.



For a thousand years in Britain the humbler hunters have had their own dog, taking pride in its performance rather than in its pure-breeding. Yet it is purpose-bred in the pursuit of hunting excellence just as shrewdly as any fox-hound, setter or spaniel. Forever associated with gypsies, poachers and country characters, the lowly lurcher has survived the campaigns of rural police forces, gamekeepers and land-owners.

Nowadays the lurcher-fancier is classless; regimental ties and cavalry-twill trousers featured at the Lambourn lurcher show just as much as moleskin, denim and mufflers.

The Lambourn show will take place this year at Newbury racecourse on 2 September. The phenomenal rise in lurcher shows in Britain in the last 20 years (there are more than 100 in 1984) has indicated the awareness of interest in these extraordinary hunting dogs of mixed heritage. But it has also brought a tendency to breed a type that will win at shows rather than a 'chase, catch and kill' champion.

But what is a lurcher? Looking around at lurcher shows it is soon apparent that the event would be better labelled 'any variety, sporting dog', for the height, weight, coat and colour is essentially anything but uniform. A



Rise of the lowly lurcher

From poacher's dog to a showman's special

lurcher must be a cross-bred dog—fast enough to catch a hare, crafty enough not to get caught doing so, silent at all times and able to endure the cold and wet, as well as withstand an encounter with barbed wire.

Purists would say it really must be a collie cross greyhound to be truly a lurcher but deerhound, whippet, saluki, Bedlington terrier and Staffordshire bull terrier blood have all been used over the years to instil gameness, a more protective coat or more stamina.

It is common to find the less diligent researchers linking the 'tumbler', quaintly described by a number of sixteenth-century writers, with the lurcher. Correspondents contributing to country sports' magazines on the subject of lurchers often sign themselves 'tumbler'. But the tumbler was the decoy dog, a very different animal.

Dr Caius, for all his learning,

knew little about dogs and yet has over the years become much quoted as an authority. Yet even he mentioned the 'Theivische dog or stealer, that is a poaching dog'. His extraordinary description of the 'tumbler' is an exaggerated description of the antics of a decoy dog. I know of no lurcher which hunts by dissembling friendship and pretending favour.

The decoy dog lives on today in the Nova Scotia duck tolling dog and the kooikerhondje of Holland, one luring the inquisitive ducks to within range of the hunters' rifles, the other enticing them along ever-narrowing little waterways until they are netted. We have lost such as the 'ginger coy dog' of East Anglia, referred to by writers such as the late James Wentworth Day. But whereas the red decoy dog is perpetuated in distinct breeds, the lurcher was and ever shall be a nondescript dog.