

SWIMMING: A PRIMER FOR WEIMS

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This is a silly topic because Weimaraners are natural swimmers, right? Well...not exactly.

Many a Weim owner has delightedly packed off their new puppy to the beach or lake, tossed a ball, and expectantly waited for their little genius to leap fearlessly into the deep. More likely what happens is your pup trots out into water up to their chest—and stops. Perhaps stares expectantly at their ball, paws at the water, or barks with frustration a few times before turning around and returning to you. For a new Weim owner, this may be your first real reminder that Weims are not Labs. Same size, same basic shape, and yes they are both sporting dogs—but the similarities really stop there.

Depending on your puppy, this swimming dilemma could be a quick-fix or could take a lifetime of work. Most people agree that swimming in Weimaraners has a largely genetic component, although we don't really understand how it is inherited. If your breeder socialized your puppy to water from an early age you may have an edge—but you may not. One thing seems to hold true: your chances of getting a puppy that swims early and easily are increased if the parents of your puppy swam early and easily. All is not lost if you've already brought Junior home and he's a non-swimmer...almost all Weims do swim as they mature as long as they are properly socialized to water as young dogs. So keep trying, and make swimming fun for your dog!



Over the years we have had many puppies, both natural swimmers and those very adamant about keeping their feet firmly rooted in the sand. We have owned slappers, paddlers, and sinkers as well as dogs that effortlessly swam high in the water from a very young age. Each dog is an individual and we have learned lots of tricks and invented some of our own that work with different dogs.

If you are lucky enough to start your puppy swimming very young, it's important that you imprint the sensation of water under their legs. You can do this by holding them securely and allowing them to paddle their legs. This obviously should only be done if the water is warm! A sandy beach with a gradual drop-off is the perfect place to get started. The younger the puppy, the better, but even older puppies can benefit from this exercise. Alternate supporting all of your pup's weight and letting him do it while you cradle his chest and belly. Once the dog gets the hang of it and can relax while you hold him, turn towards the shore and let him paddle a bit on his own.

Instinct tells him to go towards the shore, and he will. Do this a couple of times, being careful to read whether it's scaring your dog. Many dogs really get upset about water getting in their ears at this point,

so watch for lots of head shaking at this stage. They do get used to it, but often dogs who “don’t like to swim” as youngsters really they just don’t like getting their ears wet!

After your pup is swimming well and can swim about ten feet into the shore, up the ante a bit. Wade into the water and tease him with a really cool toy. See if he’ll swim out to you. The natural swimmers will do it, but most Weims won’t. If he does, praise him like he’s the best pup in the world (which of course he is!) and move on to something else for a while before trying it again. Don’t overdo it, don’t force it, and praise like crazy!

The next step is getting your pup to be comfortable going into the water without you. We use cheeseballs, or popcorn if we can’t find them. Cheeseballs seem to work best because they float and take a long time to dissolve in the water in case your pup takes a long time deciding to swim. We’ve never met a Weim who didn’t like cheeseballs but if you have one, you can try using anything that floats and is edible and visible in the water. Toss a cheeseball just far enough out to where your pup has to really reach to grab it. Then toss a few more past that point. If there is a current, you may have to play with the distance a bit because your dog will learn quickly that he just has to stand and wait for his prize to float in. Why work when he doesn’t have to? Once he is going for the cheeseballs, you can build on his momentum and toss them in rapid sequence to keep him going after them. Sometimes you can even trick him into swimming.

Depending on your Weim and how he operates, you can either offer encouragement or keep your mouth shut while he works this out. Always praise a lot once he’s swimming!

Once your dog seems reasonably comfortable in the water, it’s time to start training him to retrieve from the water. This is assuming that your dog has a solid retrieve. If not—that’s a whole ‘nother article.

If your dog has a special toy that they love to retrieve, try tossing that in. You may have to start the sequence over again to get him comfortable in the water. If that works-great! If not, we have some other ideas that may get your pup retrieving:

- Hard salami zip tied or rubber-banded to a bumper
- Bird wings zip tied to a bumper
- Bumper on a string so you can make it move (adds visual interest and also allows you to “reel it in”)
- Soft bumper with bird scent on it (bird scent is available at many sporting goods stores)
- Frozen bird, either thawed or frozen



- Live bird, with one wing taped down, allowed to flap to add interest
- Dead freshly killed bird
- Squeaky toy, teasing dog and having a helper hold the dog's collar to build drive
- Tie your dog up, make him watch another dog play fetch for a while to build interest
- Cross a pond and "leave him behind" if he doesn't follow
- Life vest

Remember that once you have your dog swimming reliably in one place, you may need to start this process over in another place. Dogs don't generalize well and just because they can swim well at a sandy beach doesn't mean that they will eagerly go into a mucky pond the first time they see one. We've found that the hotter the day, the more successful we are, and this is a great thing to do on those steamy summer days.

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About Meredith

Meredith currently lives in southwestern VA and is an avid hunter and outdoorswoman and also enjoys field trialing and any kind of trouble she and her Weims can get into. When not outside or working at her "real job," she can be found reading, researching, and mentoring--her other passions. She breeds occasionally under the name [Southpaw Weimaraners](http://www.southpawweimaraners.com). (<http://www.southpawweimaraners.com>)