

## Spinning the Dog

The exuberance of short, fine hairs  
by Els Van Dam

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My daughter Peggy sent me a copy of the article "Putting on the Dog: A Special Twist for the Sweater Set" by Clare Innes in the Fall 2004 issue of The Bark. Just as the Interweave Press publications are aimed at a group of creative and inventive people so is The Bark, a relatively new dog magazine published in California aimed at dog owners who want their puppies and dogs well trained and socialized. Peggy, who writes a column for the publication, sent the article to be because I had just finished pinning the very short hair of her friend's black Lab. Atlas had long passed on to dog heaven, but his owner, Jane, had kept his brushed hair. Peggy told her to send it to me, and maybe I could spin and knit a hat for her as a memento of Atlas.

When I first looked at these short Lab hairs, my heart sank, but I was willing to give it a try since I am game for most fiber adventures, I had just purchased a black alpaca fleece from a local alpaca grower. Alpaca, I decided, would be a good fiber to use as a blend for the short dog hair. I cut this very soft long fiber to the same staple length as the dog hair and started to blend it fifty-fifty on handcards.

Dog hair was everywhere. I did not give up and made the batts into punis to keep some control of the flyaway Atlas hairs. But other projects crowded in and Atlas spinning was put aside. I found it was not that hard to put off since it was certainly not the easiest of fibers to spin. Atlas had settled in with the black alpaca and was totally at ease with all the other animal fibers lurking in my weaving room. Off and on I would get a whiff of a strong dog smell, a gentle reminder that a job waited for me, but as in real life, Atlas was patient and willing to wait for the right time.

That time arrived when my daughter came to visit for a weekend. I set her to blending and carding the batts, while I did the spinning. As we watched the deer come by in the meadow, we caught up on the latest family news. The spirit of Atlas instantly came out from under the loom and kept watch with us. We even thought we heard him barking softly at the deer grazing next door.

By the time Peggy left for Toronto, we had prepared enough yarn for a hat - a lovely jet black skein, with extra twist to keep control of a very frisky Atlas. He now seemed to be everywhere, chasing his own tail, and at times I could just catch the tip of it disappearing around the corner of my loom, or an eye would peer at me from between the spokes of my big wool wheel. And when I mopped and vacuumed, Atlas was there, tripping on the hardwood stairs on his way down. At times, I'm sure I heard a soft bark. I took the well-washed skein downstairs and started to knit the watchman's hat out of *Vogue Knitting's* hat book<sup>1</sup> while watching television in the evening. Atlas was ever present: I pictured him jumping on the couch and keeping an eye on the knitting. The hat was lovely when finished. I had spun a little brown Lab from his sister Yara and blended it with a bit of brown alpaca. There was just enough for two or three rows of fancy knitting on the border of the hat. It was obvious that Atlas would approve.

Just pulling the hat over your ears and head would create a cloud of Atlas's hair. Oh yes, I did apply that extra twist to make Atlas stay with the alpaca, but as in life, this dog had a mind of his own. The hat will definitely be a conversation piece, but I wonder if it will ever be worn.

Posthaste, I mailed it to Toronto. In November, when Peggy and her husband visit Jane in Portland, Oregon, for Thanksgiving, she will give Jane her pal Atlas back in the form of a hat.

Atlas will jump out of the giftwrapping and will certainly greet Jane with lots of vim and vigor. It was fun to share Atlas as a guest in my weaving room for a while, although I am not so sure about spinning fine or short dog hair again. But who knows - when another daughter or friend requests a "spinning of the dog" - it may be another adventure all over again.

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Els Van Dam, of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, says she will think twice before she spins dog hair again - maybe.

<sup>1</sup> Trisha Malcom, editor, *Vogue Knitting: Caps & Hats* (Vogue Knitting On The Go). New Your: Sterling Publishing, 1999.