

The Australian Shepherd

A general Information guide

Compiled by the

National Australian Shepherd Association

Buying a puppy of any breed should be a ten to fifteen year commitment - so is the Aussie the Breed for you?

It is the aim of our Association to help you make an educated decision before making any commitment to owning an Aussie so that you can experience all the enjoyment possible with your Australian Shepherd if this is to be the right breed for you. So often people fall in love with a cute little puppy for all the wrong reasons and end up with a lot of heartache. Knowing as much as possible about a chosen breed makes good sense - then you will be sure it is the kind of dog you want to live with. We hope this information will help you to make the right choice for you, your family and your dog.

Breed History and Development

This is a condensed and somewhat oversimplified account of the origins of the Australian Shepherd and further reading is of course recommended but for those who are encountering this breed for the first time, it is intended that a general impression of the Aussie can be formed that will enable newcomers to better understand what the Aussie is all about.

Although the name suggests that this is an Australian breed, the Australian Shepherd, as we know it, is American based. There are several areas of thought relating to their early development. Some believe that Aussies evolved from a mixture of several herding breeds that were introduced into the USA from Europe in the 16th

and 17th centuries by early settlers. These breeds could well have included Smithfields (a natural bob tail), the Old Welsh Bobtail and possibly German Coolies. Another school of thought is that the breed arrived in California via Australia during the Gold Rush period. It is believed that during the latter part of the 19th. century, Basque shepherds (from France and Spain) emigrated to Australia to find work, taking their "little blue dogs" with them. Certainly, the Californian Gold Rush created a ready market for Australian sheep which were imported into America in huge numbers along with their shepherds and their dogs. Many Australian Shepherd historians hold the firm belief that the present day Aussie is a direct descendant of these Basque shepherds' dogs. Those courageous dogs not only guarded the sheep against predators such as wolves and thieves but were instrumental in keeping the huge flocks together. They were hardy individuals, toughened by the harsh environment in which they lived and worked. The same type as the ones who had preceded them, those dogs closely resembled the present-day Australian Shepherd. They have continued to breed true to type.

In America today, the Aussie is a traditional ranch dog in much the same way as the Border Collie is the main farm dog over here. The two breeds should not however be considered similar as they differ in structure, mentality and working style.

The Present Day Aussie

The Australian Shepherd has been developed as a farm and ranch dog in America, not only to work livestock but to be a companion and guardian of the family and the family's possessions. As a working dog they are authoritative and are used extensively across America to work both cattle and sheep. A unique trait of the Aussie is his devotion to his master and family. This trait makes him a dog

who is equally happy working livestock all day or simply being with his owner and family and taking part in their activities. Because the Aussie is a breed developed to work, they are highly intelligent. Early day Aussies were often depended upon to guard the children whilst both parents were out in the fields. Valuable equipment and livestock were safe when the family Aussie was around. Aussies have long been popular with small farmers who need a dog to help them but don't have enough work to keep their dog busy full time. Since most Aussies are content to be companions when there is no livestock around, they can do well living in the home environment. Few of us here in the British Isles have the need of an Aussie to work stock but that fundamental element of their heritage and development should never be disregarded or overlooked by owners, breeders or judges alike.

Most Aussies are friendly with everyone but the Australian Shepherd generally tends to be reserved and cautious with strangers. Aussies tend to form a very strong bond with their owners and family - more so than many other breeds. This trait causes some dogs to become protective against what they perceive to be a threat. Remember that dogs of any breed may become aggressive if they are poorly socialized and the Aussie is of no exception to that rule. You should be aware of his territorial instincts and that he may be naturally possessive and protective of his owners and home. Because these dogs were developed to work and control livestock, their intelligence and energy needs to be channeled elsewhere if they are not worked to stock on a daily basis. Obedience, Agility and Working Trials are highly recommended and the Aussie will easily learn and thoroughly enjoy these various disciplines through well-structured training programmes. When raised with children, Aussies love youngsters and quickly become a great playmate. Aussies don't

need a farm to exercise on but they do need daily exercise and attention. Most Aussies love to play ball or Frisbee and most of them adore water and swimming.

If you are looking for a dog with an intense desire to please and who is loyal to you and your family, an Aussie will make you a wonderful companion as well as a great working partner. You and your environment will greatly determine the dog you end up with.

Buying a Puppy!

One of the best ways to locate breeders is through our Association's Puppy Registrar. He or she will be able to put you in touch with breeders who have puppies currently available or who have litters planned. N.A.S.A. does not have a list of 'Recommended Breeders' but as an Association, we strive to encourage breeders to only breed from healthy, eye tested and hip scored dogs which are as free as possible from genetic defects and undesirable temperaments. It is the responsibility of the purchaser of a puppy to check out a breeder and gain as much information as possible about the parentage of any prospective puppy.

We do have incidences of hereditary cataracts within the breed and therefore clear and current (within the last 12 months) eye certificates should be readily available not only for both the sire and dam of a prospective litter but also for the grandparents (and even beyond) wherever possible. All litters should also be puppy eye tested by the breeder at 6 weeks of age.

A DNA test for the HSF4 Cataract mutation (one type of cataract) has recently been developed for the Aussie by the Animal Health Trust, UK.

Most breeders are now also DNA testing for CEA & PRA through Optigen (USA)

Another DNA test now available is the drug sensitivity test for the MDR1 gene.

Another DNA test now available is for colobombine malabsorption (B12 deficiency)

Likewise, although the mean average hip-score in the breed is only 10, in order to maintain improve this, all breeding stock should be x-rayed and hip-scored and the results taken into consideration prior to breeding. Copies of all the relevant certificates should be made available to prospective owners upon request.

Elbow scoring is becoming more commonplace and can be carried out at the same time as hip-scoring. Be wary of any breeder who cannot readily produce copies of these certificates. Why buy a puppy that cannot be certified reasonably free of at least some known hereditary defects!.

A good breeder should not rush to sell you a puppy but should check out your suitability and home environment beforehand and likewise, you should not object to this vetting process. You should also be offered a comprehensive sale agreement. Puppies should be guaranteed against genetic defects - certainly within the first six months of life. Ask the breeder why the litter was bred. The object of breeding should be to improve the breed as a whole and not just to make a few pounds. Ask the breeder why they chose to use a particular sire on their bitch. Inquire about traits that you feel are important i.e. temperament. You should ask lots of questions and get satisfactory answers. Most breeders when registering puppies with The Kennel Club will have them endorsed 'progeny not eligible for registration'. Don't be put off by this as it is probably a good breeder taking precautions should genetic problems later appear or be suspected in a bloodline. The conditions of lifting an endorsement should however, be made clear in the Contract of Sale.

Ask for a pedigree of a puppy. This should preferably include five generations. Ask for the names of other people who have purchased

dogs from the breeder and talk to these and other owners who have bought siblings or close relatives. It is strongly advisable to have a good look at both the sire and dam of a litter whenever possible and satisfy yourself that their temperament, condition and general appearance is what you are looking for. If a breeder promotes a litter as 'top show quality' then beware, top show dogs are few and far between and a knowledgeable breeder will not usually sell an outstanding individual or they're best potential breeding stock.

Puppies should not be sold under seven weeks of age. Breeders should always supply an information sheet covering diet, exercise, training, vaccinations, worming etc. and be prepared to follow up and give support to new owners.

Breeders should be prepared to take back dogs they have bred and re-home them should the owner not wish to keep a dog or a change in their circumstances gives no option.

The price should be consistent with the quality of the puppy. Raising a litter of quality, healthy Aussie puppies takes time, commitment and expense. Stud fees, registration fees, feed, worming and advertising can add up to a significant amount. The initial investment you make in purchasing a puppy is relatively small when compared with the investments both financially and emotionally that you will be making over the next 10 to 15 years.

Docking

The Australian Shepherd can be a natural bob-tail. Some bloodlines regularly produce more natural bob-tails than others.

Male or Female?

The choice of whether to buy a male or female is often just one of personal preference. However, there are some points that you should be aware of. Females are

usually smaller with the preferred size between 18" and 21" at the shoulder while males will stand between 20" and 23".

Females will come into season approximately every six months and must be confined for three weeks during that time.

Males tend to wander, especially if there are females in season in the neighborhood. Spaying or neutering should be discussed with both the breeder and your own veterinary surgeon but should be seriously considered if future breeding is not intended. Spaying can also prevent some serious health problems such as pyometra in bitches.

Facts regarding Colour

The four main colours of the Australian Shepherd are Black, Red, Blue Merle and Red Merle ALL can be WITH or WITHOUT White trim and/or Copper points.

Occasionally a dog appearing to be solid black or solid red can genetically be a merle. One or two flecks or lighter merling on an otherwise solid dog will make him genetically a merle. These dogs will produce like any other merle and are often referred to as 'phantom merles'.

Ideal merling on a blue merle should be patches of all black. Diluted patches will show up as grey, rust or brown and are not desirable.

Ideal merling on a red merle should be dark chocolate or liver patches and all should be of the same shade.

Diluted patches appear lighter (sorrel) and are also not desirable.

Copper point's range from pale cream to dark tan. Ideally they appear as 'shepherds' spots above the eyes, on the sides of the muzzle, on the legs and under the tail. Copper trim extending into the body or onto the head is referred to as 'running copper' and is not desirable.

All black and blue-merle dogs should have black noses, eye rims and lips.

All red and red-merle dogs should have liver noses, eye rims and lips. Reds NEVER have any black hairs.

Blue and/or part blue eyes are totally acceptable in ALL coat colours.

Blue eyes and blue flecks in dark eyes occur fairly often in merles but are not reliably predictable in a given litter. One eye colour is not preferable over another.

The term 'Tri' refers to a black or red dog with copper points *and* white trim.

The term 'Bi' commonly refers to a black or red dog with white trim (no copper) A black or red dog with copper points (no white) can also be referred to as a 'Bi'

There is no such term as 'blue tri' or 'blue bi'. 'Tri' and 'Bi' are only used when referring to solid coloured (not merle) dogs.

Pet, Show or Working Quality

What is a pet quality puppy? This is a puppy that is healthy with a good personality but may lack certain desirable qualities when compared with the Breed Standard. The Breed Standard, for the Australian Shepherd is a description of the ideal specimen of the breed - a 'blue print' in other words. Very few individuals ever meet these high ideals.

Often the imperfections of a pet puppy are minimal and are things that a person looking for a pet would hardly ever notice - a pet puppy however, should not have any health or temperament problems. Some typical faults that may cause a breeder to consider a happy, healthy puppy as pet quality are teeth imperfections (the breed standard calls for a full compliment of teeth which meet in a scissors bite), colour that is not rich and clear, faults of top lines,

excessive white, incorrect ear sets, pink nose spots etc.

You should advise the breeder of your own expectations of a puppy. A show quality puppy should come as close as possible to the breed standard, however, no-one can guarantee just what a puppy will grow up to look like. A knowledgeable breeder can usually see potential and should be honest with you in evaluating their puppies.

If you are looking for a stock dog then it is extremely important that both parents and grandparents are working stock dogs. If at all possible, see the dogs work or at least see a video of the dogs working. No one can look at a puppy and be able to see the inherited ability to work stock and the instinct can soon be lost by breeding individuals who may not have the intense instinct required of a working dog.

Would you consider giving a home to a Rescue Aussie?

Unfortunately, and for all sorts of reasons, Aussies find their way into our Rescue Kennels. This is often because a family's situation has changed perhaps through bereavement, divorce, separation, change in financial circumstances or sometimes an owner just cannot cope with a boisterous, lively Aussie.

All Aussies coming into N.A.S.A. Rescue are assessed regarding their temperament and general condition and are only made available for placements following a detailed assessment of both the individual Aussie and the prospective new home. All our Rescue dogs are spayed/neutered or this is made a condition when transferring to a new owner. A donation is encouraged to assist in covering some of Rescue's costs. Most Rescue Aussies make excellent family pets and readily settle down in a new home. Aussie Rescue is not intended to operate as a refuge for 'breeders' who can't sell puppies.

So you want to breed from your bitch!

When you begin as a breeder of any animal, whether it is dogs, horses, cattle etc. it is essential to find out everything you possibly can about the breed you have chosen. You should then carefully consider what goals you are striving to achieve in a breeding program - it does not matter whether you are planning a large breeding programme, have just one pair of dogs or only one female you plan to breed to someone else's stud dog.

One of the biggest mistakes and the most damaging to the immediate and long term welfare of any breed is to breed dogs just to make money from selling puppies with no regard as to whether the sire and dam complement each other or are *both* of breeding quality.

If you have chosen the Australian Shepherd to breed and decided to embark on a litter, your decision deserves a lot of thought. You should be making a long term commitment to the improvement of the breed as a whole rather than short term possible financial gain. Good homes for your puppies should be found *before* any mating takes place and you must allow for prospective owners to change their minds when they see your litter. 12 puppies in a litter are not unknown. Breeders can often be left with unsold puppies who soon take up a lot of space. You should speak to as many established breeders as possible and familiarize yourself with the Breed Standard, the reasoning behind the formation of the standard, health problems within the breed and certain lines, desirable and non desirable traits And colour genetics (in particular 'merle to merle' implications). N.A.S.A. has Health Advisors on hand and help and advise is always available - you only have to ask !

Hereditary Defects of the Australian Shepherd

The Australian Shepherd is generally a healthy breed compared with many others but it is not without hereditary problems. These are the main problems that can arise - more detailed information is available - again, you only have to ask !

Hip Dysplasia (HD)
Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRA)
Collie Eye Anomaly (CEA)
Iris Coloboma
Hereditary Cataracts
Epilepsy
Monorchidism
Missing Teeth/Dentition Faults
Merle-Whites
Pattern Whites
Some temperament faults.

This list should not alarm you unnecessarily but these defects are present because past breeders have not taken sufficient care when selecting breeding stock. Likewise, none of these defects will diminish or disappear by chance. Only by breeders making themselves aware of the bloodlines and/or individuals where defects occur and by avoiding those lines or individuals in their breeding programs, will any progress be made in eradicating any of the above faults.

The Australian Shepherd Club of America describes the Aussie thus -

'The Australian Shepherd is an intelligent and primarily working dog of strong herding and guarding instincts. He is an exceptional companion. He is versatile and easily trained, performing his assigned tasks with great style and enthusiasm. He is reserved with strangers but should not exhibit shyness. Although an aggressive, authoritative worker, viciousness towards people or animals is intolerable.'

This says it all. If this dog fits your lifestyle - then an Aussie could be the dog for you!

This information has been collated by N.A.S.A. with grateful thanks in the main part to the Australian Shepherd Club of America, Inc. Established in 1957. ASCA is the Original Parent Club of the Australian Shepherd and holds the largest Single-Breed Dog Registry in North America. A.S.C.A. and N.A.S.A. are dedicated to preserving the Standard of Excellence of the Australian Shepherd.

Useful Contacts

Hon Sec Sandra Harrison
The N.A.S.A. Web-site
www.
australianshepherdnasa.com
Australian Shepherd Club of America (A.S.C.A.) web-site
www.asca.org
United States Australian Shepherd Association
(U.S.A.S.A.) Web-site
www.australianshepherds.org/

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National Australian Shepherd Association

The
National Australian Shepherd Association
and
NASA Aussie Rescue
are recognized by and registered with
The Kennel Club

Recommended Reading - all these publications can be obtained through NASA

"ALL ABOUT AUSSIES"
The complete Handbook on Australian Shepherds
by
Jeanne Joy Hartnagle-Taylor

“JUDGING THE AUSTRALIAN
SHEPHERD”

by
Sandra Cornwell

“THE STRUCTURE AND
MOVEMENT OF THE
AUSTRALIAN SHEPHERD IN
DRAWINGS”

by
Victoria Mistretta

“THE AUSTRALIAN SHEPHERD
CHAMPION OF VERSATILITY”

by
Liz Palika

“THE N.A.S.A. JUDGING PACK”
- a guide for Judges compiled by
N.A.S.A.

The National Australian Shepherd Association regularly holds breed seminars, judging seminars, stock dog training, agility, obedience and working trials training days throughout the year together with social events and health seminars and 'heel work to music' training days. We also run Open & Limited Shows - Breed, Obedience working trials etc.

N.A.S.A. members receive quarterly editions of 'Roundup' - a magazine covering all aspects of the Aussie in the UK. A Copy of the annual Year book, a great history record for the breed.

This Association works alongside the Animal Health Trust by actively supporting their DNA Research Program.

N.A.S.A. Instigated the Australian Shepherd Breed Survey - a valuable tool for conscientious breeders.

N.A.S.A. Rescue has successfully re-homed several Aussies during the past few years.

The N.A.S.A. Breed Stand has won the 'Best Breed Stand Award' at the National Working & Pastoral Breeds Championship Show' in 1997, 1998, 1999 & 2000.

Also the best Breed stand, Pastoral group at Crufts 2003 at our first attempt!