

Meet the Breed: The Rhodesian Ridgeback

The African plains set the stage for this big-game hunter, loyal guardian, and lure-courser.

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In his 1875 memoirs, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, Dr. David Livingstone published one of the earliest engravings of a ridge-backed dog. He would have been ahead of his time to ask if it was a Rhodesian Ridgeback, however. The dogs he saw were still a somewhat motley band of dogs kept by the native Hottentot tribes, known more for their fierce courage than for the occasional, peculiar ridge of reversed hair along their backs. But times were changing for these dogs.

That same year, missionary Charles Helm traveled to Rhodesia, bringing two dogs from his home in South Africa. These dogs were descendants of Hottentot dogs that had been crossed back in the 16th and 17th centuries with the European breeds that Dutch and German immigrants had brought to Africa. The native Hottentot dogs were hardy, fierce, half-wild dogs, able to withstand the rigors of enormous temperature fluctuations and water deprivation. The settlers wanted a more tractable dog that would retain the Hottentot hardiness but could also guard the farm, protect the family, and hunt a variety of animals from birds to big game. Crosses with Great Danes, Mastiffs, Greyhounds, Bloodhounds and other breeds resulted in such a dog, many of which coincidentally sported the Hottentot ridge.

Once in Rhodesia, Helm met a big-game hunter, Cornelius von Rooyen, who borrowed the two dogs to take hunting. The dogs outperformed any other dogs von Rooyen had hunted big game with, and he undertook to breed a pack of them, a project he continued for the next 35 years. Along the way he set the ridge and red coloring as breed traits. He introduced other big-game hunters to the dogs, which became known as Rhodesian Ridgebacks.

The dogs skillfully found, chased, and held big game – including lions – at bay. The Ridgeback is the only breed that can keep a lion at bay and survive. In other parts of the world, Ridgebacks have since been used to hunt bear, wild boar, mountain lion, deer and raccoon, and even to point and retrieve birds.

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