

Meet the Breed: The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog

Switzerland's largest Sennenhund works, guards, and wedges his way into your family.

Stephanie Horan

This is not a tricolored lap dog," warns Lori Price of Washington, D.C., currently 1st vice-president of the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America and a longtime owner of Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs. Known to enthusiasts as Swissies, these big, good-looking dogs with the symmetrical markings of black, tan and white have been described as just plain nice dogs. However, any potential owner seeing them as the ideal family pet should be prepared for their size, power, and strong working heritage.

A native of Switzerland, where it is known as the Grosser Schweizer Sennenhund, the breed is one of the four Sennenhund (mountain dog) breeds – the others being the Bernese Mountain Dog, the Entelbucher, and the Appenzeller. The Swissy is the largest of the four and is believed to have descended from the large mastiff-type dogs brought into the Alpine area by the ancient Romans, who also moved into southern Germany where the Rottweiler was eventually developed. All five breeds were used for similar purposes: driving cattle, herding flocks, and guarding the farm and family. They were also used by farmers to pull wagons loaded with produce to the local market. By the 19th century both farmers and tradesmen were using these powerful dogs, many of which were tricolored, while the two combinations of red-and-white and black-and-tan were also common. Red-and-white Swissies were seen at one time but were thought to be the result of crossbreeding with the Saint Bernard, as the Swissy was almost certainly used in the development of that breed. By 1900 the numbers of all these mountain dogs were rapidly diminishing, as many of their traditional jobs were gradually being taken over by mechanization.

By the end of the 19th century it was believed that the Swissy had disappeared. Then in 1908, at a commemorative dog show celebrating 25 years of the Swiss Kennel Club (SKC), a dog was exhibited by Franz Schertenleib, a Bernese Mountain Dog breeder. He had seen and bought the dog as an oddity and called him a short-haired Bernese. Dr. Albert Heim, an acknowledged expert on the Swiss breeds, was the Bernese judge at the show and insisted that this was a separate breed from the Bernese and encouraged fanciers to embrace and promote it. Schertenleib began to search for other representatives to begin a breeding program, and the following year the breed was listed in the SKC Stud Book.

The first Swissy came to America when J. Frederick and Patricia Hoffman saw them in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1967, and with the help of Perrin G. Rademacher, they imported a dog the following year. The first litter was whelped in 1970. Fanciers formed the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America in 1968, and the AKC accepted them for full registration and competition in 1995. The breed is still relatively rare in its homeland, as well as in the United States.

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