

The New Guinea Singing Dog

This rare breed serenades its listeners with an eerie, canine cantata.

Alice Bixler

Listen to New Guinea Singing Dogs sing!
Sound clip courtesy of New Guinea Singing Dog Conservation Society

An eerie, other-worldly, spine-chilling song is the prime feature that sets the New Guinea Singing Dog apart from all other canids. It's an alien melody that has been sung for more than 6,000 years.

The Singing Dog is truly a living, breathing, four-legged fossil that has inhabited the island of New Guinea since the Stone Age. The island remained isolated from the rest of the world for thousands of years, while its native people enjoyed the companionship of the clever, fox-like Singing Dogs.

It wasn't until 1957 that the first Singing Dogs left New Guinea. Three years earlier, the Curator of Mammals for the Australian Museum arrived on the island and began collecting native mammals, among them a pair of NGSDs brought down from the highlands. Unfortunately, the gentleman was unaware of the breed's escape-artist attributes and penchant for poultry. The dogs escaped from captivity and wreaked havoc on the government's chicken population. They were quickly handed off in disgrace to some natives.

In 1956, another pair was captured in the highlands and sent to Sir Edward Hallstrom, who was studying native animals at a center in the western highlands. Hallstrom observed them and then, in 1957, passed them on to the Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney, Australia. There, the curator – the same gentleman who had endured the embarrassment of the chicken massacre in 1954 – determined the Singing Dogs to be a separate species and labeled them "Canis hallstromi." Later, researchers concluded the dogs weren't deserving of separate-species status and should be referenced as "Canis familiaris hallstromi."

At the zoo, the female of the pair delivered an historic litter – historic because the majority of NGSDs in the world today descended from it. In fact, the entire captive population of Singing Dogs harks back to just eight that were caught in the wild. There are still some living free in the New Guinea highlands, but they've proven to be too elusive (and too expensive) to capture.

Introduction to the United States

The NGSDs were not adverse to breeding in captivity, and the Taronga Park Zoo was quite willing to send offspring to other zoos.

Consequently, the first Singing Dog to reach the U.S. was a female sent to the San Diego Zoo in 1958. Later, she was joined by a male from Sydney. Pups produced by these two Australian imports found their way to other U.S. zoos.

The United Kennel Club started accepting the breed for registration in January 1996. The New Guinea Singing Dog Conservation Society is a non-profit organization which promotes conservation of the breed both in the wild and in captivity and donates funds for non-invasive research.

Appearance

Fox-like in appearance, the NGSD is rectangular in outline, being a bit longer than tall. The height ranges from 13 to 16.5 inches at the withers, and weight varies from 17 to 25 lbs. The short, dense, plush double coat is red to sable in color with white markings on the collar, throat, chest, stomach, paws, tail tip and facial blaze.

The Singing Dog sports a wedge-shaped head devoid of wrinkles and topped with wide-set, erect ears which move to catch the slightest sounds. There's a demonic sparkle to the small, dark, triangular eyes. Those eyes possess a mysterious quality. In low light, they glow a luminous, eerie green. Behind those lips, large and strong teeth meet in a scissors or level bite.

Therein lies another unique feature of the breed: The upper first molar, or carnassial tooth, is unusually large – a trait generally found only in wild canids such as the wolf. On the move, the Singing Dog flows with a graceful, catlike agility.

Temperament

Only a few generations removed from the wild, the NGSD still retains a high prey drive and the devious intelligence which makes escaping from any enclosure a challenge that's hard to resist. Adept at both digging and climbing, they're apt to find a way out of a pen unless it's secured top and bottom – and then some. Think of Houdini with four legs.

The Singing Dog is sensitive, gentle and affectionate, yet at the same time independent and headstrong. Training is a contest requiring patience, a gentle approach and perseverance. A heavy-handed method never works, and the sensitive NGSD simply melts under such pressure.

With familiar people, the Singing Dogs are demonstrative, friendly and playful. With strangers, they're inclined to be more aloof and reserved. Other dogs are a different story. They're dog aggressive and will tackle an adult dog of the same sex. Despite their small stature, Singing Dogs are reputed to be fierce fighters.

The New Guinea Singing Dog makes a rewarding and unique pet for those able to deal with its eccentricities and keen to be serenaded dawn and dusk with the most unusual canine cantata ever heard.

Alice Bixler judges for the AKC, CKC, ARBA, Canine Rarities, and IABCA. She breeds and exhibits Bearded Collies, Briards and Löwchen and has been a professional dog writer since the 1970s.