

## Siberian Huskies

**Learn how Siberian Huskies happily cope with cold climates.**

*By Cal Orey*

Labs don't have the coats to weather a blizzard. I remember what it was like when I hitched and hiked through America in the winter of 1974 with a knapsack and a Labrador Retriever. There we were, stuck on an on-ramp in Cheyenne, Wisconsin. Ebony was constantly whining and the snow kept blowing while I felt cold and helpless. I wished my canine partner had a warm fur coat (more than one, actually) like a northern dog.

Although we weathered the blizzard, like millions of dog lovers (especially native Californians, such as me) I have often wondered: What makes certain breeds, such as the Siberian Husky, more suitable for northern climates and cold weather?

I went to the nation's northern breed experts and discovered exactly why the Siberian Husky is tailor-made for chilly climates. Find out how Siberians can survive the big chill—both at work and at play.

### NORTHERN EXPOSURE

While nomadic tribes in Siberia have used dogs as lifesavers for countless years, the history of the Siberian Husky is linked to Chukchi peoples of Eastern Siberia. The Siberian's northern roots, however, are difficult to prove prior to its arrival to Alaska at the turn of the century.

In the early 1900s, the Chukchi dog was used as a sled-hauling dog. When food was scarce, the Chukchis would join their dogs to sleds when it became necessary to pull their belongings from one village to another. The friendly, hard-working Siberian Husky was greatly valued in heavy snow and grueling weather.

Like wolves, Siberian Huskies endured climates in frozen areas of the far north. In winter, a wolf's thick fur keeps the wolf warm during brutal cold. And a wolf can sleep snugly at below-zero temperatures; it just takes one tuck of the head between their paws and covering their muzzles with their tails. However, wild wolves don't have the temperament required to be good sled dogs. So while dogs have descended from the wolf, the Chukchis (and others) discovered the Siberian Husky was the best bet for combining form and function.

In the winter of 1925, for instance, these dogs carrying diphtheria serum to the victims of this deadly disease in Nome, Alaska, is an example of how the Siberian Husky can survive the cold in the worst of times. Leonhard Seppala left Nome with a dog team of 20 Siberians, which endured grueling weather conditions during the "Serum Run"—an infamous relay.

The Siberian Huskies did well and continued to excel in other cold weather feats. They were used as sled dogs on the Byrd Antarctic Expeditions and also in the U. S. Army's Search and Rescue Unit during World War II. That's by no means the end of their Arctic activities.

### WARM-BLOODED WORKERS

The Siberian Husky has been bred to work and survive in cold climates. And the best part is, it's worked. They are good to go: pre-packaged for the chill, from head-to-paw.

**Built-In Snow Shields:** The Siberian's almond-shaped eyes help protect its eyeballs from cold air. "It allows the dog to be able to squint and have its eyes less exposed to wind and snow," says breed historian Bob Thomas.

**Natural Ear Muffs:** "There's hair inside of the Siberian Husky ears. It is an adaptation that allows them to keep warmer. Most of the breeds don't have hair inside their ears, but the Siberian does," says Patrick M. Hourigan, D.V.M., of Richmond, Illinois. That means built-in ear muffs all over the flap of the ear.

**Double-Duty, Double Coat:** The Siberian's coat is rich and thick. "They have an undercoat that is very short, almost like

down. (They shed it in spring and fall.) And they have an outer coat, the guard hairs, which are twice the length of the undercoat and water-resistant," explains Thomas. Note, however, that it's the undercoat that provides insulation and keeps the Siberian Husky warm.

Nic Matulich, rescue coordinator of the Bay Area Siberian Husky Club of Campbell, California, has learned the power of a "rough coat" on sledding trips. Other breeds require blankets, he explains, because they have the type of hair that attracts moisture rather than repels it. No extra padding is required for his Siberians. However, there's more to being suitable for cold weather than just having the right fur.

**Well-Furred Tail:** The long, fox-brushy tail can curl around the Siberian's nose to warm the air around the face while it sleeps. "The history is that the bushy tail was used to prewarm the dog's breath in its own tail," says Matulich. "It keeps its nose and the front of its face warm. The dog will curl up in a tight little ball like that. I've seen Siberians sleep 12 hours straight during a snowstorm."

**Furry Feet:** Siberians have thick foot pads that keep their feet insulated in cold weather. Also, these dogs boast furry feet—another warming plus. (Beware: They can gather painful ice balls, which call for nylon or leather dog booties.)