

# *the Icelandic* **SHEEPDOG** *in North America*

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**T**he Icelandic Sheepdog has both an ancient heritage and a very bright future. The versatile Nordic spitz dogs which accompanied the original settlers to Iceland between 874 and 930 AD had an invaluable role in the agricultural settlement of their new land. From the start, they were indispensable farm companions. Within the last few decades, the breed has found its way to North America and into the hearts of dedicated fanciers.

The path from origins to modern day has not been a straightforward one. More than once, Iceland's native breed was at risk of disappearing entirely, either due to disease epidemics, famine, or lack of awareness. Fanciers of the Icelandic Sheepdog are supremely grateful to the remarkable individuals who rescued the breed in the 1960s.

What makes this breed special is a question we often hear as they become more widely known. The Icelandic Sheepdogs are the national breed of Iceland. These just-under-medium size spitz dogs came to Iceland with the first settlers as early as 874. Spitz-type dogs were the typical farm and herding dog found in Norway, and archeological remains of their distant ancestors have been found dating back to the Bronze Age. The Iceland dogs remained a uniquely pure population as only small numbers of other breeds of dog were ever imported into Iceland, and starting in 1909 it was forbidden to bring foreign animals into Iceland. Their closest canine relatives, in a modern breed form, are probably the Norwegian Buhund. DNA research has detected a genetic relationship to the

Karelian Bear Dog.

Their attractive and friendly appearance often draws people in. They are a very friendly dog, happy to meet people, and easily making friends. It seems that because the breed was developed by farmers, and lived in their homes, they had to be trustworthy and affectionate. They say there was little need for a dog that was aggressive to humans because Iceland was such an integrated society where people mostly knew their neighbours. They are great alarm dogs, and they will let you know when there's a knock at the door, but don't expect them to threaten or chase away strangers. On farms, Icelandic Sheepdogs protect young animals like lambs and foals by being alert to birds of prey and driving them away. These are also qualities that are useful on farms in the USA and Canada.

The Icelandic Sheepdog has some unique physical characteristics. Like other spitz breeds, it has triangular ears that stand upright, and a tail that curls over the back. The coat has a dense undercoat that sheds at least twice a year, and a longer topcoat of somewhat coarse guard-hairs. The coat should be very protective and waterproof, and neither wind, rain or cold temperatures will bother the dogs. The ears are very mobile and the dogs



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**Angel, Thorri's daughter**

fold them backwards to show submission or playfulness, and can even fold them tightly against their head to keep out wind and rain.

One special characteristic are the dewclaws on the rear legs. Icelandic Sheepdogs have dewclaws on their front legs like many other dogs do, and they also have a single or double rear dew-claw on each rear leg. It is a distinctive trait and the dewclaws provide extra traction on steep or slippery terrain.



PHOTO: LEESA MCLELLAN



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Coat length ranges from fairly short to very long, dense and full coats. The texture shouldn't be soft or silky, or the coat would mat and get wet more easily. The breed is said to be self-cleaning because with the correct type coat, the dog can get very wet and dirty and when the coat dries, the mud and dirt will just fall off. This kind of coat doesn't need to be washed with shampoo, in fact bathing too often will take away the dirt and weather-resistant qualities and make the coat harder to maintain.

We're often asked if the breed can do well in warm and humid climates, and the double coat does seem to insulate against heat as well as cold. Dogs living in warm climates may also adjust by growing less undercoat in the summer. However, in very hot climates it's likely the dogs will be less active during the heat of the day and will really appreciate having access to air conditioning.

The breed has historically been important to the sheep farmers. Sheep farming was important to the survival of Icelandic settlers and to building the economy of Iceland in the medieval and early modern period. The type of sheep raising in Iceland was not the same as that practiced in Scotland or the border areas of Wales where those other famous breeds, the Border Collies, Bearded and Scottish Collies come from. In Iceland, the sheep spent the summer in the mountain pastures, and were rounded up in the fall to spend the winter on the home

farms. Then again in the spring they were moved back to the pastures.

This was a group effort with men on horseback riding along the valleys and sending the dogs into the mountains. The dogs needed to be able to move stubborn sheep who weren't all that nervous about dogs. The dogs also needed to bark so that the men on horseback could hear where they were. At one time Border Collies were imported into Iceland as it was thought they would be superior in working with sheep, but their working style and abilities did not suit the Icelandic terrain or farming system.

These seasonal movements of sheep were a hard job, but only lasted about two to three weeks, a couple times a year. The Icelandic horses are also kept in herds, and due to their special temperament they are not as flighty around dogs as other domestic horses are. So the dogs are also used to move herds of horses and to get horses into the stables for saddling, and they accompany trail rides.

The dogs would accompany farmers in winter on their travels, and would ride on horseback with the farmer when crossing a river. The dogs were said to be smart enough to find individual sheep in a flock by name, they would know when a sheep was lost and could find that sheep even buried in snow. Some dogs had a unique talent for collecting eggs of wild birds and bringing them to their owners unbroken. The dogs were considered indispensable by farmers. At times,

the price of an Icelandic Sheepdog was equivalent to a cow or a couple of sheep, or even a horse. For a representation of how important the dogs were to the farmers of Iceland, I recommend reading the novel *Independent People* by the Nobel Prize-winning author, Halldór Laxness.

Iceland is of course notable for being a highly literate society, and has an incredible resource of written accounts of Icelandic culture in the sagas and epics. The Icelandic Sheepdog is not specifically described in the Icelandic Sagas. The most notable account of a dog found in the Sagas describes a dog that is most likely an Irish Wolfhound and large dogs that were probably hunting breeds were also brought to Greenland, where such dog bones have been discovered in excavations. There is archaeological evidence of the dogs that came to Iceland with the first settlers. Even in places where the bones of dogs have not been found they have left their mark in the form of canine teeth marks from gnawing on the bones of cows and sheep.

There are accounts of the Iceland Sheepdog being exported to other countries – the Iceland Dog is mentioned in the Shakespearean play *Henry VIII*, although not in such complimentary terms, and the breed was said to be favored by the aristocracy of England during the middle ages and among the Swedish upper class, as well as being coveted by English shepherds. There is an account from the 10th century that records a de-

bate over a famine that caused so much hunger that the decision was made to kill most or even all of the dogs, in order to spare food so that people would survive. Later in the 17th century there was an epidemic of distemper which killed many dogs.

Farmers were criticized for keeping too many dogs in the 18th and 19th century. One major public health issue in Iceland was a species of tapeworm that caused disease in sheep and also intestinal infections in humans. The dogs were an intermediate host for this tapeworm. This culminated in a tax on dogs that subsequently cut the dog population by more than half, from an estimated 24,000 dogs in 1869 to about 10,000 dogs in the 1880s. In 1924, the ownership of dogs in Reykjavík itself was banned.

However, the breed continued to be valued highly abroad. In the late 19th century some Icelandic Sheepdogs were exported to Denmark and became formally recognized as a breed in Denmark. Some dogs were also exported to England and in 1905 the Kennel Club of England registered its first Icelandic Sheepdog. In England they were only shown occasionally – the breed was eventually removed from the list of breeds recognized by the Kennel Club. The numbers also continued to diminish in Iceland itself.

By the 20th century the existence of the Icelandic Sheepdog was in danger. An Englishman named Mark Watson made several journeys to Iceland. In the 1930s he could find several true examples of Icelandic Sheepdogs in the country side. However, by the 1950s it was very rare to see pure Icelandic Sheepdogs except in very remote areas. Mark Watson undertook to export some of the dogs to California where he had a dog-breeding kennel. Meanwhile, in Iceland, having cooperated with Mark Watson's efforts, the chief veterinarian of Iceland also realized the breed was facing extinction. The veterinarian and an Icelandic woman named Sigríður Pétursdóttir, located as many pure examples of the breed as they could and began an organized breeding program. Their breeding plans were designed to avoid inbreeding as much as possible. Without the work of Mark Watson and Sigríður Pétursdóttir, we may not even have the breed as we know it today.

Dogs continued to be imported from Iceland to North America, although the



PHOTO: JACQUELINE MUOIO

### **Thorri the therapy dog has earned achievement awards**

breed wasn't recognized by either American or Canadian Kennel Clubs. Some dogs had been acquired by families who had been living in Iceland, others came when North Americans visited Iceland to choose horses to import, and brought back dogs as well. Also, some Icelandic people who emigrated to North America simply wanted to bring their dogs along with them. The bloodlines of several of these dogs continue to be represented in the population today. In Canada, I'll mention one Icelandic woman in particular, the late Stefania Dignum of Yeoman Farms in Ontario, who not only bred Icelandic Sheepdogs in Canada but also brought the first Icelandic sheep to North America. Such individual efforts over the last several decades have also contributed to our breed's diversity.

### **The spirit of co-operation**

The Icelandic Sheepdog breed has inspired a spirit of co-operation among its fanciers in many different countries. There is an international "umbrella" group that encompasses the breed clubs in each country. This group is called the Icelandic Sheepdog International Committee, known as ISIC. Member countries currently include Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA. The mission of ISIC is to help preserve the breed. This cooperative arrangement started in 1996 with an agreement formed between Iceland and the countries Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Holland and Finland.

International seminars have been conducted annually from 1996 to the present. At these seminars, each national breed club submits a report and statistics regarding the breeding of Icelandic Sheepdogs in their country. Also at the seminars, presentations are given by geneticists. A key issue is the small gene pool of the breed and the sincere desire to avoid genetic diseases that can easily become prevalent in small purebred populations.

The Icelandic Sheepdog breed has been fortunate in having some very dedicated individuals contributing to its welfare and preservation. One of these people is a Dutch biologist named Pieter Oliehoek, who used the Icelandic Sheepdog as an example of a small population to study inbreeding. His research used specialized computer programs and the result was a genetic family tree that classified the global population of Icelandic Sheepdogs into a number of family groups. A few of these families are very large and contain most of the population. Some of the families are very small and represented by only a handful of individuals. One of the strategies to keep the breed diverse and, we hope, genetically healthy, has been to encourage breeding of dogs descended from the rare family lines, so that their genetic resources will not be lost from the population.

The Icelandic Sheepdog is a healthy breed. However, it is important to test breeding dogs for hip and eye health. There is a very small incidence of an early-onset form of cataracts so it's important to have puppies eye-tested as well. The American breed club has initiated research to discover a genetic marker for the juvenile cataracts. This involved sending test kits to other countries so that DNA samples from enough affected dogs could be obtained. The genetic analysis is still on-going and if it's successful then a simple DNA test will tell us if our dogs are carriers or affected by this disease. What's particularly impressive about this effort is that people who owned affected dogs were by and large quite eager to submit their dog's DNA for this study, rather than hiding the fact that their dogs are affected.

### **Celebrating our accomplishments**

The Icelandic Sheepdog became fully recognized by the Canadian Ken-



PHOTO: JACQUELINE MUOIO

### Thorri playing in the snow

nel Club in 2006. As part of the process of official recognition, first the breeders and owners have to show evidence that there is a growing population of the breed in Canada, and that they are interested in entering shows and other events. The breed has received generally quite positive feedback from other exhibitors and glowing praise from several judges. Several Icelandic Sheepdogs have already completed their Canadian championships. The breed is just on the brink of achieving full recognition in the American Kennel Club. This was to be finalized on June 30, 2010. By the way, this recognition by the kennel clubs does not only pertain to entering dogs in conformation shows. National kennel clubs keep a registry of dogs born to registered parents in their country, which is referred to as a stud book. By virtue of being registered in the national stud books, our dogs are eligible for being exported to other countries and, therefore, each country can contribute some of its genetics and keep the gene pool a bit less shallow.

Icelandic Sheepdogs are also making their mark in performance events – this includes activities like agility, obedience, rally obedience, disc dog, flyball and herding. There are Icelandic Sheepdogs active in each of these sports in the USA and in Canada, some in training and some already titled, including a few dogs that have multiple titles. This really

showcases the versatility of our breed and the breed is gaining the reputation of being fast and smart. Of course, besides participating in the ‘hobby’ sport of herding, many Icelandic Sheepdogs are fulfilling their natural vocation on working farms. They may not get titles for their daily work but the owners find them to be priceless helpers.

I have to mention a third arena in which the Icelandic Sheepdog really excels. Therapy dogs are some of the most remarkable individuals in the canine world. They go through specialized testing and training and if they qualify, they visit hospital wards and nursing homes. There are related programs for dogs that visit libraries and schools as the presence of the dog as non-judgemental listener is used to encourage children to read. Icelandic Sheepdogs are brilliant at this work. They are responsive to people’s states and have an intuitive awareness of human needs. It’s amazing that one breed of canine can have all these dimensions of being a speed demon on the agility course, have the confidence to move stubborn sheep or a herd of horses, as well as gentleness and intuitive kindness to bring comfort to people who are ill or suffering.

The breed, thankfully, is no longer in danger of extinction. There are breeding populations in several countries, and also breeders in various countries are making

the effort to import unrelated dogs or to access different bloodlines through artificial insemination. Generally, about 100 puppies a year are born in Iceland. In the USA in 2008 there were 23 litters registered by the American Kennel Club, for a total of 102 puppies. The numbers were slightly lower but similar in the two previous years. In Canada there have been a few litters born and registered each year since the breed was recognized.

I think the breed is in good hands in North America with most breeders being very dedicated to the breed and doing relevant health testing. It is worth being on a waiting list for a puppy from a responsible breeder. This is not a breed that is suitable for everyone. They can be very vocal and they need both physical and mental stimulation on a daily basis, so they are best suited to energetic owners who are prepared for the challenge of living with an intelligent dog. There is interest in the breed from people involved in various sports from dog agility to dog dancing, from people of Icelandic descent, and from people who have Icelandic or other heritage breeds of livestock. While they are energetic, an Icelandic Sheepdog is still more moderate in their energy level than some of the other herders. They can do very well in families with children as long as the adults are ready to take on the challenges of puppyhood. Raising an Icelandic Sheepdog through puppyhood and adolescence is not for sissies. Thank goodness the puppies are so adorable! At this time it is rare for Icelandic Sheepdogs to be found in shelters, and a national breed rescue has been founded to help any Icelandic Sheepdogs in need of new homes.

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