

The Labrador Retriever





Chapter 1

What Is a Labrador Retriever?

A Labrador Retriever puppy is a bouncy bundle of black, yellow, or chocolate fun and energy. Versatility is the breed's middle name. A Lab might be a guide dog, an assistance dog, a hunting companion, a therapy dog, or work in law enforcement.



If you decide to show your dogs in conformation or to compete in obedience or field trials, once again, Labs are a very popular choice. Because of their happy-go-lucky attitude, Labs are great with children and adults. When it's time for your family to choose a pet, you probably can't go wrong with a Labrador Retriever if you are an active family on the go and want a dog who will be on the go, too. A Lab is never happier than when he's with his family or his person.

The Sporting Breeds

The Labrador Retriever is a sporting dog, as classified by the American Kennel Club and other breed registries. The Sporting Group includes the other retrievers, such as the Golden Retriever and the Chesapeake Bay Retriever, as well as the setters, spaniels, and pointers. The breeds that make up the Sporting Group were all bred to work alongside and help out hunters.

Their hunting skills varied according to the purpose for which they were bred. But most of the dogs in the Sporting Group have some characteristics in common. First of all, they are intelligent and quick to learn. Training is easy when you have learned how to motivate the dog. But these dogs can also think for themselves, and when they do, training can be a challenge.



Labrador Retrievers are sporting dogs. If you never hunt with your dog, you'll have to find other ways to keep him active.

Sporting dogs are also athletic and busy, especially as puppies. They need daily exercise and activities. Without enough exercise and an occupation to keep them busy, these dogs can get into trouble.

The Lab's Physical Appearance

The Labrador Retriever should be medium in size and give the appearance of a dog who is strong, muscular, and active. He is well balanced, not clumsy or spindly. He should appear ready for action at any time. There is a distinct difference between the sexes. Male Labs should look masculine: strong, thick-necked, and with heavier bones. Females are definitely more feminine: strong

and athletic yet not as heavily boned as the males or as muscled. In this section, I briefly describe the ideal Labrador Retriever based on the breed standard.

The Head

When looking at a Lab, the first thing you notice is the dog's head. The Lab has a fairly broad skull. The head should not have big, heavy, apple cheeks or flews (lips) that are too pendulous. The head should have a neat, clean appearance. The muzzle should be strong and never thin or pointed.

The eyes are where we see that irresistible sweet, kind, alert expression. The eyes should be the shape of a rounded diamond. Although some roundness in the eyes can be attractive, they should not resemble the round eyes of a Cocker Spaniel, nor should they be too almond-shaped. They should be a warm brown on all dogs, no matter what the coat color, and maybe a bit darker on a yellow Lab. When you look into a Lab's eyes, you should see instant friendliness.

The ears should be set off the side of the skull, not too high and not too low. They should be of medium size, hanging so that the bottom tips are about two inches below the eyes. The ears should not be so big or so small that they draw attention to themselves. And they should never be long or folded, as they are on many hounds.

The Body

The neck is strong and of medium length. There is nothing elegant about this dog. He should remind you of a small Mack truck—agile but strong and sturdy. He should appear well balanced, with all parts of him in proportion and working together correctly.

As you continue down the neck, past the withers (point of the shoulder), the topline (along the spine) should be rather level, never swayback or sloping. The chest should be deep with ribs like a barrel. The front legs are well underneath the dog, allowing a prominent breastbone to show and creating the picture of a powerful chest.



*The Labrador Retriever has a broad, strong skull.
The head is a striking feature of the breed.*

What Is a Breed Standard?

A breed standard is a detailed description of the perfect dog of that breed. Breeders use the standard as a guide in their breeding programs, and judges use it to evaluate the dogs in conformation shows. The standard is written by the national breed club, using guidelines established by the registry that recognizes the breed (such as the AKC or UKC).

The first section of the breed standard gives a brief overview of the breed's history. Then it describes the dog's general appearance and size as an adult. Next is a detailed description of the head and neck, then the back and body, and the front and rear legs. The standard then describes the ideal coat and how the dog should be presented in the show ring. It also lists all acceptable colors, patterns, and markings. Then there's a section on how the dog moves, called *gait*. Finally, there's a general description of the dog's temperament.

Each section also lists characteristics that are considered to be faults or disqualifications in the conformation ring. Superficial faults in appearance are often what distinguish a pet-quality dog from a show- or competition-quality dog. However, some faults affect the way a dog moves or his overall health. And faults in temperament are serious business.

You can read all the AKC breed standards at www.akc.org.

All four legs should have good, thick bone, with the front legs coming straight down from the shoulders. The rear legs should be well bent at the knee or stifle. The hindquarters should be thick, with well-muscled thighs.

As a Labrador Retriever moves, his tail usually wags happily from side to side. It should never be carried curled up over the back like a hound's tail. A tail that is carried too low or between the legs will give the appearance of timidity.

The Lab's tail is called an otter tail because it's thick at the base and tapers down to a tip, like the tail of an otter. The tail should be well covered with a very distinctive short, dense coat. The underside of the tail should never have any long, feathery hair on it.



Labs come in black, yellow, and chocolate.

The Coat and Colors

The Labrador Retriever comes in three solid colors: black, yellow, and chocolate. The black is very black; the yellow ranges from an almost white to a dark yellow; and the chocolate is a rich brown. A white spot on the chest is permissible.

Dogs in all colors should have a waterproof, double coat. The thick undercoat lies beneath the topcoat. The topcoat should be a bit rough to the touch and doesn't have to lie flat. In fact, if the coat is too slick, the dog probably doesn't have a good undercoat and would not be useful as a retriever in cold water. The undercoat acts as insulation and, working in conjunction with the coat's natural oil, helps repel water.

TIP

All three colors are equal in the Labrador Retriever. A yellow Lab is the same breed as a chocolate Lab and a black Lab.

The Lab's Character

Labrador Retrievers have been the most popular dog in America for many years, for several reasons. The breed's size and easy-care coat certainly have something to do with this popularity, but most enthusiasts say they love the dogs' personality.

Labs are fun. They love to play and are always up for whatever you want to do. You like hiking? Labs love to go for a hike! You like to go swimming? They'll

do that, too. Labs chase balls and catch Frisbees. They will play with the kids, and go jogging with Dad. Labs enjoy life!

Family and Friends

Labrador Retrievers are devoted family dogs. They love everyone in the family equally with loyalty and devotion. When you come home, even if you've only been gone a few minutes, you'll be greeted with a wagging tail, a wriggling body, and a smiling face.

This breed is also very devoted to his friends. Once you're a friend, you will be greeted with enthusiasm each and every time the dog sees you, no matter whether it's weekly or once a year.

Intelligence and Trainability

Labs are bright dogs. They are smart enough to get into trouble and can figure out problems: Many Labs have figured out how to open sliding glass doors to let themselves into the house! The breed is also very trainable. When you have figured out how to motivate the dog and keep his attention, Labs can (and have) been trained in agility, flyball, obedience, therapy dog work, search and rescue, and much more.

Although Lab puppies can be very silly and easily distracted, once past adolescence they can become more serious about training. Puppy owners just need to be patient and consistent with training.

Active Dogs

Labs do best in a household where the people want to do things with him. If they're left alone for too many hours each day, many Labs will find ways to amuse themselves, and often those activities will be unwelcome. Labs have been known to bark too much, dig holes in the lawn, pull down the woodpile searching for critters, and escape from the yard. Labs can also be destructive chewers. However, when you can spend time with him every day and can make sure the dog gets enough exercise, your Lab will be a wonderful companion dog.

Not Protective

If you're looking for a protective dog, perhaps a dog who would give his life to defend you, don't get a Lab. Labs will bark a few times when someone approaches the house, but other than that, the breed is not at all protective. This breed was bred to be nonthreatening.

This trait is one of the reasons why they are such good family dogs. Not only are Labs always ready to play, but they also don't get upset when other people play. For example, if your son brings home his friends and the kids begin wrestling in the backyard, the Lab may either join in or just watch. A protective dog will be very upset. To a protective dog, wrestling is a potential attack. But not to a Lab.

Working Dog Extraordinaire

Several of the breed's characteristics have made them very popular as working dogs. The Lab's keen sense of smell and love of play has lead many military and law enforcement agencies to use them for detection work. With a play session as a reward, Labs will search for drugs, contraband, and other items. They are also excellent search and rescue dogs.

The breed's devotion to his owners and trainability have made it popular as assistance and service dogs. The Lab's wonderful temperament and friendliness lead them to be wonderful therapy dogs. Labrador Retrievers can be found working in many different occupations.



Because Labs are smart and active and easily trained, they have become popular as working dogs.