

## So You Think You Want A Siberian ☺

### **Introduction – Deciding if a husky is the right dog for you?**

So you have decided that the Siberian Husky just might be the dog for you! Perhaps you have seen one on a TV documentary; or in one of the popular movies about sled dogs; you've seen one at a dog show, or being walked along the street, or you have fallen for their stunning good looks in pictures. Perhaps you have always loved wolves and think that a Siberian would be just like owning one. You may have heard that they make great jogging partners or that they are wonderful with children. Maybe someone mentioned how friendly they are ☺ Well Husky's certainly are a strikingly beautiful breed that catches many peoples eye, but it's also true that a Siberian Husky is not the dog for everyone.

If for example you are expecting your Siberian to act the way your old Labrador did, or even think that you know 'working dogs' because you've had a German Shepherd or Border Collie you are in for a little shock. Unfortunately Siberians rank highly amongst breeds dumped or surrendered into canine shelters. Sadly many prospective owners don't take the time to find out about the background of their new family member or they have purchased from a breeder or pet store which has not ensured that the prospective new owners understand the breed. Many of the traits which new owners find problematic and which lead Husky's to end up as rescues are qualities which were necessary for survival in the environment and for the work for which this breed was bred. The following information is aimed to give you a balanced view of the breed and help you to make an informed decision on whether or not a Husky is right for you and your lifestyle.



## **A quick history lesson ☺**

The modern Siberian evolved from the sled dogs of the Chukchi people of North-Eastern Siberia. Through its original breeding of these dogs the Chukchi people developed a smart, confident, strong dog that had speed and endurance over distances, was efficient in translating food into energy, and which would be friendly to people and other dogs. Temperatures in the region often plunged to 62 degrees below 0 so the breed needed to be resilient to such extreme conditions.

Temperament was extremely important to the Chukchi as their dogs often worked in large teams (sometimes as large as 18 or 20 dogs to one sled) and aggression of any kind simply was not acceptable. The Husky's were usually brought up in close proximity to Chukchi families, and as such the breed was well trusted with children.

A musher often entrusted his life in the hands of his canine team. He therefore needed an intelligent dog which, rather than blindly obeying instructions to the letter would be independent in assessing the advantage of certain situations and would be capable of making its own decisions where required. If the musher commanded the team to go right, but the dogs knew through their superior senses that such a direction might mean death such as travelling over thin ice, the dogs needed to trust their own instincts and disobey their musher's commands. The independent streak much prized in the Siberian for such work remains a key characteristic of the breed today.

Many people believe that Husky's and other sled dogs are related more closely to wolves than other breeds of dogs. This is not correct. The Husky however has evolved maintaining many of the original aesthetic characteristics of ancient canines, as these were well suited to the arctic conditions where it lived.

Unfortunately the original huskies disappeared from their birth place (along with many of the Chukchi's) during Russian Stalinist purges however a number of early Arctic Explorers had been so taken by the breed that they had exported large numbers of prized stock to North America, establishing breeding programs which ensured the survival of the breed.

## **Breed characteristics**

The Siberian is a medium sized working dog, described as being light on its feet with a running action that should appear effortless. It should have a moderately compact well-furred body and be capable of carrying out its original function of being a harness dog carrying light loads at a moderate speed over great distances. Its body proportions and form should reflect a balance of power, speed and endurance. The Siberian Husky should never appear so heavy or coarse as to suggest a freighting animal, nor is it so light and fragile as to suggest a sprint-racing animal.

A Siberian should be friendly and outgoing, confident and adaptable, not nervous or suspicious of strangers. They are usually not a one-person dog, due to their huge capacity to give affection. They adore their family, which can extend quickly to include everybody they meet. Bred to be the ultimate team dog this is a breed that should never show any form of aggression, and should always be friendly with other dogs, though a Siberian not use to small dogs may confuse these with prey so socialisation with small dogs at an early age is advised.

Any colour coat is permissible in a Siberian and a variety of markings can be found; common colourings are Grey and White, Black and White, Red and White or Piebald. Common eye colour is brown or blue. Bi eyed (eyes being different colours) is acceptable. Eyes should be almond shaped (not round) and moderately spaced apart. The nose colour should be black in grey, tan or black dogs, liver in copper/red dogs; may be flesh coloured in pure white dogs. The pink streaked "snow nose" is acceptable. Ethical breeders do not breed particular colours due to market demand. There is an old saying that any good dog is a good colour.

A Siberian grows very quickly in its first year and in most cases will obtain most of its height by around 8 or 9 months of age. Size wise the breed is described in its standard as standing between 53.5 and 60 cm in height for a male or 51 to 56 cm for an adult female. For confirmation showing there is officially no minimum height that will cause a disqualification for a Siberian (although the standard does call for a medium sized dog). Being over the maximum height allowable, as noted above, for a Siberian however is cause for disqualification in a show ring.

Every breed has been developed to undertake certain functions so it follows that they will be good at some things and not so good at others.

The Siberian has none of the protective instincts of a good guard dog. Although the size of the Siberian alone may offer some deterrent to would be trespassers, the average Sib has much love to spread around to everybody and most will offer an intruder the same positive enthusiastic welcome that they would in greeting a friendly visitor.

The Siberian, whilst being a dog that can be quite independent, is also a dog that loves to be fully involved in life and sharing experiences with its people. It was bred to be social, working with large numbers of other dogs and living in close proximity with its people. Siberians therefore do not cope well without attention. This is an active breed and there are a wide variety of activities that you can share with your dog.

The Siberian also has a great love of running, to the extent that many describe it as an inbuilt desire to run, genetically programmed, an instinct that simply cannot be ignored by any Sib when the opportunity arises. This partnered with a total lack of traffic sense can be very dangerous for your dog should it get loose. It is important then that all Siberians are kept in yards that are well fenced. Most importantly NEVER let a Sib off lead outside of enclosed spaces. Following on from this, the Siberians love of freedom also means that you should never trust your dog with an open door or gate, even when you are nearby, given the horrific consequences you might face if your dog does get out onto the road. Please do not disregard this Siberian trait as many people unfortunately do, especially those who have successfully obedience trained other dogs to heel off lease previously. Pick up just about any book on the breed or visit many of the websites about the breed and you will no doubt find over and over again the statement that Sib's should never be let off lead in an open space. There is a very good reason for this consistent warning. The one time your dog does disobey you may well be its last.

Due to the Siberians love of running Sib's thrive on opportunities to really stretch out their legs (in a contained area). The look of pure joy that comes to their faces when they are able to run flat out is wonderful to observe.



Many Siberians have a strong prey drive and thus have a bad reputation when it comes to cats, rabbits, birds and other small animals. Some Siberians have learned to cohabit well with cats when they are raised with them and therefore socialised with them from an early age however this issue is one that you should be aware of with regards to this breed as there are many instances where this prey drive has brought about the untimely demise of smaller pets. Siberians are also renowned for chasing (and sometimes attacking) stock such as sheep, cows and even horses so secure confinement must be a consideration if keeping a Sib in rural areas.

The Siberian's coat is relatively low maintenance but will require some level of attention and care to keep it in good condition. It has a double coat medium in length and relatively odourless. The undercoat is soft and dense. The guard hairs of the outer coat are straight, never harsh. Once or twice a year it will 'blow' its coat, which means the coat will come out in enormous quantities. At this time you will wonder just how so much hair can come out of one dog. Siberians shed in a unique patch like way, and at this time they will look better (and feel better) if you work to remove the dead coat as it blows. Keeping the coat clean will also help promote healthy growth.

Ears are of medium size, triangular in shape and set high on the head. The muzzle also should be of medium length; the distance from the tip of the nose to the stop should be equal to the distance between the stop and the occiput. The stop on the head of a Siberian should be well defined.

The back of a Siberian should be straight and strong with a level topline from withers to croup. The shoulder blade should be well laid back. The tail is usually carried in a graceful sickle curve when the dog is at attention, it should not curl to either side of the body, nor snap flat against the dogs back. A trailing tail is normal when the dog is relaxed.

Movement wise this breed should exhibit good reach in the forequarters and good drive in the hindquarters. When viewed from the front or rear the Sib does not single track when moving at a walk, but as speed increases the legs gradually angle inward until the pads are falling on a line directly under the longitudinal centre of the body. When moving the topline remains firm and level. The Siberian should not display a short, prancing, choppy gait.

The Sib is a very intelligent dog, alert, and eager to please. However the free spirit that many possess can prove challenging where training is concerned and they become bored easily of being asked to repeat the same tasks. This is certainly not because this breed has difficulty learning, quite the opposite as this is a very smart dog that learns very quickly. It's just that this is a breed that was developed to be an independent thinker and at times the logic of why we ask our dogs to do certain things totally escapes the Siberian. Siberians are not known for retrieving balls for example. It was once described to me that the look a Sib gives you if you attempt this game clearly states *'if you wanted that ball you wouldn't have thrown it away in the first place'*. Many Siberians master selective hearing when faced with commands that they simply see no reason to obey and a good sense of humour is definitely an advantage when training a Sib. Success in training often comes from making it a fun game for a Siberian, ensuring that the Sib sees it to his/her advantage to do as is asked. Despite this light-hearted look at trainability, many Sib's have excelled in obedience and agility competitions as well as in a range of other different disciplines and in fact the Siberian is very adaptable when its owner / trainer understands the specific behavioural traits of the breed.

Siberians are not big eaters, especially given their size as they have evolved to maximise the nutrition in the food they receive. Because of this they can become fat quickly if overfed and their daily food requirement is far less than other breeds of their size.

Although the breed can and do bark they tend to do so a lot less than other breeds. Sib's can be quite vocal but they tend to woo, howl, or chirp ☺. The plaintive 'wooning' in particular is a breed trademark and many Siberians can appear to be trying to hold conversations with their vocalisations.

Another breed specific trait that can be both endearing and annoying is that Siberians LOVE being on top of things that give them height; a vantage point from which to survey all that is around them. Even well trained huskies love jumping onto tables (including coffee tables & dining room tables), and anything else that they can spring up onto. One useful tip can be to give your husky something that it is taught it is allowed onto, such as having a flat roofed dog house (many huskies will spend more time sitting on top of such a doghouse than in it) or a special outdoor table that is their's to sit regally upon. A useful tip: Never leave a car parked in a yard with a husky. They can and will easily spring up onto the bonnet or roof and never understand your anger at the inappropriateness of this action.

Siberians love to dig and many yards belonging to Siberian owners have been re-landscaped to look more like lunar moonscapes by their dogs than gardens. Especially whilst your Sib is young you may need to accept that it will be impossible for you to maintain a beautifully manicured garden. Another tip: Many dogs can be taught to dig in a specific area. Rather than try to completely train out this natural instinct provide your dog with a sandpit in a discreet corner of the garden and teach your dog that it is ok to dig in this place whilst not appropriate for it to dig elsewhere.

Whilst the breed has relatively few hereditary health issues incidences of hip dysplasia and eye diseases can still occur (although dog breeding practices by ethical breeders is thankfully minimising these now). As such problems are genetic it is important dogs that are to be used for breeding be health screened (have hips and elbows tested and have their eyes tested). Copies of such test results should be available for viewing for any prospective puppy buyer.

Further information on health issues for the breed are detailed on

<http://siberianhuskyhealthfoundation.org/health.asp>

Whilst this is an American site and the specific registration certification mentioned is country specific, similar health certification exists in Australia for many of the specific health issues detailed. Ethical / responsible breeders should be willing to openly discuss with you how they are dealing with such issues and whether such problems have been identified within the breeding lines that they use in their current or planned breeding program.

### **SHARING Your Life with a Siberian – Issues / time & Commitment ☺**

According to a variety of research into canine breeding and behaviour approximately 30 to 35% of a dogs ultimate behavioural makeup is genetic and the rest (60 to 65%) is attributed to its upbringing, training, socialisation, nutrition and health care.

As breeders, temperament is extremely important to us and we breed only from dogs with good sound temperaments. We then spend a lot of time with our puppies in their earliest days giving them the best start in life that we can.

Before being placed in new homes Asryn puppies are well socialised with people and other animals in their early weeks of life. They are handled daily from the age of 3 days, and from two weeks onwards are gently introduced to a wide range of noises and experiences to help it to become a happy, relaxed, outgoing and well adjusted dog throughout its adult life.

It is important that socialising of each puppy continues, especially during the early but extremely critical period in its development, as this time will form the basis for all that each dog will become in the future.

The more chances a puppy has to be exposed to new things and experiences the less bothered it will be throughout its life when faced with new or stressful situations. Unsocialised dogs can become shy, fearful, and defensive and can even become aggressive (fear aggression).

As detailed in the introduction it is vital that Siberian owners do have an understanding and appreciation of the basic instincts which drive this breed along with other characteristics which might be seen as problematic by ill informed owners.

I'm sure you have all read and heard the golden rule that a pet is a commitment for the life of that pet. How true this is! But just as important is that you understand the specific commitment you need to make in the initial period, particularly in the first year or so of your pet's life with you. Young dogs require a good deal of your time and energy to enable its role in your family to be one that you can all enjoy. A dog cannot know how to behave in the way you wish it to all by itself; it looks to you for guidance in its behaviour. A well-trained dog is a happy dog, as it is one that knows what is expected of it and who gains pleasure from pleasing you. I can assure you also that if you take the time to train your dog you will also be a much happier owner as well 😊

### **Exercise & Attention**

The Siberian is an active dog with a huge amount of energy and it does require exercise to expend this energy, otherwise you risk your dog displaying destructive behaviours. Despite popular belief this need not be a huge amount of exercise, short periods of vigorous activity and play each day is adequate. Running around its own yard (no matter how large this yard may be) day and night will not suffice for this is a breed which requires mental stimulation as much as physical exercise and what it really craves is that you spend time sharing your life with it. The one thing that a Siberian does require above all else (even though this is not a breed that fawns all over its people) is large doses of companionship. If you do not feel able to devote a significant amount of time to your dog, and to share your life and activities with it The Siberian may not be the dog for you.

### **Heat**

Although adapted for frozen climates the Siberian also adapts well to Australian conditions. In fact in many instances it deals better with our heat than many short-coated breeds that have a solid black (heat attracting) coat.

The main issues in relation to heat (and these are relevant to all breeds not just to your Siberian) is that your dog should always have access to fresh water and shade. (No dog should ever be left out in the sun without access to adequate shade!) Most Siberians love water so paddling pools or similar which your dog can stand in or play in are fabulous. Siberians also usually love trips to the beach

### **De-sexing**

Asryn puppies sold as pets are sold on a neuter agreement, which means that we expect the owners to de-sex their puppy when it reaches the age of six months of age. There is no reason for a pet to be left entire and there are many reasons why de-sexing is best for you, your dog and for the breed in general.

Despite popular belief a bitch does not have any need to have a litter of pups for its wellbeing, and there are already far too many homeless dogs in shelters and far more puppies available than the market requires. Breeding is not a money making exercise; to breed in a responsible way requires much research, time and expense.

There are also significant health reasons why a dog which is not intended for breeding should be de-sexed as there are a number of very serious health conditions which entire dogs are susceptible to and which you will not have to worry about with a de-sexed animal.

Advantages of spaying females is that you don't have to worry about messy heats, you don't have the problem of howling male 'suitor's' at your windows and fences trying to get to your female, and you eliminate the real risk of pyometra (disease of the uterus) and significantly decrease the risk of incidences of mammary cancer in your dog. For male dogs the advantages of neutering include decreased incidences of wanting to display aggression to other dogs (without changing your dogs personality), decreased tendency to want to roam in search of bitches in season, and decreased incidences of many urogenital diseases.

### **Last word ☺**

As with any breed, dog ownership is a commitment for the duration of that dog's life and should never be entered into lightly, without adequate consideration.

We love this breed and we are always happy to discuss any breed characteristics or requirements such as training, feeding and general care with any prospective or current Siberian owner.



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