

The Labrador Handbook



Your definitive
guide to care
and training



Pippa Mattinson

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About the Book

THE LABRADOR HANDBOOK is the only Labrador training manual you'll ever need.

From help with choosing your new best friend, to training, playing with and caring for the world's most popular dog, this complete handbook includes problem-solving tips and essential healthcare information for puppies, adolescents and senior dogs alike.

Pippa Mattinson is in touch with over 300,000 dog owners every month through her website www.thelabradorsite.com and knows exactly what Labrador owners want. She is the author of the bestselling *Happy Puppy Handbook*.

About the Author

Pippa Mattinson is a zoologist and the founder of The Gundog Trust - the UK's first gundog training and welfare charity. She is a keen supporter of modern, science-based dog training methods, and is passionate about helping people to enjoy their dogs. Visit her website for more information: www.pippamattinson.com





THE
Labrador
HANDBOOK


Your Definitive Guide to
Care and Training

Pippa Mattinson









Introduction

THE LABRADOR RETRIEVER is surely one of the most loved and respected pedigree dog breeds in the world. In the United Kingdom, and in the USA, it is certainly the most numerous. There are over two hundred different breeds of dog to choose from in Britain, yet in 2014, around 16 per cent of all the pedigree puppies registered with the Kennel Club, were Labradors. That's one in every six puppies. No other breed comes close.

While a well-trained adult Labrador is the ultimate human companion, getting to the well-trained and adult part can be difficult at times. Young Labradors can be boisterous and destructive, and they need consistent guidance and handling in order to fulfil their potential. In 2011, I set up a website, the Labrador Site, to help people overcome some of the challenges involved in raising a Labrador puppy, training their companion and coping with owning a large, bouncy dog. Over twelve thousand visitors currently browse the hundreds of articles in the Labrador Site archives each day, and one of the objectives of this book is to bring together the wealth of information accumulated on the site, so that you can have it on your bedside table, to read and refer to at your leisure.

This book is very much my personal approach to a breed of dog that I have shared my life with for over thirty years. I won't be giving you long lists of Labrador diseases,

labelled diagrams of the workings of your Labrador's reproductive organs, or lengthy descriptions of breed history or characteristics. These are covered adequately elsewhere. My aim is to take you on a journey through the life of the Labrador from puppyhood to old age, pausing here and there to cover specific age-related issues in more detail. I want to help you with the common problems that thousands of people have posted up on our website, so that you and your dog can resolve them quickly or even avoid them altogether.

With the right support and encouragement, raising a Labrador should be fun for your entire family. With that in mind, almost everything in this book is aimed at dealing with the realities of raising and training a large, intelligent and powerful dog so that he is a credit to you and a joy to all who know him. We'll be examining some of the challenges that will face us along the way, from the perils of potty training, through the agonies of adolescence, to the relative calm of maturity and onwards to the twilight years, addressing all the decisions and responsibilities that each stage brings.

I'll be showing you how to use the best and most up-to-date training methods, and including exercises that help build your skill and develop your dog's potential as well as providing entertainment and amusement for you both. Since a book can only do so much, I'll also be showing you how and where to find help if you get stuck at any point.

Raising a Labrador is one of life's very best experiences. Like every adventure, there will be challenges and surprises, but with a little help and support this will be a journey that you will thoroughly enjoy.

1

A special friendship

FOR MANY OF us, the Labrador has come to represent the perfect canine partner. No other breed of dog inspires such admiration and devotion in so many human beings, and no other breed of dog has come to serve our needs in such a multitude of roles. The characteristics of this ordinary yet very extraordinary dog are so widely recognised and accepted that even those who have never owned a Labrador are able to describe his personality and are happy to acknowledge his value to society.

It is fascinating to consider what makes the Labrador so special and admired. He is not without his flaws, and can be challenging to manage in his boisterous adolescence. So why do we love this bouncy, messy, food-obsessed creature with such a passion? Could the clue to the success of the world's most popular dog lie somewhere in his past?

The St John's dog

The origins of the Labrador as a unique breed are well known and documented. The history of the Labrador goes back over two hundred years, when our modern dogs' ancestors were living and working in Newfoundland. Today's Labrador Retriever is descended from the St John's dog of North America. These fishermen's assistants,

probably descended from the larger Newfoundland dogs, were noted for their love of water and of retrieving, and for their excellent temperament. As a result, they soon became popular hunting and sporting dogs, too. The first St John's dogs were imported into England in the early 1800s, and it was in Britain that the breed as we know it today was established.

The first Labradors

St John's dogs were established in the United Kingdom by two British aristocrats, independently of each other, both of whom were impressed by the retrieving abilities of these adaptable and hardy dogs. The name Labrador was used early on and probably came about due to the location of Labrador in the region from which the dogs were imported. The first breeding kennel was established by the 2nd Earl of Malmesbury in the early 1800s and, a few years later, another was set up by the 5th Duke of Buccleuch.

The Buccleuch breeding programme laid the foundation of the modern working Labrador Retriever we know and love and is still going strong today! The Kennel Club recognised the Labrador Retriever as a pedigree breed in 1903, and the Labrador has become increasingly popular over succeeding generations, as a service dog, family pet and favourite all-round shooting companion. Despite the huge variety of roles played by the Labrador over the years, it is his origins as a retriever that have made him uniquely suited to some of the vital roles he plays in our modern world.

Gundog heritage

The Kennel Club allocates all breeds of dog to one of seven groups. The Gundog Group embraces dogs that have been bred for many years specifically to act as hunting companions. The requirements of this role have influenced some of the characteristics of the gundog breeds, especially in terms of temperament. Some of these breed characteristics persist today, even though the majority of modern gundogs are no longer worked in the shooting field. There are four sub-groups, or categories, of gundog work - the retrievers, the pointers, the spaniels, and the HPRs (hunt, point, retrieve).

The retrievers are expected to find shot game, such as rabbits, duck or pheasant, and return the dead animal to their human partner in a fit state for the table. The spaniels and HPRs are expected to retrieve, too, but retriever breeds are the ultimate specialists at this job. There are other very successful working retriever breeds - most of you will be familiar with the Golden Retriever, and the less numerous Flatcoated Retriever - but the world of the working retriever is dominated by the Labrador. Not only is he the most popular and successful companion dog; he is also the most successful working retriever in history.



Labradors have a strong instinct to pick up and carry objects.

What makes a Labrador?

The Labrador is so familiar that he needs little description. Like all gundogs, every young Labrador is an athlete in the making, with huge capacity for endurance, speed and agility. He covers his ground at an easy gallop and, with his otter tail, dense waterproof coat and the right up-bringing, is as at home in the water as he is on land.

Just as they do for every pedigree dog, the Kennel Club publishes a 'breed standard' for the Labrador Retriever, as a guide to exactly how an adult Labrador should be structured, and what his temperament should be. The Kennel Club describes a kindly, intelligent dog, around 56 centimetres (22 inches) high at the shoulder, and with no trace of aggression - an adaptable and devoted companion. Undoubtedly, these important characteristics are what we expect from the breed and, for the most part, that is what we get.

The Kennel Clubs of the UK and North America recognise just three colours of Labrador - yellow, black and brown. Brown dogs are usually referred to as chocolate, or occasionally by the original term, liver. Yellow dogs may come in a whole range of shades, from pale cream to the deepest fox-red. All these shades must be registered as yellow. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a Golden Labrador.

The breed is not without controversy. At some point during the last fifty years, a gene that causes dilution of coat colour has appeared and created a new silver colour, one that most of us will be more familiar with in the Weimaraner breed. Many people find the colour both attractive and appealing, and many others consider it an outrage. Controversy continues over how this gene got into the Labrador breed. It is possible that it appeared via a

genetic mutation but perhaps more likely that it arrived via a surreptitious outcross between a Labrador and a Weimaraner. In the absence of any real proof, Kennel Clubs are (probably reluctantly) accepting registrations of dogs with the new colour, although they must be registered by the original colour that has been diluted (black or brown), not under the colour silver.

Controversy over breed appearance is not limited to colour. Over the last few decades, a division in type has arisen within the breed, and not only in structure and appearance, but in temperament, too.

A divided breed

At one time, a Labrador could theoretically win a prize in the show ring one day and win a field trial the next. However, over time, the two types have become deeply divided. It's important to understand the difference between these two strains of Labrador, because the strain you choose to bring into your life may have some bearing on how well you get along together. Although in the USA the dogs on either side of this division are sometimes referred to as English (show type) and American (field type), this is a bit of a misnomer, since the division is exactly the same in the UK. We have show and field Labradors, too, and both are British in origin. The division between the two types is one of purpose, not one of nationality.

Field or working-strain Labradors

Field or working-type Labradors are athletic, lean dogs with less substance than the Labradors of old. Some have lost the classic Labrador otter tail, some have a thinner coat than the modern show Labrador, and in some cases, on the working dog, the handsome chiselled Labrador head

has become a little snikey. The working Labrador is often quite sensitive and biddable, and at the same time, highly driven and energetic. He is a fast and very powerful animal, surprisingly agile for a relatively large dog, and capable of leaping gates and fences with ease. The working-strain Labrador is very soft mouthed and has a natural ability to mark and find fallen game, and, often, an overpowering urge to retrieve. These attributes, together with his receptive attitude to training, all help to account for his continued success in the shooting field and beyond. Most working-strain Labradors make great companion dogs, but some have such energy and drive that they may be a challenge for the inexperienced pet-dog owner to manage.



It's important to choose the right type of Labrador for your family.

Show or bench-strain Labradors

The show-type Labrador has become a more heavyweight and, in some cases, less agile animal than his ancestors and field-bred cousins. Some show Labradors now have rather short legs compared with the Labradors of the twentieth

century, and there seems to be no clear explanation for this. There may be some differences in temperament, too. Show-type dogs may, in some cases, be a bit more emotionally robust, playful and devil may care about life, and may lack the intense drive of the field-bred dog, but these are by no means predictable attributes. For example, my younger, mainly show-line Labrador is as keen a retriever as any of my working-line dogs.

Some Labrador enthusiasts feel that show lines have become too heavy and lack the agility and stamina for their original purpose. Despite this concern, and although they may not be successful in top-level competitions, many show-bred Labradors are currently working successfully as retrievers on shoots up and down the country. So, owning a show-type Labrador is not a barrier to participating in gundog fieldwork.

Which type is right for you?

It is always difficult to make sweeping generalisations about which strain of Labrador is right for any particular family. Many families will be very happy with a Labrador from either field or show stock. *Some* field-bred Labradors can prove a challenge outdoors since they have strong hunting instincts, but, for the most part, it is really a matter of personal choice.

As a rough guideline, it's best to choose a dog from working lines if you are interested in sports requiring an athletic and agile dog. Activities such as agility or working trials are best suited to working-strain Labradors, and if you wish to train your Labrador as a working gundog, again, a working-strain dog is probably a better choice. If you have no real interest in dog sports and like a more heavily built Labrador with a classic Labrador look, then a dog from show lines might suit you better.

If colour is important, you may have less choice. In the UK, for example, there are far fewer chocolate Labradors

available from working lines – most are show or pet bred – and the majority of dark yellow (fox-red) Labradors are field bred. So if you want a particular type of dog, you may have to compromise on colour.

Of course, the vast majority of Labradors are first and foremost companions. Show or field, old or young, working gundog or pet, Labradors are loved and treasured in homes up and down the land. The health and welfare benefits to human beings of canine companionship are well documented, but with Labradors those benefits go much further. Living in our midst are thousands of Labradors who, on a daily basis, provide a service so special and so important, it is impossible to put a price on it, or to imagine what life would be like without them.



Fox red Labradors are often from field-bred lines.

Labradors in service

The service we perhaps associate most closely with the Labrador is that provided by guide dogs. The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association was founded in 1931 and we are all familiar with the loyal dogs we see out and about on our streets, leading their owners safely as they go about their daily lives. In fact, guide dogs these days are often Labrador cross-breeds, and there is an enormous diversity of *other* service roles in which Labradors abound. Nowhere are the unique talents of these dogs more valuable than in saving and supporting those whose health and happiness depend upon them.

Many Labradors are respected members of our armed services, involved in detecting explosives, but they also play a role in supporting traumatised soldiers and helping to restore them to health. Most of us know that Labradors and other gundogs work with customs officers, helping to reduce the amount of drugs imported illegally into this country. Labradors are also trained to sniff out all kinds of other important substances that may be subject to theft or illegal importation, from metal to money, and are even used by pest-control companies to sniff out bed bugs, a growing problem in many big cities.

Labradors are being trained as lifelong companions for vulnerable young people, including autistic children, and as partners in schools and libraries to help children with reading difficulties. Reading to a calm and friendly dog helps to encourage young children and builds their confidence. Pets as Therapy dogs, many of them Labradors, are taken into nursing homes and hospitals to befriend and support lonely and vulnerable people. Yet other Labradors go to work as search-and-rescue dogs, accompanying their owners at a moment's notice, possibly hopping on a plane to travel to earthquake zones or to go to look for missing people on moors and mountains.

In the last few years, we have made extraordinary progress with using dogs in the field of medicine.

Labradors have been trained to detect critical changes in blood sugar, and so can become vital partners for people with diabetes. We even have Labradors that can detect tumours in people with cancer. While other breeds of dog are involved in some of these roles, Labradors dominate the list, which really does beg the question - why is the Labrador such an outstandingly successful and useful dog? It isn't just his basic gundog heritage, although clearly that plays a part. There is more to it than that.

Why is the Labrador so successful?

Why is this ten-a-penny, one-on-every-street-corner dog muscling in on just about every field of canine endeavour and taking it by storm? How come the Labrador steals the show every time? Is it just an accident, or a coincidence? Is it the Labrador's happy-go-lucky temperament, his debonair good looks, or the fact that he can charm the dinner off the table?

He's not without faults, after all. He is big, greedy, smelly, clumsy, boisterous, careless and messy; and when young, he can be very destructive. He rips up the designer beds you buy for him, breaks all his toys, digs up the garden and steals from the bin. So why is it we cannot get enough of him?

The answer lies in the Labrador's specific role as a retriever. All gundog work requires a degree of co-operation between the dog and his human partner. Natural instincts to hunt and chase are essential, but so is control. Spaniels that hunt and flush game out of range of the gun, for example, are no use to the hunter. But retrieving requires an even greater depth of partnership. The retriever that carries a bird gently but won't give it back, or one that will not follow directions at a distance, is not going to be a very useful dog. So not only do we need the

natural instincts and urges that we breed into our gundogs, we also need them to have a strong desire to communicate with, and be with, a human partner.

The ultimate in teamwork

Many people imagine a working retriever's job as being fairly straightforward. He sees a bird shot, runs over to the area where he saw it fall, picks it up and runs back with it – very nice, but not particularly impressive. Retrievers have a natural ability to mark the point of fall when they see an animal shot, which is honed and refined with training.

However, a substantial part of a retriever's job is to fetch game that he didn't see shot. It may be a bird his handler shot while he was retrieving another bird, out of sight; or it may be a bird shot by a different person. Either way, one of the most important roles of the retriever is to fetch a retrieve the approximate location of which is known only by a human being. These are called blind retrieves.

Getting a dog to run blind retrieves reliably and over long distances involves an outstanding piece of teamwork. The job of the handler is to get the dog close enough to the retrieve so that he can find it with his nose. This requires a lot of complex training because the dog has to be directed to the right area, which might be across a river, or through a hedge and across a field, or on the other side of a wood, and this direction is given to the dog by a series of whistles and hand signals, sometimes over distances of hundreds of metres.

A unique blend

What we have done with our Labrador Retrievers, over generations of selective breeding, is create a dog that has an astonishing ability to learn this complex skill, a passion for retrieving that takes him through that learning process, and a desire to co-operate with people that enables that

process to take place. It is this unique blend of intelligence, passion and willingness to co-operate that lies at the heart of the Labrador's success in so many walks of life.

It is not surprising that so many people want to share their lives with one of these beautiful, intelligent and trusted animals. Able to morph from hunting partner to household pet and back in the space of a single day, this most affable and willing canine partner has truly earned the nation's vote.

If you are about to bring a Labrador into your life, you have a fantastic journey ahead of you. There will be downs as well as ups but, if you are well prepared, they will be mostly ups. If you haven't quite made up your mind whether or not to bring home a Labrador, the next chapter is especially for you. We're going to take a look at what life with a Labrador is really like!



Labradors' intelligence and loyalty give them a very wide appeal.

2

Are you ready for
a Labrador?

RAISING AND TRAINING a Labrador puppy is one of life's great joys, but life with a new Labrador isn't always plain sailing. Many times, new Labrador parents just need the right information and a little support in order to weather some of the common difficulties we all experience with puppies and young dogs. But sometimes, people struggle because they are not quite ready for the commitment of dog ownership, and sometimes because a different type of dog might have been better suited to their family.

In this chapter, I'm going to help you make sure that this is the right time to bring a dog into your life, and that the Labrador is the right breed for you.



Getting wet is all part of the fun when you have a Labrador!

Is this the right time?

If you bring a dog into your home, it won't just change your life – it will change the dynamics of your family. Everyone will be affected, even the family cat. If you have three children under five and twins on the way, you probably don't need me to tell you that now is not a good time to get a dog, although it is surprising just how many people do take on a puppy when their kids are tiny and then struggle to cope. Having a puppy is quite an intense experience, and while some dogs and kids do rub along together very nicely, it can be tough in the early years. Puppies play-bite and have poor bladder control. So you may find yourself alternating between mopping up puddles and drying your children's tears. Small puppies are easily injured by children climbing on them and tripping over them. A toddler, expensive veterinary treatment and a puppy with its leg in plaster do not make a great combination.

A puppy and a small baby may seem a better option, timing-wise. Why not get the baby stage out of the way and

have them grow up together? But that can be an even bigger challenge. What seemed like a brilliant plan in your friend's kitchen while you admired her basketful of beautiful Labrador babies, may not seem such a good idea at two in the morning when you are stood in the garden waiting for a puppy to wee by torchlight, while your own baby screams his head off upstairs in his cot.

Consider your lifestyle

Most of us have to work these days, often longer hours than we would like, and some of us have time-consuming hobbies or sports, or are supporting children who are similarly engaged. A dog can be a far bigger problem in this respect than some people anticipate.

In many families in the UK, both parents work full-time up to, and after, the births of their children. Many ordinary homes are empty from around eight in the morning until after four in the afternoon when children start trickling home from school. In residential areas, whole streets may be eerily deserted during the working week and yet in many of these streets, behind each front door lies a dog. Some seem uncomplaining; others howl and bark in protest for hours at a time. We discuss this topic from time to time on my Internet forum, and while a significant proportion of people feel it is wrong for those working full-time to keep a dog, there are clearly those who make a success of it.

The secret seems to lie in being willing to pay for a sufficient level of daycare to keep your dog happy, and to a certain extent in the individual temperament of your dog. A dog is rather like a child - if you have one, you either have to look after it or pay someone else to do it for you. How much daycare you will need depends on whether your dog is a puppy or an adult, and daycare doesn't come cheap.

It is true that, unlike your six-year-old child, you can leave an older dog alone for part of each day, but there is no guarantee that he won't howl or chew things up. You can leave puppies alone for shorter periods of time, but not for hours on end. Some people find that the emotional commitment of owning a dog, having to come home at lunch time each day and walk in the dark each winter morning, far more of a drain than they imagined. It's a tie, a commitment and a big emotional responsibility. If you are ready for that, the rewards are great, but if you are not, they may not be sufficient.

If you don't feel quite ready to be tied down, already have a number of time-consuming hobbies, have just planned an adventure holiday to the Himalayas or are drawn to the idea of canoeing up the Amazon, it might be a good idea to postpone dog ownership for a while. If you think you are ready for this but aren't quite sure, one way to test yourself is to look after a friend's dog for a few days and see how it pans out.

Small puppies need a lot of concentrated effort, so while you may be ready for a dog in a general sense, it isn't a good idea to bring a puppy home in the week before Christmas, or just before your daughter's wedding day, as you simply won't be able to give the puppy the attention he needs.

Is a Labrador the right breed for you?

Once you are certain you are ready for a dog, it is important to consider the particular characteristics of the Labrador, both his physical attributes and his temperament, since these will have an impact on your life, your home and your wallet. Bearing in mind the