

More Than A Dog:

by Clarke C. Jones

Chastain's Good Luke Charm, MH, (in our home, MH stands for Master of the Household) strolls purposefully into my office and with his cold, wet nose, nudges my left arm off the computer keyboard. I dutifully respond by giving him the customary tribute of ten seconds of behind-the-ears scratching. With a soft groan that comes from old dogs and old men when they sit or rise, he half collapses to the floor beside me. For this Labrador retriever, rest is essential because his typical day requires that he focus on the many other titles and tasks he fulfills so well. They include: home protector, cat chaser, squirrel eradicator, retriever of upland game and waterfowl, copilot, calendar model, tear dryer, swimming instructor, cook supervisor, therapist, author, food vacuum, and part-time court jester. Even in sleep, he is still busy. It is not uncommon to see his four legs churning, attempting a dream retrieve through invisible waters or maybe chasing down a pheasant. Sometimes

in the middle of night, he emits a woeful howl, making me wonder what kinds of nightmares are chasing him.

We both have reached the age when we awaken in the wee hours of the morning, giving us the best seats for a sunrise. After eating an early breakfast, Luke immediately goes back to sleep while I drink coffee and sort through emails. He seldom leaves my side, but when we are apart, it is debatable which one of us has the greater separation anxiety. His fidelity, however, does have limits. Sounds and smells of tempting meals in preparation divert his attention to the kitchen. Except for his tail swishing back and forth across the kitchen floor like a furry metronome, he lies motionless, observing patiently, ears perked up ever so slightly, listening for the "PLUNK!" sound of a piece of carrot or egg hitting his metal food bowl. He has learned that if he hangs close by, some tasty morsel might land in there, and I have learned not to stand between him and the bowl when that happens.

It is easy for me to understand how, for 23 years, the Labrador retriever has been the

most popular breed in the United States, according to the American Kennel Club (January 2014). The *Guide Dogs of America* considers the Labrador retriever the top breed used "for guide dog programs throughout the world." The attributes of the Labrador for hunting both waterfowl and upland game are well known by the majority of readers of this magazine. So what is it about this particular breed of dog that attracts not only hunters but non-hunters as well?

Though there are several, great hunting and non-hunting breeds and each one of us has our favorites, I have spent most of my adult life owning Labs, and over the past decades my retrievers and I have been able to watch each other closely. Here are some of my observations.

Labs love to please.

Labs seem to have an insatiable desire to please those with whom they bond, and when given clear, proper instructions appear happiest when carrying out a requested task, looking only for a bit of praise from you, their partner.



A Lab is Family

Labs love being around people.

Sometimes, they act like college freshmen pledging to get into the human fraternity. Mine prefers being around people more than other dogs. They seem to bond tightly with their human family, especially if they spend much of their leisure time inside the home. Labs quickly pick up on the day-to-day routine. They notice the difference between your dress shoes and field-stained boots and comprehend that they are not going along as you head out the door for a day at the office. This leads me to my next point.



Courtesy of Michael Bobb

Michael Bobb's Labrador retriever, Jake, takes a break after having his toenails painted.

Labs love being with you hot or cold, dry or wet (but mostly wet).

"Velcro Dog" is a term often used when referring to a Labrador because a Lab nearly always wants to be with you. It doesn't seem to matter if you are freezing in a windblown duck blind with sleet slapping against your face or chasing early season pheasants on a hot Nebraska afternoon; if you are there, your Lab will want to be there too.

Dr. Randy Chisholm's retriever is a case in point. "She likes to ride with me on my jet ski," declares Randy. "If I do not take her with me, she swims after me. If the water gets a little rough, she simply straddles the seat."

Labs will put up with most anything you think is fun.

When Northern Virginia duck hunter Michael Bobb brought home his black Lab puppies, Ashley and Jake, he envisioned owning two well-trained, waterfowl retrievers. At the time, he also had six-year-old twins and apparently the Labs and the twins adored each other. Bobb remembered that his children would have tea parties and dress the Labs in festive hats and costumes, which the dogs took in stride.



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“I have fond memories of the two Labs and my twins interacting and growing up together. The relationship between my children and those two dogs was special,” says Bobb. “The Labs turned out to be okay water-fowl dogs. But, thanks to the twins, I’ll bet I was the only one in a duck blind with black Labs sporting pink toenail polish.”

Labs are full of surprises.

Labradors are used by our very own law enforcement division—from tracking lost people to finding discarded evidence. Linda Downey, a field trialer, found out how well her Labs excelled in tracking.

“I always kept my insurance cards and other important cards in a little Vera Bradley purse,” Linda explains. “One day when I needed a card, I could not find the purse anywhere and had to go through the tedious process of getting replacement cards.”

She continues, “About six months after that ordeal, I was at a location at least 50 miles from home to watch my Labs compete in a field trial. Two of them—before the trial started—went over to a spot near some woods and started sniffing and indicated a find. When I went over to see what was so attractive to them, there was the Vera Bradley purse! Quite faded from the rain and sun but, evidently, still emitting a familiar scent.”

When Linda’s Labs aren’t locating her fashion accessories, they tag along while she works in her flower garden. It’s comforting to think that when you are looking after your hostas, there are several eyes watching your back.

Labs know when to charge and when to be laid back.

Krystal and Zack Smith hunt with their Labs, but as Krystal points out, they seem to have an “on” and “off” switch. “Our Labs love to hunt and go full force when it is time to do so, but they are also big, sweet, calm babies at home,” reveals Krystal.

“I have an 18-month-old niece who comes over very often and our two Labs love her. They seem to understand that she is little and fragile by the way they move around her.”

Linda Downey can vouch for a Lab’s wonderful temperament and companionship, in addition to its keen sense of smell.



Krystal Smith hunts with the family Labs but also appreciates how sweet and gentle they behave at home.

Labs protect their territory.

Although not known as guard dogs, Labradors detect any changes in their territory. Unfamiliar cars pulling into your driveway or a stranger knocking on your door will set off a Lab's alert alarm. Once they know you are satisfied with who's "out there," they settle down but still keep an eye on things, just in case.

Lab puppies think humans are magical and brave.

When a Lab puppy comes to your home, it immediately surveys the situation—trying to determine how he or she fits into the "new pack." This assessment is part of a dog's DNA that helps it survive. Food and water magically appear in the bowls, usually at the same time every day, and the dog figures out that *you* fill them. A puppy's first night in a new home may understandably make it feel anxious, so it's quite impressive when you can make a dark, foreboding room suddenly glow bright

Some dogs are such intimate family members their life is chronicled as news events. Joe Wirt has dozens of photos of his dogs doing hilarious things in the "Midlothian Sundown Telegraph."



as day by turning on a lamp. The loud boom of thunder can be shocking, but if you aren't bothered by the noise, then the puppy decides that neither is it.

A great thing about a Lab is its enthusiasm for retrieving.

Watching your Lab retrieve is great fun, and obviously the dog enjoys it. However, because a Lab does not seem to ever tire of retrieving, you have to be the adult and watch out for signs of heat exhaustion. Always have some kind of water source handy to cool it down.

This leads me to my final point.

Labs love an active lifestyle.

Joe Wirt, from Powhatan, emphasizes the importance of working your Labrador 12 months out of the year. "Take my word for it; your dog is not ready to become a couch potato when hunting season is over," states Wirt, adding, "Health-wise, it is good for both of you to get regular exercise."

Joe recommends giving hunting tests a try, because it will keep your dog sharp and you healthy. He adds, "To ride home with a wet, winning dog is a thrill you must experience to fully appreciate. With patience and training Labradors are willing to do what is requested. So do your dog a favor and let it realize all of its capabilities."



Whether you are driving a foreign car with three numbers on the rear or an American pickup with three numbers on the bumper, your Lab couldn't care less. It doesn't matter if you have taken it to a professional trainer who, with a toot on a whistle and a few hand signals, has taught it to make 200-yard blind retrieves, or it's just you and your dog in the backyard with an old tennis ball... if you are happy and praising his retrieves, he's happy too. It is that happy-face, yeoman-like work ethic from such a dependable companion that makes life with a Labrador retriever a joy to live. 🐾

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at www.clarkecjones.com.

Joe Wirt, shown here with his award-winning Labs; they enjoy the exercise and health benefits of participating in field tests year-round.



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