

# Shetland Sheepdog - The Sheltie

The Shetland Sheepdog (affectionately known as the Sheltie) are gorgeous, small-statured dogs with quick reflexes, even quicker minds and a loving, family temperament.

Often mistaken for Collies, Shelties are hard to miss with their distinctive and beautiful double-coat of fur. But there's a lot more to the Sheltie than its appealing appearance.

In this guide, we'll explore the Shetland Sheepdog's origins, from its herding origins on Scotland's remote and harsh Shetland Islands to its global popularity today.

We'll then take a look at their temperament and grooming requirements, along with their health issues and special needs.

Finally and most importantly, we'll give you information and resources to help you decide if a Sheltie is a good fit for you and your family.

By the end of this guide, we hope you'll have the knowledge you need to successfully take care of a Sheltie, from frolicking puppyhood through to adulthood.

## Origins and history of the breed

The story of the Sheltie's origins become all the more fascinating when we think about the breed's status today. So let's begin there.

Today, the Sheltie is considered one of the most intelligent and easily trained dogs in the world. In fact, the Sheltie ranks sixth out of over 130 breeds tested for intelligence and ease of training.

It's probably not surprising then that the Sheltie is prized today as a family companion, an excellent working dog and even a therapy dog. So, where did this prodigiously intelligent and eager to please dog come from?

That story of this breed begins on a tiny, bleak Scottish Island in the northernmost point of the United Kingdom: the Shetland Islands.

The Shetland Islands are unusually inhospitable and throughout the island's history this has posed considerable challenges for farming. Food is scarce. The climate is cold and the island's terrain is harsh and treacherous.

The precise origins of the Sheltie are unknown, but [it is believed](#) they were bred from a Scottish Collie, the King Charles Spaniel and a mainland Britain Collie.

Small, and able to survive on less food than larger sheepdogs, "Toonie Dogs" (as they were then known, based on the Shetland slang word "toon", meaning farm) were ideal as a resilient, easily-trained and hard-working dog which thrived in harsh conditions.

Because of their remote origins, the Shetland Sheepdog remained largely isolated from other breeds right up until the early Twentieth Century, when a Rough Collie was added to its breeding stock to create what we know know as the modern Shetland Sheepdog.

The breed was first registered in 1909 by the [UK Kennel Club](#) and in 1911 by the [American Kennel Club](#).

## Description of the Shetland Sheepdog

The Shetland Sheepdog stands between 13 and 16 inches tall. The typical Sheltie weight is around 22 pounds. For their height, their bodies are unusually long, giving them a fleet yet stalwart appearance.

In motion, the Sheltie's rugged working heritage is very obvious. Well-proportioned and light on their feet, they exhibit a striking combination of sturdy resilience and agility. They clearly take great delight in being boisterous and energetic.

Shelties have a refined, long head with alert and inquiring eyes. Their ears are relatively small but highly expressive, with tips pointing forward. Their neck is muscular and notably long for the dog's size, giving the Sheltie an alert and proud bearing.

One of the most striking features of the Sheltie is its beautiful, thick coat.

The Shetland Sheepdog has a double coat, perfect for enduring the cold, damp weather of its bleak island of origin. Long, rough water-repellant hair sits on top of an undercoat which is thick, surprisingly soft and well insulated.

The outer layer of fur frequently stands out from the Sheltie's body because the under layer is so dense.

The mane and frill are thick and lush, filling out the Sheltie's body and further emphasizing its proud and upright bearing. The Shetland Sheepdog's tail (which is typically held low) is also full and fluffy.

Coat colors are black, a mottling of predominantly dark as well as light colors (known as blue merle), and gold and mahogany blended with mottled black and white (referred to as tricolor).

The overall result is a dog that is entirely appealing to behold, with an interesting combination of hardiness and agility wrapped up in a striking coat of many colors.

You can read more about the characteristics of this attractive and unusual dog through the official breed standard, available [here](#).

## Temperament & behavior of the breed

The Shetland Sheepdog is known for its sweet temperament. It bonds closely with its family and is happiest when closely involved in daily family life.

This is a herding and working dog, so it will naturally and inherently seek to be busy. It will also exhibit a natural herding instinct, especially with children and small animals. For this reason, it's important to socialize a Sheltie from an early age.

Shelties are frequently vocal and excitable, especially when confronted with new situations or if they become frustrated or bored. Again, early training and conditioning can assist in managing this tendency.

The breed is rarely aggressive and its guiding impulse is to please. For this reason, they are well-suited for obedience training and companionship.

Their small size and demeanor also make the breed a popular choice as therapy dogs. They tend to do well with children and respond well to play and handling.

A crucial aspect of their behavior to be aware of is their need for mental stimulation. The Sheltie is a highly intelligent dog, bred to be active and challenged. It's therefore important to keep a Sheltie mentally engaged.

This is dog that loves to play.

## Training a Sheltie

As one of the world's most intelligent dogs, training a Sheltie requires both creativity and vigor. Provided these conditions are met, this breed typically learns new commands at a prodigious rate.

[Research](#) carried out on Shelties by animal intelligence expert Dr Stanley Coren revealed some impressive findings. An average Sheltie is able to understand a command with fewer than five repetitions. It's also naturally obedient, obeying commands the first time they are given over 95% of the time.

Of course, the flip side of this impressively quick mind is that the Shetland Sheepdog can become bored very easily!

Challenging games will be an essential part of keeping this intelligent little worker happy, especially activities which involve finding, herding and fetching.

Another facet of training and exercise for a Sheltie is maintaining a "light touch." Despite their cheerful and obedient demeanor, the breed is sensitive and excitable.

It's therefore important to correct behavior gently, focusing on using a calm voice. Of course, all punitive forms of discipline should be avoided and will cause the dog to withdraw and lose trust.

Overall, with gentle instruction, food rewards and lots of praise, Shelties are one of the easiest dogs to train and socialize.

## Grooming & General Care

It's probably not too surprising that a Sheltie's coat will require consistent and thorough grooming. Its profuse and abundant double coat sheds considerably, usually during the onset of Spring and Autumn.

It's important to brush brush the coat weekly and more often during shedding.

Shaving the coat is not advised. This can cause the dog to have difficulties in managing its temperature and may also result in skin problems.

When grooming, particular attention needs to be paid to areas where matting can occur. Behind the ears, under the tail and around the elbows are especially important.

All that said, Shelties are actually considered fairly easy dogs to groom, mainly because their fur is shed in clumps. Unlike some other breeds, it's therefore relatively easy to remove the hair and manage their coat.

The Shelties are an active, running dog. Keeping their nails trimmed is an important part of making sure their feet stay healthy and pain free.

## Health issues and special needs of the Shetland Sheepdog

Shetland sheepdogs are generally a healthy breed. Their average lifespan is 12 to 13 years and for the most of that time they can be expected to lead healthy and active lives.

However, when choosing a Sheltie puppy it's important to have a conversation with the breeder about what health screening has taken place and whether its parents have any ongoing health conditions.

If possible, it's a really good idea to see a Sheltie puppy's parents to see if there are any obvious health issues.

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) recommends [early health screening](#) just as you would for your own health.

Shelties should be screened for the following conditions.

**Collie eye anomaly (CEA):** [This inherited condition](#) affects the inner eye. It's generally mild but can be severe in a small number of cases, leading to retinal detachment and blindness. The condition can be screened for in a sheltie puppy 5 to 6 weeks of age.

**Dermatomyocitis and ulcerative dermatosis:** This is an [inherited condition](#) causing skin and muscle inflammation. Its cause is [immunological](#) and it closely resembles human dermatitis. The condition can be screened for using a skin biopsy.

**Von Willebrand's Disease:** This [bleeding disorder](#) is a (typically mild) inherited condition known to be somewhat common in Shetland Sheepdogs. While the disease is usually not diagnosed until later in life, there are specialized [genetic and blood tests](#) a vet can carry out to identify if the condition is present.

Other less prevalent conditions to discuss with breeders and veterinarians include [hypercholesterolemia](#) (a condition characterized by high blood cholesterol levels), [hip dysplasia](#) (an inherited degenerative joint condition), [patellar luxation](#) (dislocating kneecap) and [patent ductus arteriosus](#) (a congenital defect affecting the aorta).

In terms of ongoing health management, other potential health issues to be mindful of with Shelties include:

**Ivermectin intolerance:** [Ivermectin](#) is a drug frequently used to treat heartworm and other parasitic infections. While harmless on most dog breeds, a small number of dogs, Shelties included, may possess a genetic intolerance to this drug. It's important to consult with a vet before using any medication containing Ivermectin as an active ingredient.

For more information about genetic disorders in pedigree dogs, [this article](#) is helpful and informative.

## Ideal home and suitability as a family dog

The Shetland Sheepdog is a loving, intelligent and highly energetic dog. The ideal Sheltie owner is likely to be outgoing, ready to get (lots) of exercise and able to offer a rewarding, mentally challenging home environment.

If this describes you, then the Sheltie is likely to be an amazing companion, equal parts loyal follower, loving family member and active exercise buddy.

There are a few things to carefully consider before choosing a Sheltie puppy as a pet.

The Shetland Sheepdog temperament is most definitely geared toward herding. If you have small children or animals, you'll need to be prepared to actively socialize your Sheltie puppy so that it understands its boundaries.

Prodigious and copious Shetland sheepdog shedding is also something you *will* need to contend with. It will be important to keep put that regular grooming regimen!

While Sheltie health problems are generally quite minor, they are prone to a number of inherited conditions which are best screened for early. It's a good idea to set regular trips to the vet to stay on top of these potential concerns.

Finally, the Sheltie personality is highly intelligent and eager to please, but is also sensitive and excitable. As a Sheltie owner you'll be working with one of the smartest dogs in the world, but as with any intelligent creature, you'll need to pay careful attention to your Sheltie's moods and emotions.

From its origins on bleak farmsteads on a remote, rain-drenched island in far northern Scotland to a breed that is loved and respected all around the world, the Sheltie has certainly done well for itself!

If you're looking for an intelligent and active dog who is quick to learn and seriously devoted to family life, the Shetland Sheepdog is a great choice as a (very) furry companion.

Just keep your new buddy feeling active, challenged and loved and the rest will fall into place.

We hope you've enjoyed this guide to Shelties.

## Sources

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