

***Redlion* Chesapeakes & Labradors**

Dogs for hunting, competition and family

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Where Have All the Chessies Gone? by Kat Bennett

The Bay's original dog and America's first registered retriever was once revered for its bird hunting abilities. But today, many dog owners lean to domestic companions easy to care for and control. The big Chesapeake showed what a marvelous breed he was by leaping into the freezing water, swimming swiftly to the edge of the ice, then breaking a way for himself, right to the goose. Clutching the big bird proudly in his jaws, he plunged into the icy water, pushed aside the frozen chunks and returned to the blind, entering it with a mighty water-spraying leap. "That's what I call a dog," Jake said proudly. And the men agreed. —James Michener: *Chesapeake: The Watermen*, 1972

Bay lore tells of a time when every one of the 26,000 families of the Eastern Shore owned at least one Chesapeake Bay retriever. Maryland governor Edward Lloyd thought so highly of the breed he sent a Baltimore clipper just to fetch one. In 1964, the Chesapeake retriever was legislatively proclaimed the official state dog of Maryland. Yet today the Bay's own dog is considered a rare breed. Fewer than 1,300 were registered in the entire United States in 2004.

Perhaps the Chesapeake retriever is too stubborn and independent for modern tastes. Perhaps the dog is too big or too smelly. Or perhaps these retrievers no longer have the skills they once had. The answer is more complex. The decline of the dynasty must be tracked through three entwined stories: one about the ducking dogs of the Chesapeake; another about the Bay itself; and a third about the people of the Bay and how they've changed.

A Dog of Many Collars

The Chesapeake retriever is a breed that wears three collars — loyal pet, hunter and show dog — and whose reign in Chesapeake Country has spanned centuries. Legends range from famous owners to valiant rescues, as their stories fall in line with our own. The most modern of Chessies live with us in Bay neighborhoods.

Walk down King George Street on a sunny afternoon and you may encounter Chess, a Chessie who's made a niche in Annapolis. This Bay retriever walks herself on occasion, checking on shopkeepers or the workers up by the State House.

"She's so friendly; people always ask me to bring her back to visit," says owner Bevin Bucheiser. But Chess first came to live with the Bucheiser family for protection. "We wanted to get a dog for safety reasons," Bucheiser said. "She raised our first son, who's now in college, and now she is helping raise Aiden, who's nine. We've always felt safe with her around." If the gate is closed, no strangers are allowed onto the property without her owners; if the gate is open, Chess knows that company is expected, and she permits guests to enter and knock at the door.

On the Eastern Shore, Bob Sheppard works to bring back the old-style hunting Chessies. Sheppard tells of a hunting trip in 1977 when his friends were debating which dog to take hunting, a Lab or a Chessie. They took both. "Each dog made a couple of marked retrieves that were around 30 yards. As the weather got worse, the flocks started to come in and the action increased," he said. "Many downed birds later, the Lab became reluctant to get into the water as the ice started to build up on the dogs. The icicle-covered Chessie was given a mark on a downed bird." Then the Chessie proved itself king of the Bay. "Without any hesitation, the dog took off, breaking ice, and made the retrieve. A second mark was given and the Chessie repeated the performance. That did it for me," Sheppard says. "I decided that it was time to purchase one of these fine dogs."

Shipwrecked Treasure

The breed named for the Chesapeake began with two castaways off Maryland's shore. In a letter dated January 7, 1845, George Law of Baltimore wrote of their coming.

"In the fall of 1807 I was on board of the ship *Canton*, belonging to my uncle, the late Hugh Thompson, of Baltimore, when we fell in, at sea, near the termination of a very heavy equinoctial gale, with an English brig in a sinking condition, and took off the crew. ... The brig was loaded with codfish, and was bound to Pole, in England, from Newfoundland." The sinking English ship held not only sailors but also a pair of Newfoundland pups. Law bought the pups and gave both away.

"The dog was of a dingy red colour; and the female black. They were not large; their hair was short, but very thick-coated. ... I gave the male pup, which was called *Sailor*, to Mr. John Mercer, of West River; and the female pup, which was called *Canton*, to Doctor James Stewart, of Sparrow's Point," Law wrote. "Both attained great reputation as water-dogs. They were

most sagacious in every thing; particularly so in all duties connected with duck-shooting.” The dogs and their offspring became “well known, through Patapsco Neck, on the Gunpowder, and up the Bay.” The English strove to preserve the original Newfoundland breed, but Marylanders looked to improve it. Within 25 years of the shipwreck, the American Shooting Manual of 1827 called this new retriever the Chesapeake Bay Ducking Dog and hunters from Maine to the Alaskan wilderness sought to own them.

A Dog for Its Time

In the 19th century ducks were so numerous they darkened the sky. With the birds, professional hunters also flourished, harvesting flocks of waterfowl to satisfy appetites and to adorn the hats of the upper classes.

Demand from Baltimore, Washington and Philadelphia was so great that a pair of birds would bring \$1 to \$7. Hunters used punt guns and boat-mounted cannons that could be fired repeatedly along long lines of flying birds. Firearms could bring down 100 to 200 birds in a day. Chesapeake retrievers could track, swim and bring back all those birds — proving themselves royalty among hunting breeds. That’s the job Chesapeake Bay retrievers were bred for.

Until the late 1800s, any bird or duck dog was called a retriever. Along the Chesapeake, retrievers included water spaniels, straight- and curly-coated retrievers, otterhounds, coonhounds, bloodhounds and the old English spaniel. Mixing retrievers to get certain characteristics was like seasoning a stew. Enterprising breeders would pick dogs with friendly temperaments and the right build to produce the hunting dog they hoped for. The defining feature of the new breed was the “true Chesapeake coat”: thick fur with a dense curly undercoat and oils so thick they could be squeezed out by hand. Oils provided waterproofing and insulation, allowing Chesapeake retrievers to work long hours without getting cold.

At a New York dog show in the 1880s, breeders seeking to prove the endurance of the breed brought in tubs of ice water to better test each dog’s water and cold tolerance. Oily dense coats and webbed feet make the retrievers take to the frigid waters of the Bay as if they were ducks. Braving choppy waves, strong currents and floating ice, these 80-to-100-pound dogs were powerful enough to break through thick reeds and shallow ice shelves again and again to bring back their catch.

Working alongside the hunter as a partner, Chessies learned with few commands — some say they knew instinctively — to first seek out injured birds, then the dead, working until the last duck was recovered. Hunting legends of the breed were the stuff of campfire stories. Un-weaned puppies were said to bring back live birds; adults were famous for the ability to mark and remember where birds had fallen. As a bonus, hunters could warm their hands in the dogs’ weatherproof coats. Initially, fur color wasn’t important, and Bay retrievers came in a rainbow of hues: black; browns in light cocoa to deep bittersweet; sedges in strawberry blonde to russet chestnut; dead grass shades in faded tan to a pale, creamy white. The dominant shade was a rich dark brown, and over time this became the standard Chesapeake color.

A New Job for the Red Chester

By the late 1870s, geese and ducks had been over hunted. By 1918, the problem was so severe that the migratory bird act was passed, restricting the hunting or sale of migrating ducks. The days of the commercial duck hunter were essentially over; duck hunting shifted from job to sport. Sport hunting was not new. Throughout the 19th century, gentlemen and politicians flocked to the Bay seeking the best guides and dogs. Every creek had a hunting club. Hotels rose all along the Chesapeake. At one hotel on Cobb’s Island, from 1874 to 1882, dude hunters from 27 states and Canada came to shoot ducks. For these sports shooters, birds were trophies. Ducking dogs delivered for the paying client.

So important were the dogs that most hunting clubs had their own kennels. At the clubs, Chesapeake breeders like O.D. Foulks helped standardize the breed. Shortly after the Civil War, Foulks was promoting his “red chesters,” boasting that they were the only real ducking dog bred for that purpose. Joe Batt, an English researcher, found that between 1914 and 1933, Chesapeake retrievers and flat-coated retrievers had been bred into Labrador bloodlines. The records had been removed to obscure the out-crossings, especially in chocolate labs. Other Chesapeake breeders regarded their bloodlines as a secret recipe.

Bob Sheppard has spent 22 years researching the Chesapeake retriever. “Even today, I can’t get some [local] breeders to talk about their dog’s lineage,” he says. “They just won’t say.” Distrustful of government, registrations and licenses, most old-time watermen never registered their dogs, and many modern men maintain that tradition. Still, in 1878, through the efforts of Foulks and other sporting hunters, the American Kennel Association registered the first retrieving breed, the Chesapeake Bay retriever. That first dog was Foulk’s Sunday. The other retrieving breeds were recognized later: flat-coated retrievers in 1885, Labrador in 1903 and golden in 1932.

A Presidential Chessie

Chesapeake retrievers reigned as top dog for generations in many prominent families. Their more famous owners included our 26th president, Teddy Roosevelt. In his autobiography, the famous Rough Rider described his dog in terms that suited himself equally well. Roosevelt’s Sailor Boy may have descended from ducking retrievers owned by General George Armstrong Custer, an avid hunter who even took his dogs to war. “Much the most individual of the dogs and the one with

the strongest character was Sailor Boy, a Chesapeake Bay dog. He had a masterful temperament and a strong sense of both dignity and duty. He would never let the other dogs fight, and he himself never fought unless circumstances imperatively demanded it.” Gen. George Custer, above, took his Chesapeake retrievers into battle with him. Legend holds that President Teddy Roosevelt’s own Chessie, Sailor Boy, left, was descended from Custer’s own dogs. On the Bay, Dr. Charles Tilghman bred dogs descended from Sailor and supplied ducking clubs along both shores of the Chesapeake including the Carroll Island Club where Duck, a descendent of the breed’s matriarch Canton, originated.

Holding Its Own

In the 19th century, the Chesapeake Bay was a maritime version of the Wild West. There were gunfights over oysters, waterfowl, terrapins and fishing. Crabs were restricted to local consumption, because they were too delicate, but with the advent of new canning techniques around 1865, crabbing also added to the industry mix. Guarding skills made a hunting dog more valuable to the men who supplied oysters, fish and waterfowl for local and big-city markets. The Chesapeake Bay dog fit the bill. Still does, owners say. “You can tell a Chesapeake retriever to stay in the back of your truck and come back three days later and he’ll still be there guarding it,” says Jim Suite of Anglers Sport Center. “You may find an arm or two, but the dog will not appear to have moved.”

New Times, New Values

Throughout the 19th century, demand for Chesapeake retrievers remained steady. A good hunting Chessie commanded several hundred dollars in the mid-1800s, the equivalent of \$1,000 or more today. From 1860 through 1904, Jay Towner on the Western Shore’s Bush River advertised his dogs to hunters all over the country. He classified the colors of coats as light or dark and would ship either as requested. But changes loomed. Just before World War I, western breeders of the Chesapeake retriever began focusing on upland game hunting, where the oiliness of the coat was less important. They favored a smaller dog with lighter, dead-grass shades, better to blend in with the western grasses.

After the wars ended, many men found that hunting was a good outlet for their military training. Upland game hunters favored Labs as their weekend gunning companions. The population of registered Chesapeake retrievers remained constant as the population of Labrador retrievers skyrocketed. As Labs dominated, competitions changed to favor their skills. Instead of being free to retrieve all downed birds one after the other, new rules required a dog to retrieve one decoy, then sit awaiting direction. Instead of ice-choked rivers and frigid conditions, water trials were held in sunny ponds during summer and fall. These trials did not fully test the Chessies’ skills. “On a warm autumn day, with a plastic decoy, there is one sort of competition,” Butch Goodwin wrote in 1997. “But when it is windy, minus 10 degrees with three-foot seas and the goose is alive and unhappy about getting grabbed by a dog that is another test entirely.”

Not Pet But Partner

The independence of mind, tireless energy, oily coat and dauntless devotion that made the Chesapeake retriever the premiere dog of the 19th and early 20th centuries are the same qualities that make them less desirable today. The Chessie is no less a duck hunter, but fewer modern dog owners hunt. Today’s preference is for domestic companions easy to care for and control.

It’s said that you can order a Lab, and you can ask a golden. But you must negotiate with a Chesapeake.

A Chessie doesn’t learn commands; it learns rules and routines and makes decisions. It needs to figure out how things fit together. Chessies think like a partner, not like a servant. Bred to work 10 or 12 hours a day five to seven days a week, the Chessie needs a job. The marshy, choppy and sometimes frigid waters of the Bay have shaped the Chesapeake retriever. Like many Bay creatures — the great flocks of birds, the oysters and the crabs — so too have retriever numbers dwindled.

Loyal Chessies owners will tell you that’s one more reason to save the Bay.

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