

# The Perennial Puppy

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Soft brown eyes display a hopeful, beseeching expression as if asking, “Do you have a treat for me?” Long flat earflaps sweetly frame the youthful face. Only the presence of gray hairs on the muzzle gives away the dog’s true age. The small-to-medium size and merry demeanor give the beagle the appearance of a canine Peter Pan—the perennial puppy that never grows up.

Beagles are the smallest member of the hound group and have been around in one form or another for hundreds of years. Packs of hounds hunted the British Isles (especially Wales) since before the time of the Roman Empire. By mid-18th century, there were two recognized types of hare-hunting hounds: the Southern hounds which were slow and ponderous, possessing long ears and a deep voice and the North Country beagle, a smaller more nimble and vigorous dog. The origin of the word beagle is unclear but may have been derived from the Celtic *beag* or Old English *begele*, both meaning small.

Over the years, the breed’s appearance went through many changes. During the rein of Elizabeth I, one could find wire-haired beagles—some so small they could fit into a huntsman’s pocket, standing only 9 inches tall at the withers. The early beagles that found their way to America during colonial times were reputed to look more like straight-legged Basset hounds or dachshunds than the miniature foxhound appearance they sport today.

For a time the breed fell out of favor as fox hunting and foxhounds became all the rage. However, the sturdy little rabbit dog made a resurgence in the 1830s thanks to Parson Phillip Honeywood who is credited for developing the modern beagle. By the late 1880s, these more refined dogs were imported into America; and in 1888, their fans formed the National Beagle Club and held the first American field trial.

Today’s beagles perform many jobs: smelling out contraband agriculture at international points of entry, indicating the presence of termites at house inspections, serving as purpose-bred laboratory research subjects, entertaining the neighborhood kids. But nothing gets a beagle more excited than the scent of a rabbit to chase. The odors from an overturned garbage can to explore or road-kill to roll on also holds the dog’s attention. Actually, any interesting smell will distract this breed from obedience. While the beagle loves to work for food, making training lots of fun, it can also turn some beagles into temporary “blithering idiots” -- too overcome with joy to focus on anything but the mouth-watering smells emanating from hand or pocket. They become imaginative problem-solvers when there’s high-value food on the line – climbing over or digging under fences and single-mindedly working at opening “dog-proof” containers until victory has been achieved or the dog is too exhausted or injured to continue.

Due to their intense love of food, beagles can pack on the pounds. Keep them trim by counting calories, offering low-fat treats and exercising the dog at least one hour a day. A beagle who is short-changed on exercise can become destructive.

Beagles were created to hunt in pairs or packs so they are very social dogs that enjoy the company of both people and other dogs. They are worthless as guard dogs because strangers are likely to be greeted as friends. Social isolation can bring on howling as the dog tries to call his family pack back together. Few beagles are prone to aggression. Their Achilles heel is their need to protect high-value possessions. The national breed club warns potential beagle guardians to stay away from the dog's bowl when he/she is eating to avoid conflict. But outside of letting their noses overrule their minds at times, the majorities of beagles and beagle mixes have sunny dispositions and are easy to handle. Teaching the dogs to walk city streets with their noses off the ground is usually the biggest challenge guardians face.

There are two size varieties: dogs under 13 inches tall and dogs 13 inches to 15 inches tall. The wash-and-wear coat is short, hard and lies close to the body. Accepted colors include "any true hound colors" meaning all shades and combinations of white (cream), black, tan/red/lemon, brown/liver and blue/grey. Ticking (small dark spots on white) is sometimes seen. Beagles are moderate yet muscled athletes that don't have any of the excess skin seen in most other scent hounds.

Americans have been fans of the breed for years. The most popular breed in the country during the mid-fifties, the beagle has been in or near the top ten ever since. As with all popular breeds, overbreeding can lead to some serious health issues. Hypothyroidism, patellar luxation, epilepsy, intervertebral disc disease, ear infections, demodectic mange and a host of eye and eyelash problems afflict the breed. Unlike the cocker spaniel, the beagle is still frequently bred as a working companion which may serve to keep the breed relatively robust. Life span for a beagle is 12-15 years.

Do you like a youthful appearance, adolescent-like inconsistency, and a merry demeanor in your dogs? If so, heed the call the next time one or two of the beagles or beagle mixes available in the nation's shelters howls for your family pack to come and get him!

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