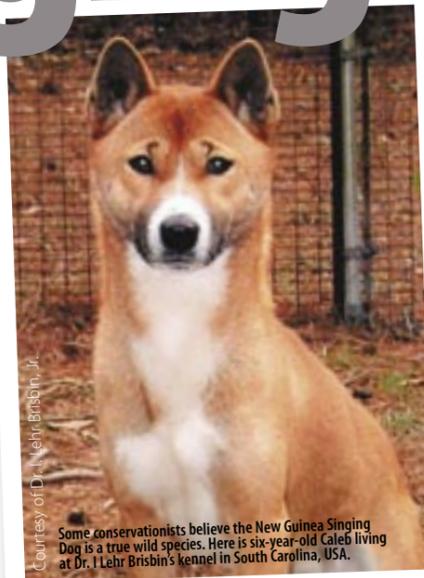


The New Guinea Singing Dog

With its co-ordinated and harmonious howl, the New Guinea Singing Dog has attracted much attention by the international canine community. But these dingo-like dogs are caught up in a controversy that could cause them to become extinct. *Beverly Borer* investigates.



Courtesy of Dr. I. Lehr Brisbin, Jr.

Some conservationists believe the New Guinea Singing Dog is a true wild species. Here is six-year-old Caleb living at Dr. I. Lehr Brisbin's kennel in South Carolina, USA.

The New Guinea Singing Dog (NGSD) — or Singer — is called that because of its peculiar habit of howling and yodelling a variety of notes. Some sounds they make resemble the chirping of birds, while others sound more like the song of a humpback whale.

Not only the sound, but also the way they howl, is unique. The howl form varies depending on the mood of the dog and context. Unlike other howling species, such as domestic dogs, wolves and jackals, the Singer's howl is normally not combined with barks, yips or whines. The real difference is that while a group of these other species all chorus howl at the same time, the Singers actually co-ordinate their howls and harmonise, like Madrigal singers.

Many people are captivated by the voice of these beautiful dogs, but they are also caught up in a debate over its lineage. Originally declared a unique species decades ago, they were later grouped with the Australian dingo as a feral wild subspecies of the domestic dog. Because of this, most zoos stopped breeding them and their captive population has subsequently declined.

Some conservationists argue that if these dogs are not acknowledged as a unique species, they will eventually die out due to lack of funds

for research, and we will lose the opportunity to learn about adaptation, evolution, the origin of the domestic dog and early man. *Dogs Life* speaks to canine experts around the world to shed some light on the controversy.

To learn about the history of the breed, *Dogs Life* first contacts Janice Koler-Matznick from the New Guinea Singing Dog Conservation Society (NGSDCS).

Also a member of the Dog Advisor Behaviour Service, the Primitive and Aboriginal Dog Society and IUCN Canid Specialist Group, Koler-Matznick says the Singer, in its wild state, is an elusive creature and although people have seen tracks and heard yodelling, all attempts to capture others have been unsuccessful.

She says most Singers in captivity today have been bred from seven wild-caught founders and five from Indonesia's Irian Jaya Highlands, which were shipped to Germany. The original pair was brought back to Australia by Mr E le G Troughton, a naturalist whose early work on the unique animal species of Australia and other countries is documented in many animal books, such as *Furred Animals of Australia*.

According to Sara Brice, registrar of collections at Taronga Zoo in Sydney, the female of the pair that was shipped there in the 1950s gave birth to several puppies soon after arrival and these, along with subsequent progeny, were eventually shipped to other zoos in Australia and overseas.

After a bit of sniffing around to find out where some of these dogs went, *Dogs Life* learns of two Singers at Birmingham Zoo in Alabama, USA, where they were used in wildlife shows. Patty Pendleton from the zoo tells *Dogs Life* the dogs, named Dillon and Joplin, had become quite tame due to constant socialisation.

"Joplin has now retired from public life and lives happily with one of the zookeepers who used to work with him," she says.

A subject of controversy

Over the years, the NGSD has been the subject of hot debate — some experts say it is a unique breed, while others say it is related to other species.

Troughton thought they were unique. In 1958, he named the species *Canis hallstromi* after Sir Edward Hallstrom, president of the Taronga Park Zoo. Placement in Taronga Park Zoo ensured a good breeding program, but, according to an article on The Caroline Dog's website (www.carolinadogs.org/geninfo/primative.html), in 1969 the scientific world decided the Singer was really just a feral domestic dog. This decision was based on taxonomic analyses of skeletal and cranial characteristics.

Unfortunately, this meant that zoos lost interest in the NGSD and stopped breeding them. When the original pair of Taronga Zoo Singers died, their remains were shipped to the Australian Museum, where they remain to this day as specimens under holotype and paratype status.

"A holotype is the specimen on which the original scientific description of the species is based," Sandy Ingleby of the Australian Museum tells *Dogs Life*. "It is used as a reference



Courtesy of Janice Koler-Matznick

Life with Singers — Darwin Matznick tries to read the paper in the joyful company of three New Guinea Singing Dogs, who were one year old at the time.

or standard to describe the size, colour, form etc of that species or subspecies. A paratype is another specimen in the series used by the person naming the species.

Type specimens are arguably the most important specimens of a species in a collection. Even if the species is no longer recognised (as in the case of *hallstromi*) the specimens always remain 'types' for that group".

A search on the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com) reveals that in 1976, V. Simons found that two of the blood enzymes from the NGSD are quite different from the domestic dog, jackal and wolf, though similar to the American coyote. A test of the NGSD mitochondrial DNA done in 1992 found that it was unique when compared with 33 breeds of domestic dog.

DNA testing

With the technology of latter years, DNA tests have been carried out by Dr Alan Wilton [Bsc (Hons) PhD], senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales' Biomolecular Science School, and Dr Peter Savolainen, assistant professor of Alba Nova University Centre in Stockholm, Sweden.

Wilton tells *Dogs Life* that these tests have shown that dingoes and

the NGSD are very closely related. "They have same mitochondrial DNA and very similar DNA fingerprints," he says.

Koler-Matznick from the NGSDCS believes the Singer is a true wild species and was not necessarily domesticated when it first arrived in New Guinea an estimated 5000 years ago. The Conservation Society arranged for the United Kennel Club (UKC) to recognise the Singer as a breed of domestic dog for record-keeping



Courtesy of Lynette Watson

Some canine experts believe the New Guinea Singing Dogs are a primitive species of dingo-type canids believed to be descended from the Indian wolf.

Links

New Guinea Singing Dog Conservation Society:

www.canineworld.com/ngsdcs

The American Rare Breeds Association (ARBA):

www.rarebreed.com

Dingo Discovery Sanctuary and Research Centre: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~dingolyn/index.html>

Australian Dingo Foundation:

www.dingofoundation.org.au

purposes. This meant they could be placed on the endangered species list, which enabled the NGSDCS to interest research centres in DNA and other forms of non-invasive testing and investigations.

In January 1996, the UKC began to keep proper registration records based on the International Species Information System (ISIS) used by zoos, while Dr I. Lehr Brisbin, Jr, a senior ecologist at America's Savannah River Ecology Laboratory at the University of Georgia in South Carolina, established the NGSD Stud Book.

The American Rare Breeds Association (ARBA) recognises the NGSD for competition purposes and the first champion NGSD was recorded in 1997.

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On the boat from Papua New Guinea to Sydney — a snapshot of the first pair of New Guinea Singing Dogs donated to Taronga Zoo by Sir Edward Hallstrom.

Courtesy of Dr. Susan Bulmer, Auckland, NZ, property of NGSDCS

The Singing Dog in Papua New Guinea

This year, the New Guinea Singing Dog Conservation Society (NGSDCS) opened a branch in Papua New Guinea, headed by Mike Wilangue, forest research scientist with the Papua New Guinea Forests Research Institute.

He tells *Dogs Life* that surveyors in Hidden Valley, a remote jungle area in the Morobe Province, have sighted several wild dogs — believed to be New Guinea Singing Dogs — as they crossed over a creek.

Government or private funding to aid in the conservation of the Singer depends on proving they still exist in pure form, Wilangue says, but this is difficult due to their evasive habits and the impassable terrain they inhabit. The NGSDCS team is working hard to gain this proof by seeking funding for a future field trip. Once formally registered, the PNG Branch team plans to declare the Singer habitat a Wildlife Management Area, so logging or mining cannot destroy it.

If you wish to lend a paw to the PNG Branch or donate, please email Mike Wilangue on mnwilangue@fri.pngfa.gov.pg

Dogs Life contacts Lyn Watson, internationally qualified all-breeds dog judge and director of the Australian Dingo Foundation and the Dingo Discovery Sanctuary and Research Centre at Toolern Vale in Victoria.

"The NGSD, like the Australian dingo, is a primitive species of dingo-type canids now

believed to be descended from the Indian wolf, *Canis lupus indicus*," Watson says. "Like the dingo, it is a naturally occurring semi-wild canid which has the innate ability to communicate across the species barrier — eg, with man."

While it is now generally accepted as the most primitive of 'domestic' dogs, the United Kennel Club and others recognise the NGSD as a unique breed.

"For a start, its carnassial tooth (the first upper molar) is greater than 10 per cent of the skull length, something that is normally only seen in wild canids, like the wolf," Watson says. "It has only one breeding cycle per year — in the fall of the Southern Hemisphere — but if the female does not become pregnant, this can be repeated four to 12 weeks later, another trait of wild canids."

Characteristics

"The NGSD looks somewhat like a dingo, but there are many differences," says Koler-Matznick. "It is much smaller than the dingo — more the size of a fox. Its head is wider and the carnassial teeth are much longer than the dingo. It is able to flatten its rather tulip, petal-shaped

"They are far too quick to catch. The best way to get them back is to excite their curiosity with something like a white sock on a long piece of twine, which mimics prey." Norma Lewis of Birmingham Zoo, Alabama, USA

ears in both a forward and sideways position, whereas most dogs flatten ears towards the back of the head. The tail has a brush on the underneath part, the head is much wider at the cheekbones compared to dingo or fox, while the muzzle is quite narrow."

The coat is a double one, the outside being stiff and the inner one softer. The eyes are extremely reflective and glow a distinctive green colour in dim light, more like the eyes of a cat than a dog. Koler-Matznick also tells *Dogs Life* that sadly these animals are now in danger of extinction due to the destruction of their habitat and inter-breeding with other dog breeds that are now more prevalent in the highlands.

Houdini of the canine world

Dogs Life speaks to Norma Lewis, who helped raise Singer puppies at Alabama's Birmingham Zoo. She says Singers are great escape artists.

"They are so agile, they can climb and jump almost as well as a cat, while their enthusiastic digging is quite capable of getting them out under a fence," Lewis says.

To keep one as a pet, you need a six-foot fence with topper and footer. Unless well-trained, they are likely to dive out the door or gate between your legs. Still, there are at least 50 kept as pets in North America and Canada, in a variety of environments from apartments to large backyards. Zoos would house between 100 and 150.

When taken out for exercise, most Singers must be kept on a leash — a harness with a strap through the front legs. Because of their wide neck and narrow body, they tend to wriggle out of an ordinary collar. Once they escape, their hunting instinct is so strong that any training they had to come at call is negated, Lewis explains.

"They are far too quick to catch. The best way to get them back is to excite their curiosity with something like a white sock on a long piece of twine, which mimics prey," she says.

Fortunately, the Singers bond with their environment as well as their owners, so they will mostly return if they are able. However, while hunting they are heedless of things that may pose a threat to them, such as traffic, so getting run over is a distinct possibility, Lewis adds.

"They rarely get sick and are tough enough to survive outside in temperate climates with little shelter," she says. "Housing them in a kennel is sufficient, as long as the right fencing is in place. They seem quite happy to be housedogs, but should not be left alone inside for extended periods, as they can become destructive. Vet care is about the same as for other dog breeds."

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New Guinea Singing Dogs co-ordinate their howls and harmonise. Pictured are 14-year-old male, Kai (in rear) and Buna, a female, died last year.

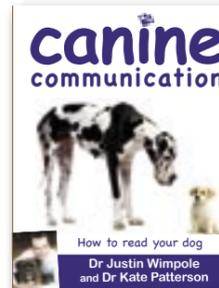
Courtesy of Janice Koler-Matznick

Barkback!

What do you think about the New Guinea Singing Dog controversy? Email us on dogslife@universalmagazines.com.au

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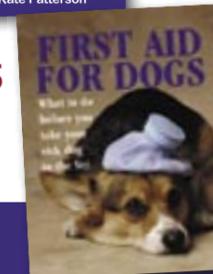
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A seven-month-old New Guinea Singing Dog puppy looks across the Colorado Mountains in the United States.

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