

Brought to the US by Helen Keller, This Popular Breed Almost Died Out

It's hard to believe that this much-loved breed nearly reached extinction in the 1800s, and if it weren't for the government's swift action to make them a national priority, they might not be here today. And blind and deaf author Helen Keller wouldn't have had her gentle and trusty companion.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The Akita is considered a natural monument in his native Japan, where as a breed they were developed to hunt bears, wild boars and elk, but today most Akita dogs in Japan are police or guard dogs
- A famous story about a loyal Akita named Hachiko, who lived in the 1930s, endeared the breed to the world and may have prompted Helen Keller to introduce him to the U.S. for the first time
- Naturally, the Akita's loyalty, bravery, protectiveness and devotion to their family members are some of this breed's best qualities. If you are thinking about this breed there are several breed rescues that have many Akitas ready and waiting for their forever home
- Since they shed in both the fall and winter, they shed a lot more, so they require daily brushing
- They're generally good with kids under supervision. Cats, however, seem to be an acceptable and loving companion if they're raised together

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Originating in the snowy, mountainous regions of Japan, an interesting dog breed called Akita, known for a district of the same name, is a favorite among dog lovers the world over. In their native country, the Akita is so revered there's even a museum dedicated to the breed, located in the city of Odate in Akita Prefecture.

It's the site of a railway station where a pet Akita named Hachiko met his beloved owner every day after work, but when his owner died from a stroke in 1925, the dog returned to the same spot daily, refusing to become anyone else's pet, until he died 10 years later.

A film based on the story, called "Hachi," starring Richard Gere, came out in 2009. In 1937, the Akita breed was brought to the U.S. by blind and deaf author Helen Keller, who was inspired by Hachiko's story and wanted a loyal dog. Pet MD notes that Keller found the dogs to be "gentle, companionable, and trusty." The breed was recognized by the American Kennel Club in 1972.

It's interesting to note that the Akita breed nearly died out in the 1800s, but when the Japanese realized they were nearing extinction, they made it a national priority to save them, along with six other native dog breeds that may also have been at risk. The Akita is the largest of all of them. The story of Hachiko's great loyalty and love for his owner is a

favorite one for school children throughout Japan. According to Japan Travel, the Akita is designated as a Japanese Natural Treasure.

The museum was built on the 50th anniversary of the Akita Dog Preservation Society's foundation, its purpose being to keep the breed pure, especially since cross breeding is common. Purebred Akita dogs were once known simply as “snow country dogs,” used to hunt mountain animals such as elk, boar and a small bear known as a Yezo. Read on for some of the best features that make the Akita a favorite breed.

Akita Characteristics — Traits and Temperament

These dogs have heavy bones and a large body, so they're quite strong, which is only natural, given their history as a working dog. The Akita breed typically weighs in at anywhere from 65 to 115 pounds, on average; sometimes more.

Vet Street notes the Akita as looking very much like a spitz breed, with a wedge-shaped head, close-set eyes and prick ears, with dense fur designed to keep them warm in even the coldest weather — a double, “weather-proofed” coat, actually — which is relatively short and easy to maintain if he's brushed every week.

However, since they shed in both the fall and winter, they shed a lot more, so they require daily brushing. Being from snow country, with the Akita dog's lineage possibly stretching back for millennia, certain physical features, such as webbed claws, help distribute their weight in deep snow, as well as help them climb out of icy lakes and ponds. Speaking of snow, this breed has a natural affinity for cooler weather. According to the American Kennel Club:

“When the weather turns cooler the dogs seem to have a ‘turbo’ button that switches on. If there is snow on the ground, they will stay out all day hunting rabbit, squirrel, and other small game, in a securely fenced yard until relegated to come inside the house. It is safe to say they prefer colder weather, love eating snow, and rolling in it as a snow ‘scrub.’”¹

The Akita is also known for being independent, as well as courageous, which may be why they make excellent guard dogs and, while they may not have the opportunity to be the hunters they were for possibly hundreds of years, they're also often used in their native Japan as police dogs. That said, training is recommended early as it is for most every other dog, because natural traits include a stubborn streak, a tendency to be headstrong, and aggression toward people they're not familiar with.

Because they have a natural instinct to hunt, the Akita will often go after other animals who trespass onto their property, and other dogs in the household are not recommended. They're generally good with kids under supervision. Cats, however, seem to be an acceptable and loving companion if they're raised together.

The Akita Breed's Lifespan and Health

The **Akita** has a lifespan that can extend to 12 years or more, with physical problems, many of them eye-related, occasionally prevalent to the breed including:

- **Microphthalmia** — Undersized eyes
- **Patellar luxation** — Kneecap dislocation
- **Renal cortical hypoplasia** — Causing kidney problems

- **Epilepsy**
- **Polyneuropathy** — Affecting the peripheral nerves
- **VKH-like syndrome²** — An autoimmune disease
- **Cataracts**
- **Entropion** — Or inward-folded eyelid
- **Canine hip dysplasia (CHD)**
- **Progressive retinal atrophy (PRA)**

In addition, Pet MD contends that care must be taken to protect the breed from other more health complications, such as osteosarcoma (bone cancer), pemphigus (skin discoloration), elbow dysplasia, hypothyroidism and sebaceous adenitis, an inflammatory skin disease.

Akita Lifespan and Health

One of the comments people make about the Akita is how well-behaved they are, but in order to keep them at their obedient best, mental stimulation and routine physical exercise is important. A safe area in which to run is a great set-up, as they really do best as an inside dog who has access to the great outdoors. Vet Street recommends a 20- to 30-minute walk or run every day, but always on leash, and explains:

“He performs well in dog sports such as agility, obedience and rally, but they aren’t his favorite activities. He prefers the more one-on-one experience of being a therapy dog. A people-loving dog like the Akita needs to live in the house. It’s an unhappy Akita who is relegated to the backyard with little or no human companionship.”³

Other adjectives often used to describe these dogs include dignified, as they have a natural relaxed but vigilant bearing and deep devotion to their forever families. Quiet, “somewhat active,” protective and eager to please are other terms that help describe this interesting, beautiful dog. Pet MD adds that the Akita is:

“Extraordinarily affectionate and loyal with family and friends. It is almost feline in its actions; it is not unusual for an Akita to clean its face after eating, and to be very neat and tidy in the house.”⁴

You’ll find many more surprising and endearing qualities to this breed, such as a fastidious nature, so house training is easier than it may be with other breeds. If you’re looking for a pet with loyalty, protectiveness and a generally easygoing nature, the Akita may be the one you’re looking for. Be sure to visit your local animal shelter or rescue group if you’re considering adding an Akita to your home; there are many available in need of good homes.

Sources and References

¹ [American Kennel Club, Akita](#)

² [Tissue Antigens. 2005 Dec;66\(6\):656-65.](#)

³ [Vetstreet, June 19, 2011](#)

⁴ [PetMD, January 8, 2025](#)