

Living with a Bouvier Des Flandres

By Lisa Rodier
American Bouvier des Flandres Club

Photos courtesy of L. Rodier and L. Murrer.

Step into a house where an appropriately tempered Bouvier lives and chances are you'll be greeted right away by a large, hairy, possibly unkempt, beast. He'll size you up, maybe take a stand between you and his guardian, then excuse himself to a corner of the room once he's made your acquaintance. Lest you think that you're safe, think again. While the Bouvier might appear to be snoozing, he has one eye on you the entire time you're in his presence. Don't pose a threat, and you'll be fine... he's not seeking a confrontation. But step out of line, and you could be surprised by his seemingly sudden intensity.

The Bouvier des Flandres was bred to be a protector and he takes his job seriously. The Bouvier's intensity and intention are characteristics that can catch first time Bouvier owners off guard, particularly those who have been lulled into a false sense of comfort by his teddy bear good looks and apparent easy going nature.

The Bouvier's temperament, grooming and exercise requirements make the breed often unsuitable for unprepared first time Bouvier or novice dog owners. The American Bouvier Rescue League (ABRL), the rescue arm of the American Bouvier des Flandres Club (ABdFC), takes in close to

100 Bouviers every year, many of whom come from individuals ill-equipped to deal with what the breed offers and requires.

Grooming

Some individuals come to the breed because of the Bouvier's striking appearance, coupled with the fact that the breed has been billed erroneously as "hypo-allergenic." Alas, wherever the Bouvier goes outdoors, he will bring a little bit back with him, indoors. Pine straw, bark, weeds, grass – you name it – the Bouvier beard, leg furnishings and body do a fabulous job of picking up outdoor debris, and an equally fabulous job of depositing it inside the house. Because dust, dirt, pollen and vegetation so easily cling to the Bouvier, this can create a problem for individuals having allergies. So buyer beware: the Bouvier is not a hypo-allergenic dog! While it is true that the Bouvier does not have a coat that sheds copiously, many a Bouvier owner will attest to finding Bouvier dust bunnies around the house. This happens, in particular, when one becomes lax on the weekly grooming sessions needed to keep the Bouvier's coat in manageable shape. Bouviers repeatedly arrive in rescue in sore need of grooming, and require a close-to-skin shave because of the severe,



painful matting and even dreadlock-type growth that can occur with neglect. Without regular attention to brushing and combing, mats form fiercely and quickly. And while most Bouvier owners invest in a set of grooming tools for home use, regular trims by a professional groomer should be figured into the budget, too – or the willingness to invest in a good pair of clippers and the knowledge to clip the Bouvier at home.

Temperament

Those who love the breed have come to appreciate the Bouvier for his temperament and physical ability: highly intelligent, fiercely loyal, protective, aloof and stubborn with a dry sense of humor. He is certain that he is at least as smart as, but most times smarter than, any of the two-legged beings that share his world – and all packaged in a large, yet surprisingly fast and agile body. One must remember that the Bouvier's origins are traced back to cattle and farm dogs of the Flandres region of Belgium; the breed was developed as a working dog to serve as protector and herder. As a result, the Bouvier is a prime example of a dog that, if not given a job of his own, will soon create one of his own – and more likely than not, it's not quite the job description that his human had in mind – for example, herding boisterous small children by nipping at pant legs and behinds. The Bouvier, too, is a capable hunter with a strong chase instinct.



Wildlife and cats are at the unsupervised Bouvier's mercy.

Those characteristics of the Bouvier that draw us in can quickly become serious liabilities without proper and intensive socialization and training. The Bouvier unexposed at a young age to the sights, sounds and people in the world around him can become fear aggressive, overprotective, uncertain, and unhealthily suspicious. Coupled with the breed's size and quickness, the results can be disastrous. An untrained, unsocialized Bouvier with a strong protective background can become a danger to those around him; sadly, this is an all-too-familiar scenario seen by Bouvier rescue. In rescue, Bouviers are relinquished for any number of reasons including mis-directed herding behavior, killing small animals, inappropriate



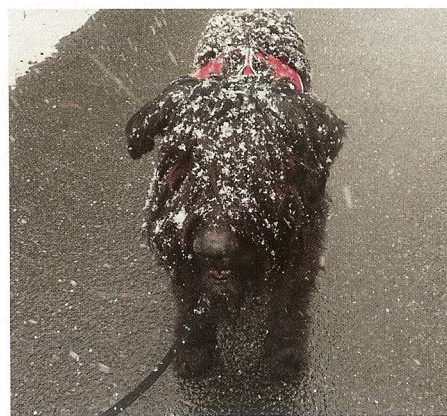
guarding, and fear aggression. Relegating a dog like this – or any Bouvier – to the backyard to live a life of solitude is a cruel solution to dealing with the Bouvier's often-challenging temperament.

Exercise & Training

The Bouvier is a house dog; the typical Bouvier is most at ease when he is around his human flock, rather than sequestered in a backyard or elsewhere alone. The Bouvier is also happiest – and most easily managed – when his body and his brain are engaged. Because of the Bouvier's intelligence and obstinacy, most in the breed have found success using positive, rather than physically punitive, methods of training. While some trainers still instruct clients to “dominate” their dogs, trying to do so with a Bouvier might lead to an impasse or worse. Trying to force a Bouvier to do anything often nets nothing; instead, convincing the Bouvier that what you want him to do was his idea all along usually leads to success. Nonetheless, the Bouvier is not a dog for a pushover: the Bouvier owner needs to be firm and clear in his or her requests, confident, and most of all, consistent, to get results.

The Bouvier requires regular physical and mental exercise to live successfully as a member of a household. The breed is not self-exercising; those with ample fenced yards who turn a Bouvier loose to exercise himself will, more often than not, peek outside to see a Bouvier standing at the doorstep or taking a snooze on the porch.

Instead, regular exercise – leash walks, hikes, interactive play, swimming – with



their people burns energy and calories. And exercising the Bouvier's brain is just as important. Engaging in training in dog sports such as herding, carting, agility, scent work, tracking, rally obedience, therapy dog, Schutzhund, flyball, weight pull and obedience (just to name a few) are recommended. The Bouvier likes variety; repetitive activities such as drilling “sits” and “downs” ad nauseum should be avoided unless the trainer wishes to see the poster child for passive-aggressive behavior come to life. Instead, engage the Bouvier with the fun and challenge of clicker training, puzzle games, hide and seek, find it games or any activity that requires him to use his brain.

Along with socialization as a puppy, basic training of manners is not optional and should be on-going for the Bouvier's life. Early skills should include proper greeting behavior, impulse control and recalls, along with the basics.

Living in harmony with a Bouvier requires patience, dedication and a significant time investment. For those who love the breed and are willing to persevere, living with our Bouvier is an experience that we'd not trade for any other. ■

BIO

Lisa Rodier is a volunteer with the American Bouvier Rescue League and a member of the American Bouvier des Flandres Club. She is an ABdFC carting judge, a Certified Nose Work Instructor and an AKC CGC evaluator. Lisa has participated in a variety of activities and dog sports with her Bouviers.

