


LIVING LARGE

Labrador retrievers
need both active
adventure time and
cozy couch potato
time with you.



THE BIG O



SHARING LIFE WITH A LARGE DOG CAN BRING UNIQUE BENEFITS AND JOYS. SO WHY DO THEY LINGER LONGER IN SHELTERS THAN SMALLER DOGS AND CATS?

» *By Jen Reeder*

Labrador Retriever

Maximum Adult

Weight 55-80 lbs

Lifespan 11-13 years

Most Positive

Attributes They are gentle, affectionate and loyal, making them excellent family companions.

Tracy Korb had only ever lived with cats when she and her husband adopted their first dog: a 90-pound Labrador retriever mix aptly named Bigsy.

Welcoming the big dog with the “kind face” into their home was surprisingly easy, according to Korb. Bigsy quickly charmed their 18-pound cat, Milo—the two even cuddled for naps—and joined the couple on daily hikes in the forests near their home in Durango, Colorado. He had enough stamina for a 13-mile hike in the summertime or to bound through deep snow in winter.

“He fit right in,” she says. “We could take him everywhere. And I love cuddling with a big dog.”

When Bigsy died in 2022, after nearly a decade together, Korb and her husband grieved the loss of their best friend. When they were ready, they adopted another big dog—a young Labrador retriever named Basil, who grew to be a lanky 95-pound dog.

There was never a question that they’d adopt another big dog, Korb says, since they wanted a canine companion who could enjoy outdoor activities. Like Bigsy, Basil can go in and out of the doggy door into the yard unsupervised, whereas their next-door neighbors’ pug, Mr. T, was recently threatened by a hawk circling overhead.

Other friends with small dogs need to buy winter coats for their pets and shovel paths in the snow so the dogs

English mastiffs look imposing, but they're typically gentle, affectionate and enjoy being part of family life.

English Mastiff

Maximum Adult Weight 120-230 lbs

Lifespan 6-10 years

Most Positive Attributes Their good natures and calm demeanors make them lovable and relaxing company.

"THESE BIGGER DOGS HAVE SO MUCH LOVE TO GIVE AND MAKE SUCH GREAT COMPANIONS."

* *Alisha Vianello, pet guardian*

can potty outside. Meanwhile, Basil can head out for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing adventures.

There was a more esoteric reason for adopting another big dog too.

"I feel like the space that Bigsy filled up was so big that if we got a smaller dog, it would just feel more empty," Korb says. "We love our big dogs."

Large dogs such as Bigsy and Basil can be incredible companions and offer unique advantages to adopters. But big dogs—weighing 61 pounds and up—linger longer than smaller dogs and cats in shelters. Only 25% of people surveyed in the *Hill's 2025 State of Shelter Pet Adoption Report* (see link on next spread) said they

will likely adopt a dog weighing over 55 pounds in the future—which has many rescue advocates concerned.

WHY BIG DOGS GET OVERLOOKED

Tori Fugate, director of communications for Shelter Animals Count, a nonprofit that maintains a database of U.S. sheltering statistics, says big dogs are staying in shelters nearly twice as long as they were in 2019, with a median stay of 20 days, as opposed to 11 days prepandemic.

Reasons why big dogs stay longer in shelters include economic considerations: Big dogs eat more food than their smaller counterparts, and face landlord restrictions. For instance, when

Irish wolfhounds
require a large
secure yard and/or
a substantial
space indoors.

Irish Wolfhound

**Maximum Adult
Weight** 105-120 lbs

Lifespan 6-8 years

**Most Positive
Attributes**

Affectionate with
family, they are
great with children
and other dogs.

Fugate was looking to move into an apartment with her 75-pound pit bull, Cooper, "Literally the absolute sweetest dog in the whole wide world," she wasn't allowed to move into one apartment because of his size and breed.

"There is just such a limit on places for people to live these days if they are looking for affordable housing and they have big dogs," she says.

Previously, Fugate worked at an animal shelter with a robust "Dog Day Out" program, where volunteers could bring adoptable dogs on outings to meet the public. Often volunteers would shy away from taking larger dogs, expressing sentiments like, "I'm not used to big dogs." So the team at the shelter would encourage them to try—something she hopes others will do.

"We had people all the time that came back and they were like, 'I've completely changed my perception of big dogs,'" she recalls. "Even better, we had a lot of people who took the dog out for the day and came back and said, 'I can't leave this dog here. I have to adopt it.'"

Alisha Vianello, executive director of Gateway Pet Guardians, a nonprofit in East St. Louis, Illinois, that operates an animal shelter and pet resource center, says around 90% of the dogs that enter the shelter weigh more than 50 pounds. But many people who walk in for adoptions only want small dogs.

"I really advocate for adopting these medium- to large-size dogs who are 50-plus pounds. There's not enough people in the world looking for them," she says. "I really encourage people to look at some of these dogs who are a little bit bigger because they have so much love to give and they make such great companions."



Historically Swiss alpine rescuers, Saint Bernards love to be the family watchdog.



Saint Bernard

Maximum Adult Weight 120-180 lbs
Lifespan 8-10 years
Most Positive Attributes Loyal family companions and guardians, they bring joy to every home.

THE BIG DOG BONUS

As someone who fosters both large and small dogs, Vianello feels big dogs have advantages. For example, they can be ideal exercise buddies who can help their people feel safer and deter home break-ins.

Big dogs are often more confident than small dogs, whose fear can cause reactivity. Small dogs often require grooming and dental surgeries and can be at risk from predators—she recently had a puppy come in with deep lacerations on its back, likely caused by hawk talons.

Plus, contrary to popular belief, big dogs don't need more room.

"The four dogs I have at my house who are over 50 pounds are couch potatoes," she says. "They would have no problem living in an apartment or small house as long as they can go for a walk or they have a yard to go out in, which any dog needs."

Before adopting a big dog, Vianello says it's important to make sure the landlord will allow it. She also encourages people who adopt large-breed puppies to commit to socializing them. "Puppies should meet 100 people in their first 100

days"—and adopters should spend time on positive training to prevent future issues.

Ultimately, she feels adopting a big dog offers the reward of saving a life.

"Small dog fostering and adopting is still great, but you are making a bigger impact when you adopt a bigger dog," she says.

Alice Mayn, founder and executive director of Lily's Legacy Senior Dog Sanctuary in Petaluma, California, agrees. Her nonprofit sanctuary takes in dogs who weigh over 50 pounds and are at least 7 years old because big senior dogs are even less

likely to be adopted from shelters. "They just have my heart," she says. "They're so huggable."

Large senior dogs like Lily, the golden retriever who inspired the sanctuary, have the advantage of needing less exercise and training. Mayn recommends pet insurance to help cover veterinary care, and advises working with a veterinarian to customize a plan to keep them mobile. Lily's Legacy has a swimming pool to help dogs exercise without putting strain on their joints.

"A lot of big dogs really like to swim," she says. "It's a stress-free way to keep their muscles toned."

People who are on the fence about adopting a big dog can seek out "foster to adopt" programs at shelters and rescue organizations to see if a dog will fit into their home and lifestyle, Mayn notes. She suspects the big dog will win them over, particularly if it's a senior.

"A lot of them have wisdom—they can just relate to new circumstances. They've seen a lot and are pretty able to adjust and go with the flow," she says. "And I think gratitude is the thing that I've learned the most from these dogs." #

LINKS FOR MORE INFORMATION

Hill's 2025 State of Shelter Pet Adoption Report:
hillspet.com/shelter-report

Shelter Animals Count:
shelteranimalscount.org

Gateway Pet Guardians:
gatewaypets.org

Lily's Legacy Senior Dog Sanctuary:
lilyslegacy.org

Originally bred as a work dog, German shepherds thrive on lifelong task training.



German Shepherd

Maximum Adult Weight 50-90 lbs
Lifespan 12-14 years
Most Positive Attributes They are affectionate with family and children and are fast learners.