

# IS IT A BELGIAN SHEEPDOG?



Border Collie Ears



Belgian Sheepdog Ears



Chow Ears



Collie Ears



German Shepherd Dog Ears

*(Note: These contributors graciously provided their insights when I asked them to assist volunteers who wished to increase their skills in distinguishing a Belgian Sheepdog from breeds most commonly mistaken for a BSD in a shelter environment, particularly the German Shepherd, Border Collie, Chow and Collie. My own advice to volunteers has been to surf the internet for the thousands of photos of BSDs at play, walking on-leash or moving about freely in a yard, rather than relying on show poses. LB)*

## Linda McCarty, Rolin Ridge Belgians:

I look first for a general impression, then concentrate on those telltale things like ear size, placement and shape. Next defining feature is angulation front and especially rear and movement. GSD have distinct movement including a double suspension trot.

As to white markings placement and size can be misleading. You can see large white chest splashes or lines from under the chin to below breastbone. You can see white feet or legs. You can see a type of spotting or mottling on the white. I've seen a BSD Groen with white ears, white face and black circles around the eyes with black body. Red or gray hairs can be present behind the ears, on the chest, in the feathering and britches and tail. However, if you see reddish brown on the legs or inside the legs, under the tail around the rectum, and spots above the eye on the brow, it's not likely a BSD.

Length of body COULD be a factor. Bone should be lighter on the BSD. Head overall should be leaner on BSD and can be triangular or rectangular in shape when looking from above. The head is not as deep from the side as a GSD head. GSD guard hairs are usually coarser and thicker than a BSD's.

Feet and pasterns are good indicators, as the GSD has a hare foot and long sloping pasterns. BSD's have cat foot in front and usually short and somewhat upright pasterns or gently sloped pasterns.

The loin is usually shorter and broader in a BSD than in other breeds, and the croup is shorter and rounder rather than steep and long.



Cat Foot

Hare Foot

Top-line and underline are very different in the BSD and GSD. The GSD has a sloping top-line and the BSD's is level. The underline of a BSD is well-defined and has a moderate tuck. ☺

## Carol Morris, Allure Belgians:

While it is necessary that anyone who IDs a BSD should intimately know and understand the standard, there are numerous AKC registered BSDs that deviate considerably from the ideal, as can a rescue. The BSD gene pool has quite a bit of variation due to folks either not following the standard or trying to reinvent the breed to their own standard.

One has to look at the whole dog and its behavior to form a general impression. Inbreeding can cause more white than "normal," on the chest, feet and legs though usually it is only small patches. I would be suspicious of large amounts of white.

Some BSDs have blockier heads than the standard, and there are some dogs much taller than the standard. Size variation in BSDs is huge today. Some are under the ideal, and some very large ones are still around. However, large does not mean coarse. Another thing one sees in rescues is a longer, lower dog, as was common in the past.

Even a large BSD won't have the bone that other large breeds have. A BSD will usually be more athletic than similar type breeds.

Dropped ears, other than an injury, would make me suspicious because dropped ears are a dominant trait in other breeds.

Look carefully at the feet. Overgrown hair and long toenails can give the appearance of hare feet. Once properly trimmed, these feet are cat-like. ☺

## Sandy Shaw, Sandcastle Belgian Sheepdogs:

Belgian Sheepdogs vary in looks from what the written standard says. The standard is the ideal, and is interpreted by serious breeders to fit their ideals. There are traits you will see in rescues that aren't defined in the standard. Intelligence is usually apparent, and is the foundation of the breed. You see it in their



eyes, even if they have been traumatized. It is a questioning look: "Why am I here?" "What did I do?" "What do you want from me?"

The overall look should be proud even from a distance, even if the dog has been abused. Try to arrange to see a Belgian standing in the yard by itself. It will pull its body up like a stallion or a mare in the wild. It will stand still, if left alone, and try to figure out what's going on. This "look" is unmistakable. In comparison, a German Shepherd keeps its head lower, straight out from the shoulders. A Lab or Lab cross might hold its head up occasionally, but usually will sniff and roll around on the ground or wander. Other breeds don't have the intelligent expression seen in the BSD.

A Belgian's coat is black with white on the chest, maybe quite a bit, and maybe white on the feet. If it's been left outside for long periods, their coat burns out and turns harsh and reddish from the weather and the sun. It may become very matted if not groomed when they are shedding. It should never be single coated, though. When they have first shed out and been groomed, the undercoat may be very minimal for a few weeks, but it is usually there no matter what. In perfect condition, they have a longer, harsher outer coat, with a softer, down-like undercoat. Males have big ruffs, like a lion. Females do not. Spaying changes the coat and the texture. Females and males become more alike, with longer softer coats, but the double layers still are very apparent.

A Belgian Sheepdog does not have heavy bone structure like a Lab or GSD. A Belgian looks like it weighs a lot more than it does, because of the coat, but should never weigh as much as a Lab or a GSD of the same size. A Belgian Sheepdog male that stands 25 inches tall at the shoulder (measured from the ground next to the front legs to the highest point before the neck begins on top of the shoulder) should weigh between 50 and 75 lbs unless it's carrying a lot of fat. A Lab of the same height may weigh 90 to 120 lbs, and a GSD will weigh 75 to 110 lbs.

My recommendation for further study is to go to lots of websites, both from the US and elsewhere, and compare photographs. ☺

### **Marcy Spalding, Mawrmyth Belgians:**

When called to ID a possible BSD, I ask a few questions before actually visiting the dog. My questions often relate to other more familiar breeds so I can determine if the dog is even close to being a Belgian.

First I ask if the dog is black all over and not just black on the back like a GSD with brown legs? If the dog has any white, where is it and how much – white on more than chin, chest and feet, not a BSD. Is the dog square in outline like a dobe or poodle or is it long like a collie or GSD? Do both ears stand up on the top of the head or are they large and on the side of the head like the GSD? Is the tongue mostly black like a chow? A spot or two of black on the tongue can be seen on some BSDs but a mostly-black tongue suggests a Chow. When the dog is moving around is the tail curled and laying on the back like a Chow? Does the dog have heavy bone like a Collie, GSD or Great Dane? Are

the feet smaller like a Collie's or larger like a GSD? Is the size between 20" & 26" for a female and 22" and 28" for a male? Is the nose long like a GSD or Collie, or short like a Chow? Is the coat short on the head and legs, and longish elsewhere like a Collie?

Once it sounds like the dog is generally square, black with maybe some white, erect ears, correct tail, close to acceptable bone, tongue and size, longish nose and correct coat – then I would go visit the dog and decide if it really does look and act like a Belgian. ☺

### **Rita Thatcher, judge:**

One of the first things I look for is that typical Belgian look. The one where they take measure of you and are deciding if you are good enough to walk up to. <g>

You can always see the intelligence in a Belgian's eyes. Eyes can also be yellow in color; a throwback but I have seen it.

In the head I look for the back skull and muzzle to be of the same length. Remember some of the dogs from the older lines have a much broader back skull than dogs with a European background. Older lines can also be longer in the body than European lines.

If I can see the dog move I watch the angulations in the rear. I also look to see the pattern the dog moves in. Most Belgians will circle rather than fence run. That will tell you if it's a black GSD or a Belgian.

Don't be fooled by a too short coat, it could have been cut. Many BSD have "touches" of brownish coat around the ears. One of the older lines will have grey breeches. Don't let the coat changing rusty color throw you off either. Dogs that haven't been groomed in awhile can appear to have clumps of coat rather than the smooth look of a groomed Belgian.

I look at the shape of the ears rather than the set. I know of at least 4 Belgians whose ears never came up so I don't discount a dog whose ears are hanging.

In comparison to a black GSD Belgians appear to be much finer boned, have less angulations, and smaller ears. ☺

### **Terri Votava, Sans Branco Belgians:**

When I ID, I start with the head. I look at ear and ear base. If the base of the dogs ears run together in the middle, the dog most often is not a Belgian. While we may see tall ears or short ears or various widths at the base, the ears do not run close together even on a high ear-set. If the ear-set is below the level of the eye it makes me suspicious. Drop ears, while they can occur in the breed, are not common.

I then go to the placement of the eyes, which are not wide set in a Belgian.

Length of muzzle should approximate length of back skull. A very full, short muzzle is often a Chow.

Next I look at the front end and the front feet. A Belgian has cat

feet; in a rescue, long nails may distort the appearance of the feet, but you will still be able to determine that the dog has cat feet. In contrast, many other breeds have hare feet.

White markings on a BSD tend to be on the back feet and the chest. These markings usually aren't solid white; rather, they're a mix of white hairs and black hairs, giving the feet or chest the appearance of being dirty. Feet with bars or bands of white suggest a Border Collie rather than a BSD. White that runs up

the legs may be seen on a BSD but it is uncommon. Brown or silver eyebrows are possible but other brown markings usually indicate a GSD. A narrow white stripe or T pattern on the chest suggests a dog is BSD but a full bib of white is indicative of other breeds that are sometimes mistaken for a BSD.

A dog with an extremely steep croup and high tail that curls is usually a breed other than BSD. Rear assembly that is extremely angulated is usually not BSD. ❧