

# ***Nature's Masterpiece: The Basenji***

Bernice Walker

The Dogs of the Stone Age were small foxy fellows, who gathered around the first campfires. As ancient man went from place to place about his business, they followed at a respectful distance, probably attracted by occasional handouts, possibly because they felt an affinity to him. The first dogs, according to palaeontologists, were very much like the Basenji, and there are scientific reasons for supposing that the Basenji was this dog of prehistoric times.

Living in long isolation from the outer world for countless thousands of years in the heart of Africa, the Basenji has not been altered by the demands and whims of man. Nothing about him has been changed – neither his size, his shape, the color and texture of his coat nor his temperament. The Basenji is a well-defined natural breed and is one of Nature's Masterpieces.



The Basenji made an appearance in civilization at the dawn of history as a palace dog of the Pharaohs, so long ago that he watched the pyramids being built. Pictured in bas-relief and sculptured in stone as far back as 4000 B.C., the Basenji even lent his ears to the dog-headed god Anubis. He was found in Mesopotamia many centuries later. The Metropolitan Museum of Arts owns a bronze statue of a man and his Basenji-like dog, including curled tail and wrinkled forehead. This is identified as Babylonian.



Photo Credit: Damara Bolte 1988

Ancient empires, crumbling, disappeared. So did the Basenji – and without a trace. The explorer Merolla, whom Edward C. Ash quotes in *"Dogs: Their History and Development"* caught a glimpse of him in the Congo in 1682. *"These dogs, notwithstanding their wildness, do little or no damage to the inhabitants. They are red-haired, have small slender bodies and their tails turned upon their backs."* Only as recently as the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were Basenjies re-discovered in their original habitat – the headwaters of both the Nile and the Congo Rivers in the heart of Africa. There, they are the hunting dogs of native tribes, and so highly esteemed are they that they are regarded as having equal rights with their masters.

The purebred Basenji is a small dog, the male measuring approximately 17 inches from the ground to the top of the shoulders; the female, 16 inches. The preferred weight for the male is about 24 pounds; for the female, 22. His legs must be slender and long; his toes highly arched. His movement lends distinction to the man who owns and walks one.

In sunlight he is an arresting sight. His coat is short and silky and one has a choice of colors. There is a lustrous golden brown with white feet and white tail-tip, white chest and belly, and in many specimens, a white blaze and collar. There is a striking black and white edition, glossy black with white where it occurs on the red dogs; and a handsome tri-color edition – glossy black with sharp edgings of brilliant tan, tan triangular eyebrows and checks, with white of course where it occurs on red dogs. (BCOA Update: Brindle basenjis, with black stripes over a base red coat, are now included as a recognized basenji color.)

The Basenji's tail should curl tightly to one side of his back and the more animated the dog, the tighter the curl. The head and expression of the Basenji are his most appealing features. His prick ears give him a constant look of alertness; his brown eyes have an oriental slant; and his wrinkled forehead imparts an anxious expression to his face – the look of one who, having known man from the beginning is terribly worried about the outcome.

Since he is silent on the trail, the Congolese, as did the ancients, require him to wear a hunting bell made of wood, or iron, or the shell of a Borassus nut, so that they may trail him to his prey. He will not become hysterical when the doorbell or the telephone rings. He will not become vocal at the sight of other animals, or the approaching stranger.

Although some are almost totally silent, Basenjis possess vocal chords and do have a voice. They have a growl worthy of a dog twice their size; they have a threatening wild-animal snarl, and they have a scream of terror. Some will talk with their masters and with one another in voices like those of Siamese cats. Others are yodellers, with a range comparable to that of a coloratura, and will even perform on command!

Then, there is a call heard generally at night, apparently a pack-call. It is an eerie sound, more reminiscent of a bird than an animal. And, there is the crow, delightfully like a young rooster's initial attempt. The Basenji crows when he greets human friends, when he's surprised, when he's amused, when he's achieved a triumph such as charging into a room forbidden to him, or when he is pleased with the way things in general are going. On such occasions he is at his irresistible best.

Owners will testify to his phenomenal intelligence, his inventiveness, his curiosity, and his clownish sense of humor. But keep in mind that since the Basenji usually has a single devotion to one man, one family, one boy or girl, it is preferable that he make friends among the human race early in life.

He is a staunch believer in personal and property rights. The silent hunter is also a silent watch dog. A sound outside brings him noiselessly to the door, to await an intruder. He will give the housebreaker a rough time.

The Basenji is immaculate, grooming his coat and paying particular attention to his feet, again, like a cat. He takes such good care of himself that he rarely needs a bath. An occasional brisk rub with a rough towel and a daily going-over with a soft brush will delight him and will cause his coat to glisten. The Basenji is practically odorless. If there is any scent at all, it is reminiscent of clean, dry grass.

Some Basenji bitches still come into season only once a year, usually in the fall, puppies arriving during the holidays. With an eye on her own, Nature has ordained that in climates where there are definite winters and summers, females ought to come into season in the spring, puppies to arrive when the weather is congenial – in June or July. In the northern United States and Canada as the years pass, more and more litters are arriving in late spring and early summer, so that puppies are now generally available throughout the year.

Although for fifty years the British made many attempts to bring Basenjies into England, they were not successfully acclimated there until 1937. In 1938 they were introduced into the United States and Canada. The Basenji Club of America, Inc., an organization of Basenji owners, admirers of the breed, sportsmen, naturalists, writers, and breeders, is dedicated to the preservation of the Basenji as an aboriginal dog and in the image of its African prototype.

Activities available for the Basenji owner are lure coursing, scent field trailing, and much companionship. The lure coursing and scent field trialling are activities in which you can enjoy watching your Basenji do what comes naturally.



Photo Credit Linda Seikert

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\* Original pamphlet cover art was by Bernice Walker, included the text of 1954 AKC Basenji Standard on the back cover, gave a contact name for more information, and welcomed new members to the Basenji Club of America. It is currently reprinted at the Basenji Club of America website. New illustrations inserted into this printing.

This is a reference to Father Jerom Merolla da Sorrento, who authored a book about his early Congo expedition: "A Voyage to Congo, and Several Other Countries, Chiefly in Southern-Africk." London: Awnsham & John Churchill, 1704.