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Blind Australian shepherds find new homes

By **BILL KETTLER**
Mail Tribune



Bert and Ernie have homes of their own. The two blind Australian shepherds, abandoned in Central Point in July, have been adopted. Ernie has gone to live with Vada Henderson in Central Point. Chris Schaffer of Grants Pass took Bert, Ernie's deaf brother, to live with her and her parents, Don and Sharon Mills.

□ Vada Henderson of Central Point says Ernie, a blind Australian shepherd she adopted recently, can sense where she's sitting and jump right into her lap. "He's very affectionate," she says.
Mail Tribune / Bob Pennell

Henderson and Schaffer both said their new companions have shown remarkable adaptability despite their disabilities.

"Ernie does real well," Henderson said. "When I have the back door of the house open, he goes in and out by himself."

"Bert's a regular little dog," Schaffer said. "He just runs into things."

The dogs were born with their impairments — the unhappy offspring of the union of two Australian shepherds with the distinctive "merle" (black-and-white or red-and-white) coat. About 25 percent of the offspring in any merle-to-merle matings are born blind or deaf, or both.

The impaired dogs are

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often called "lethal whites," a term drawn from their mostly white coats. The problem also surfaces in other breeds (such as shelties and collies) when two merles are bred.

Some breeders deliberately breed two merles to obtain more merles, the most popular Australian shepherd color, said Lorraine Ayres of Mesa, Ariz. She works with Aussielads Aussie Rescue, an organization that finds homes for lethal whites.

Other breeders "just don't know," Ayres said Thursday in a telephone interview. "They just want to breed two pretty dogs."

There are also responsible breeders who know about the problem, Ayres said. "They would never breed two merles, no matter what."

Some breeders destroy lethal whites at birth. Others have been known to pass off the deaf dogs as "rare" white Aussies to unsuspecting buyers.

Ayres said living with a disabled dog takes some patience.

"These are not dogs for everybody. Everybody cannot handle a blind-and-deaf dog. You have to know your limits.

"You definitely need to spend time with them," she said, "but you find they learn quite quickly."

Henderson said Ernie is adjusting to her other two dogs, Maggie, a dachshund, and Little Britches, a boxer mix. Those two dogs are still learning how to get along with a dog that doesn't see the visual cues, such as bared teeth, that dogs often use to communicate.

Henderson said she took a coffee table out of her living room to give Ernie more room to navigate, but otherwise she's made few changes to accommodate him.

"He's like a big lap dog," she said. "He senses where I'm at and he makes a big leap into my lap. He's very affectionate. He loves everybody."

Schaffer has been reinforcing the touch commands that deaf-and-blind Bert learned from Sue Hughes of the Southern Oregon Humane Society. Hughes taught him to come by rubbing under his chin; to sit with a touch on his rear end, and to lay down with a hand across his shoulder.

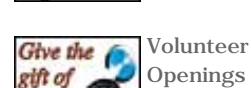
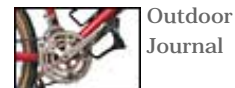
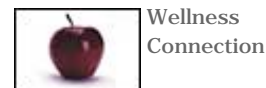
"A tap on the nose means 'No,' " Schaffer said, "and a tap on the shoulder means 'Pay attention.' "

Bert has learned to depend on his sense of smell and his tactile sense to get around, she said. "He can feel the air moving, and the vibrations in the floor. When you walk by, he can tell."



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Despite their handicaps, both dogs were adopted relatively quickly, said Bob Brooks of the Southern Oregon Humane Society. He said television and newspaper stories about the dogs probably helped them find a home faster.

"Our average (time to get a dog adopted) is 56 days," Brooks said.

"We can have dogs that get adopted in a day. Others we have for four or five or six months. Everybody loves a cuddly, little puppy. Bigger dogs and older dogs are more difficult to place."

On the Web: www.aussielads.com

Reach reporter Bill Kettler at 776-4492, or e-mail bkettler@mailtribune.com

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