

DONT BUY A BOUVIER!

by Pam Green (c.1992)
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(This article, written many years ago, has become a notorious classic in Bouvier circles. It has been reprinted many times by clubs to use for the education of prospective Bouvier owners. I give my permission freely to all who wish to reprint and distribute it in hopes of saving innocent Bouviers from neglect and abandonment by those who should never have acquired them in the first place.)

Interested in buying a Bouvier? You must be or you wouldn't be reading this. You've already heard how marvelous Bouviers are. Well, I think you should also hear, before it's too late, that ***BOUVIERS ARE NOT THE PERFECT BREED FOR EVERYONE***. As a breed they have a few features that some people find charming, but that some people find mildly unpleasant and some people find downright intolerable.

There are different breeds for different needs. There are over 200 purebred breeds of dogs in the world. Maybe you'd be better off with some other breed. Maybe you'd be better off with a cat. Maybe you'd be better off with goldfish, a parakeet, a hamster, or some house-plants.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU ARE ATTRACTED TO THE BREED *CHIEFLY* BY ITS APPEARANCE.

The appearance of the Bouviers you have seen in the show ring is the product of many hours of bathing and grooming. This carefully constructed beauty is fleeting: a few minutes of freedom, romping through the fields or strolling in the rain restores the natural look. The natural look of the Bouvier is that of a large, shaggy farm dog, usually with some dirt and weeds clinging to his tousled coat. His esthetics are those of an unmade bed. Remember that the Dutch nickname for the breed, "Vuilbaard" means "dirty beard". The true beauty of the Bouvier lies in his character, not in his appearance. There are many other breeds whose natural beauty of appearance far exceeds that of the Bouvier. Some of the long-coated and most of the short-coated breeds' appearances are less dependent on grooming than is that of the Bouvier. (See also the section on grooming below.)

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU ARE UNWILLING TO SHARE YOUR HOUSE AND YOUR LIFE WITH YOUR DOG.

Bouviers were bred to share in the work of the farm family and to spend most of their waking hours working with the family. They thrive on companionship and they want to be wherever you are. They are happiest living with you in your house and going with you when you go out. While they usually tolerate being left at home by themselves (preferably with a dog-door giving access to the fenced yard), they should not be relegated to the backyard or kennel. A puppy exiled from the house is likely to grow up to be unsociable (fearful and/or unprovokedly aggressive), unruly, and unhappy. He may well develop pastimes, such as digging or barking, that will displease you and/or your neighbors. An adult so exiled will be miserable too. If you don't strongly prefer to have your dog's companionship as much as possible, enjoying having him sleep in your bedroom at night and sharing many of your activities by day, you should choose a breed less oriented to human companionship. Likewise if your job or other obligations prevent you from spending much time with your dog. No dog is really happy without companionship but the pack hounds are more tolerant of being kenneled or yarded so long as it is in groups of 2 or more. A better choice would be a cat, as they are solitary by nature.

NOTE: ADDITIONAL LINKS TO BOUVIER INFORMATION ARE AT WWW.BOUVDOGOFFLANDERS.COM

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU DON'T INTEND TO EDUCATE (TRAIN) YOUR DOG.

Basic obedience and household rules training is NOT optional for the Bouvier. As an absolute minimum, you must teach him to reliably respond to commands to come, to lie down, to stay, and to walk at your side, on or off leash and regardless of temptations. You must also teach him to respect your household rules: e.g. is he allowed to get on the furniture? is he allowed to beg at the table? What you allow or forbid is unimportant; but it is **critical** that you, not the dog, make these choices and that you enforce your rules consistently. You must commit yourself to attending an 8 to 10 week series of weekly lessons at a local obedience club or professional trainer and to doing one or two short (5 to 20 minutes) homework sessions per day. As commands are learned, they must be integrated into your daily life by being used whenever appropriate and enforced consistently. Young Bouvier puppies are relatively easy to train: they are eager to please, intelligent, and calm-natured, with a relatively good attention span. Once a Bouvier has learned something, he tends to retain it well. Your cute, sweet little Bouvier puppy will grow up to be a large, powerful dog with a highly self-assertive personality and the determination to finish whatever he starts. If he has grown up respecting you and your rules, then all his physical and mental strength will work for you. But if he has grown up without rules and guidance from you, surely he will make his own rules and his physical and mental powers will often act in opposition to your needs and desires. For example: he may tow you down the street as if competing in a sled-dog race; he may grab food off the table; he may forbid your guests entry to his home.

This training cannot be delegated to someone else, e.g. by sending the dog away to "boarding school", because the relationship of respect and obedience is personal between the dog and the individual who does the training. This is true of all dogs to greater or lesser degree, but definitely to a very great degree in Bouviers. While you definitely many want the help of an experienced trainer to teach you how to train your dog, you yourself must actually train your Bouvier. As each lesson is well learned, then the rest of the household (except young children) must also work with the dog, insisting he obey them as well.

Many of the Bouviers that are rescued from Pounds and Shelters show clearly that they have received little or no basic training, neither in obedience nor in household deportment; yet these same dogs respond well to such training by the rescuer or the adopter. It seems likely that a failure to train the dog is a significant cause of Bouvier abandonment.

If you don't intend to educate your dog, preferably during puppyhood, you would be better off with a breed that is both small and socially submissive, e.g. a Shetland Sheepdog. Such a dog does require training, but a little bit goes further than with a Bouv. In the opposite direction, if your goals in obedience training are oriented towards success at high level competition (HIT, OTCh, and Gaines), please realize that the Bouv is not among the half dozen breeds best suited to such highly polished performance. (Bouvs can, with adequate training, excel at such working competitions as agility, carting, tracking, protection and herding.)

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU LACK LEADERSHIP (SELF-ASSERTIVE) PERSONALITY.

Dogs do not believe in social equality. They live in a social hierarchy led by a pack-leader (Alpha). The alpha dog is generally benevolent, affectionate, and non-bullying towards his subordinates; but there is never any doubt in his mind or in theirs that the alpha is the boss and makes the rules. Whatever the breed, if you do not assume the leadership, the dog will do so sooner or later and with more or less unpleasant consequences for the abdicating owner. Like the untrained dog, the pack-leader dog makes his own rules and enforces them against other members of the household by means of a dominant physical posture and a hard-eyed stare, followed by a snarl, then a

knockdown blow or a bite. Breeds differ in tendencies towards social dominance; and individuals within a breed differ considerably. Bouviers as a breed tend to be of a socially dominant personality. You really cannot afford to let a Bouvier become your boss. You do not have to have the personality or mannerisms of a Marine boot camp Sergeant, but you do have to have the calm, quiet self-assurance and self-assertion of the successful parent ("Because I'm your mother, that's why.") or successful grade-school teacher. If you think you might have difficulty asserting yourself calmly and confidently to exercise leadership, then choose a breed known for its socially subordinate disposition, such as a Golden Retriever or a Shetland Sheepdog, and be sure to ask the breeder to select one of the more submissive pups in the litter for you. If the whole idea of "being the boss" frightens or repels you, don't get a dog at all. Cats don't expect leadership. A caged bird or hamster, or fish doesn't need leadership or household rules.

Leadership and training are inextricably intertwined: leadership personality enables you to train your dog, and being trained by you reinforces your dog's perception of you was the alpha.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU DON'T VALUE LAID-BACK COMPANIONSHIP AND CALM AFFECTION.

A Bouvier becomes deeply attached and devoted to his own family, but he doesn't "wear his heart on his sleeve". Some are noticeably reserved, others are more outgoing, but few adults are usually exuberantly demonstrate of their affections. They like to be near you, usually in the same room, preferably on a comfortable pad or cushion in a corner or under a table, just "keeping you company". They enjoy conversation, petting and cuddling when you offer it, but they are moderate and not overbearing in coming to you to demand much attention. They are emotionally sensitive to their favorite people: when you are joyful, proud, angry, or grief-stricken, your Bouv will immediately perceive it and will believe himself to be the cause. The relationship can be one of great mellows, depth and subtlety; it is a relation on an adult-to-adult level, although certainly not one devoid of playfulness. As puppies, of course, they will be more dependent, more playful, and more demonstrative. In summary, Bouvs tend to be sober and thoughtful, rather than giddy clowns or sychophants.

A number of breeds retain into adulthood a more puppyish and playful disposition, e.g. Australian Shepherd, Malamute, and others. Quite a few are far more dramatically demonstrative and/or more clingingly dependent, e.g. the Golden Retriever.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU ARE FASTIDIOUS ABOUT THE NEATNESS OF YOUR HOME.

The Bouvier's thick shaggy coat and his love of playing in water and mud combine to make him a highly efficient transporter of dirt into your home, depositing same on your floors and rugs and possibly also on your furniture and clothes. One Bouvier coming in from a few minutes outdoors on a rainy day can turn an immaculate house into an instant hog wallow. His full beard soaks up water every time he takes a drink, then releases same drippingly across your floor or soppingly into your lap. (It is of course possible to cut the beard off and to keep the feet clean-shaven year-round to reduce mess.) Although it is technically true that Bouviers do not shed, you will find that the grooming process usually results in balls of pulled out hair tumbleweeding their way about your house, unless you deposit same directly from comb into a trash basket. I don't mean to imply that you must be a slob or slattern to live happily with a Bouv, but you do have to have the attitude that your dog's company means more to you than does neatness and you do have to be comfortable with a less than immaculate house.

While all dogs, like all children, create a greater or lesser degree of household mess, almost all other breeds of dog (except the Old English Sheepdog) are less troublesome than the Bouvier in this respect. The Basenji is perhaps the cleanest, due to its cat-like habits; but cats are cleaner yet, and goldfish hardly ever mess up the house.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU ARE FASTIDIOUS ABOUT UNPLEASANT ODORS.

Bouvier are one of the more flatulent breeds of dog. While the volume and aroma of the emissions depends partly on the diet, about half an hour after his meal your nose knows! (As the period of maximum emissions lasts only half an hour to an hour, it would not be unreasonable to put the dog outdoors in a fenced yard for this period.) The Bouvier coat, when damp, tends to smell rather swampy. A wet Bouv confined to a car or small room for an hour or so can create an aroma even the least sensitive will perceive. Some people consider the Bouvier beard to have noticeably unpleasant body odor even when dry and recently groomed. The Bouvier beard tends to retain particles of food, which soon become offensive if the beard is not washed frequently.

Almost all of the short-haired breeds, other than hound breeds or afield-bred (oily coated) Chesapeake, are less likely to offend the nose through general coat/body odor. I'm sure many other breeds are less flatulent, but it is difficult to get reliable information on this as few owners care to discuss the issue.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU DISLIKE DOING REGULAR GROOMING.

The thick shaggy Bouvier coat demands regular grooming, not merely to look tolerably nice, but also to preserve the health of skin underneath and to detect and remove foxtails, ticks, and other dangerous invaders. For "pet" grooming, you should expect to spend 10-15 minutes a day (e.g. while listening to music or watching television) on alternate days or half an hour twice a week. Of course any time your Bouv gets into cockleburs, filigree, or other coat-adhering vegetation, you are likely to be in for an hour or more of remedial work. During "oxtail" season, (western US), you must inspect feet and other vulnerable areas daily. In Lyme disease areas during tick season, you will need to inspect for ticks daily. "Pet" grooming does not require a great deal of skill, but does require time and regularity. Keeping the dog in a short or semi-short "working clip" substantially reduces grooming time, but does not eliminate the need for regularity. "Show" (beauty contest) grooming requires a great deal of skill and considerably more time and effort or expensive professional grooming.

Almost every Bouvier that is rescued out of a Pound or Shelter shows the effects of many months of non-grooming, resulting in massive matting and horrendous filthiness, sometimes with urine and feces cemented into the rear portions of the coat. It appears that unwillingness to keep up with coat care is a primary cause of abandonment.

Many other breeds of dog require less grooming; short coated breeds require very little. The Rottweiler has a temperament and personality similar to the Bouvier, yet requires little grooming.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU DISLIKE DAILY PHYSICAL EXERCISE.

Bouvier need exercise to maintain the health of heart and lungs and to maintain muscle tone. Because of his mellow, laid-back, often lazy, disposition, your Bouvier will not give himself enough exercise unless you accompany him or play with him. An adult Bouvier should have a morning outing of a mile or more, as you walk briskly, jog, or bicycle beside him, and a similar evening outing. For puppies, shorter and slower walks, several times a day are preferred for exercise and housebreaking.

All dogs need daily exercise of greater or lesser length and vigor. If providing this exercise is beyond you, physically or temperamentally, then choose one of the many small and energetic breeds that can exercise itself within your fenced yard. Most of the Toys and Terriers fit this description, but don't be surprised if a Terrier is inclined to dig in the earth since digging out critters is the job that they were bred to do. Cats can be exercised indoors with mouse-on-a-string toys. Hamster will exercise themselves on a wire wheel. House plants don't need exercise.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU BELIEVE THAT DOGS SHOULD RUN "FREE"

Whether you live in town or country, no dog can safely be left to run "free" outside your fenced property and without your direct supervision and control. The price of such "freedom" is inevitably injury or death: from dogfights, from automobiles, from the Pound or from justifiably irate neighbors. Even though Bouvs are home-loving and less inclined to roam than most breeds, an unfenced Bouv is destined for disaster. Like other breeds developed for livestock herding, most Bouvs have inherited a substantial amount of "herding instinct". which is a strengthened and slightly modified instinct to chased and capture suitable large prey. The unfenced country-living Bouv will sooner or later discover the neighbor's livestock (sheep, cattle, horses, poultry) and respond to his genetic urge to chase and harass such stock. State law almost always gives the livestock owner the legal right to kill any dog chasing or "worrying" his stock, and almost all livestock owners are quick to act on this! The unfenced city Bouv is likely to exercise his inherited herding instinct on joggers, bicyclists, and automobiles. A thoroughly obedience-trained Bouvier can enjoy the limited and supervised freedom of off-leash walks with you in appropriately chosen environments.

If you don't want the responsibility of confining and supervising your pet, then no breed of dog is suitable for you. A neutered cat will survive such irresponsibly given "freedom" somewhat longer than a dog, but will eventually come to grief. A better answer for those who crave a "free" pet is to set out feeding stations for some of the indigenous wildlife, such as raccoons, which will visit for handouts and which may eventually tolerate your close observation.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO BUY, FEED, AND PROVIDE HEALTHCARE FOR ONE.

Bouviere are not a cheap breed to buy, as running a careful breeding program with due regard for temperament, trainability, and physical soundness (hips especially) cannot be done cheaply. The time the breeder should put into each puppy's "pre-school" and socialization is also costly. The "bargain" puppy from a "back-yard breeder" who unselectively mates any two Bouvs who happen to be of opposite sex may well prove to be extremely costly in terms of bad temperament, bad health, and lack of essential socialization. In contrast, the occasional adult or older pup is available at modest price from a disenchanted owner or from a breeder, shelter, or rescuer to whom the dog was abandoned; most of these "used" Bouviere are capable of becoming a marvelous dog for you if you can provide training, leadership, and understanding. Whatever the initial cost of your Bouvier, the upkeep will not be cheap. Being large dogs, Bouvs eat relatively large meals. (Need I add that what goes in one end must eventually come out the other?) Large dogs tend to have larger veterinary bills, as the amount of anesthesia and of most medications is proportional to body weight. Spaying or neutering, which costs more for larger dogs, is an essential expense for virtually all pet Bouviere, as it "takes the worry out of being close", prevents serious health problems in later life, and makes the dog a more pleasant companion. Bouviere are subject to two conditions which can be costly to treat: hip dysplasia and bloat. (Your best insurance against dysplasia is to buy only from a litter bred from OFA certified parents and [if possible], grandparents. Yes, this generally means paying more. While bloat may have a genetic predisposition, there are no predictive tests allowing selective breeding against it. Your best

prevention is not to feed your dog too soon before or after strenuous exercise.) Professional grooming, if you use it, is expensive. An adequate set of grooming tools for use at home adds up to a tidy sum, but once purchased will last many dog-lifetimes. Finally, the modest fee for participation in a series of basic obedience training classes is an essential investment in harmonious living with your dog; such fees are the same for all breeds, though conceivably you will need to travel a bit further from home to find a training class teacher who is competent with the more formidable breeds, such as Bouvier. The modest annual outlays for immunizations and for local licensing are generally the same for all breeds, though some counties have a lower license fee for spayed/neutered dogs.

All dogs, of whatever breed and however cheaply acquired, require significant upkeep costs, and all are subject to highly expensive veterinary emergencies. Likewise all cats.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU WANT THE "LATEST, GREATEST FEROCIOUS KILLER ATTACK DOG".

Although the Bouvier's capability as a personal protection dog and as a police dog have been justifiably well publicized, and occasionally dramatically over-stated, the Bouvier is not any more capable in these respects than are half a dozen other protection breeds. Nor are all Bouviers equally capable: some are highly so and some moderately so, but many have insufficient natural capacity for such work. Due to his laid-back disposition, the Bouvier is, if anything, a bit slower to respond aggressively to a threat than are most other protection breeds. For the same reason, however, The Bouv is perhaps somewhat more amenable to control by the handler and somewhat more willing to refrain from biting or to stop biting when told to do so. Whatever the breed, before the dog can be safely protection trained, he must have great respect for the leadership of his handler and must be solidly trained in basic obedience to that handler. Equally essential, he must have a rock-solidly stable temperament and he must also have been "socialized" out in the world enough to know that most people are friendly and harmless, so that he can later learn to distinguish the bad guys from the good guys. Even with such a dog, safe protection training demands several hundred hours of dedicated work by the handler, much of it under the direct supervision of a profoundly expert trainer. Please don't buy any dog for protection training unless you are absolutely committed to the extreme amount of work that will be required of you personally. Also talk to your lawyer and your insurance agent first.

In contrast to the protection-trained dog, trained to bite on direct command or in reaction to direct physical assault on his master, the "deterrent dog" dissuades the vast majority of aspiring burglars, rapists, and assailants by his presence, his appearance, and his demeanor. Seeing such dog, the potential wrong-doer simply decides to look for a safer victim elsewhere. For this job, all that is needed is a dog that is large and that appears to be well-trained and unafraid. The Bouvier can serve this role admirably, with the added assets of generally dark color and shaggy "bestial" appearance adding to the impression of formidability and fearsomeness. If the dog has been taught to bark a few times on command, eg "Fang, watch him!" rather than "Fifi, speak for a cookie", this skill can be useful to augment the deterrent effect.

Other breeds of dog which are equally suitable for protection or for deterrence include the Doberman, Rottweiler, German Shepherd, Briard, Belgian Sheepdog, Belgian Tervuren, and Belgian Malinois. Of these the first 3 are recognized by the general public as "police dogs" and are probably far more feared by most potential criminals than is the Bouvier. The Malamute, though not suitable for protection, is quite effective for deterrence due to his highly wolf-like appearance.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU WANT A TOTALLY UNAGGRESSIVE AND UNPROTECTIVE DOG.

Most Bouviers have an assertive and confident personality. When confronted with a threat, a proper Bouvier will be somewhat more ready to fight than to flee. Thus he may respond aggressively in situations where many other

breeds back down. Most Bouviers have some inclination to act aggressively to repel intruders on their territory (i.e. your home) and to counter-act assaults upon their pack mates (you and your family). Without training and leadership from you to guide him, the dog cannot judge correctly whom to repel and whom to tolerate. Without training and leadership, sooner or later he may injure an innocent person who will successfully sue you for more than you own. With good training and leadership from you, he can be profoundly valuable as a defender of your home and family. (See also remarks on stability and socialization above.)

If you feel no need of an assertive dog or if you have the slightest doubts of your ability and willingness to supply the essential socialization, training and leadership, then please choose one of the many breeds noted for thoroughly unaggressive temperament, such as a Sheltie or a Golden Retriever.

DON'T BUY A BOUVIER IF YOU ARE NOT WILLING TO COMMIT YOURSELF FOR THE DOG'S ENTIRE LIFETIME.

No dog deserves to be cast out because his owners want to move to a no-pet apartment or because he is no longer a cute puppy or didn't grow up to be a beauty contest winner or because his owners through lack of leadership and training have allowed him to become an unruly juvenile delinquent with a repertoire of undesirable behaviors. The prospects of a responsible and affectionate second home for a "used" dog are never very bright, but they are especially dim for a large, shaggy, poorly mannered dog. A Bouvier dumped into a Pound or Shelter has almost no chance of survival -- unless he has the great good fortune to be spotted by someone dedicated to Bouvier Rescue. The prospects for adoption for a youngish, well-trained, and well-groomed Bouvier whose owner seeks the assistance of the nearest Bouvier Club or Rescue group are fairly good; but an older Bouv has diminishing prospects. Be sure to contact your local Bouvier club or Rescue group if you are diagnosed as terminally ill or have other equally valid reason for seeking an adoptive home. Be sure to contact your local Bouvier club if you are beginning to have difficulties in training your Bouvier, so these can be resolved. Be sure to make arrangements in your will or with your family to ensure continued care or adoptive home for your Bouvier if you should predecease him.

The life span of a Bouvier is from 10 to 15 years. If that seems too long a time for you to give an unequivocal loyalty to your Bouvier, then please do not get one! Indeed, as most dogs have a life expectancy that is as long or longer, please do not get any dog!

In Conclusion

If all the preceding "bad news" about Bouviers hasn't turned you away from the breed, then by all means **DO GET A BOUVIER!** They are every bit as wonderful as you have heard!

If buying a puppy, be sure to shop carefully for a **responsible** and **knowledgeable** breeder who places high priority on breeding for sound temperament and trainability and good health in all matings. Such a breeder will interrogate and educate potential buyers carefully. Such a breeder will continue to be available for advice and consultation for the rest of the puppy's life and will insist on receiving the dog back if you are unable to keep it.

However as an alternative to buying a Bouvier puppy, you may want to give some serious consideration to adopting a rescued Bouvier. Despite their responsibility of their previous owner, almost all rescued Bouviers have proven to be readily rehabilitated so as to become superb family companions for responsible and affectionate adopters. Many rescuers are skilled trainers who evaluate temperament and provide remedial training before offering dogs for placement, and who offer continued advisory support afterwards. Contact local Bouvier breeders or Bouvier club members to learn who is doing Rescue work.

NOTE: ADDITIONAL LINKS TO BOUVIER INFORMATION ARE AT WWW.BOUVDOGOFFLANDERS.COM

An Afterward

I first wrote this article nearly 10 years ago. Since then it has become a classic of Bouvier literature, reprinted many times. Since then I have spent nearly 5 years in Bouvier Rescue, personally rescuing, rehabilitating, and placing 3 or 4 per year and assisting in the placement of others. Very little has needed revision in this new addition.

For more information about rescuing a Bouvier des Flandres, please contact:

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