

# A griffon's tale

The wirehaired pointing griffon, known as the “ugliest” purebred, is mounting a challenge for the position of the Wood River Valley’s favorite canine. A proud griffon owner, **Jennifer Tuohy** sheds some light on this characterful breed. Photos by **Chris Pilaro**.

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Roger Hull

A casual inventory of the criss-crossing trails and lush backyards throughout the Wood River Valley poses an intriguing question. Are Labrador retrievers taking over the world?

Probe a little deeper, however, and there is a glimmer of hope for less popular puppies. Yes, that Sun Valley staple is facing a challenge, from the little known—yet uniquely suited to this valley—wirehaired pointing griffon.

“Pointing what?” people exclaim when presented with one of these intriguing looking canines. “That’s one of the ugliest dogs I’ve ever seen,” is also a common refrain. With a face only a mother could love, these mischievously delightful canines are carving out a niche in this Labrador-loving valley. And, with only 410 registered with the American Kennel Club last year—compared to 137,867 Labs—griffons have something else many Wood River Valley residents appreciate: originality.

Over the past few years, a griffon coup d’état has been slowly brewing in the valley (its ranks now boast a champion: Longshots Duchess, owned by Teena Hill, was named Best of Breed at Portland Rose City Dog Show last January). The root of this slow usurpation can be traced to one man, Lee Ritzau.

Ritzau, a Ketchum lawyer, is responsible for at least 13 griffons in the valley. The subsequent exposure of the breed has led to their becoming an increasingly common sight along the streets and trails of the Wood River Valley. Ritzau grew up with griffons, so when he set out on his own he felt a natural need for a bearded companion.



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Four years ago, his griffon, Callie, produced a large litter of puppies, seven of which found homes locally. One, named Max, even landed a job at Lost River Outfitters on Ketchum’s Main Street. However, Max may be more renowned for his midnight liaison with a German shorthaired pointer (a breed closely related to the griffon). The unscheduled coupling produced a litter of seven pups that look remarkably like full-blooded griffons. Five of those Sun Valley creations now reside in the backyards of Bellevue, Hailey and Ketchum.

Ritzau is somewhat oblivious to the trend he is in part responsible for, but his praise for the breed is effervescent. “They can do everything. They point (an intense, stylized stance taken to indicate the position of game), but they can also retrieve waterfowl, so they’re a versatile dog for sportsmen. They have a great personality and are great family dogs. I think they’re mellower than other pointing breeds, and their thick coat means the winters don’t get to them the way they do to pointers and (German) shorthairs.”

These attributes make griffons perfect companions for the typical year-round Wood River Valley family that loves to explore the outdoors and occasionally supplement their dinner table with some hard-earned upland gamebirds.

The unique appearance of the griffon is another reason behind its growing popularity. Their scruffy look singles them out among the predominantly glamorous class of purebreds and also appeals to the laid-back atmosphere of valley life. A medium-sized breed (adults weigh 45 to 55 pounds) with a noble, square-shaped head, the griffon’s wirehaired coat is a distinguishing feature. Hard and coarse with a thick undercoat of fine hair for insulation, the coat is responsible for the



Callie, top left, looks on while her owner, Lee Ritzau, feeds four of her seven locally based offspring.

Photo by David N. Seelig



A griffon stands on point, highlighting the presence of a chukar for its owner.

Photo by Roger Hull

breed’s distinctive unkempt appearance. The harsh texture provides protection in rough cover, but the real bonus of the coat, and the trait that knocks those Labs right off the furniture, is that it barely sheds.

Beyond saving the sofa from a decade of dog hair, the griffon is also an ideal companion for the valley’s hunters. Often referred to as the “supreme gun dog,” the griffon has a quick, intelligent mind and is easily trained. A meticulous hunting companion, bred to use its mind as well as its nose to hunt, the griffon can be used as a retriever and excels in work that requires concentration, tracking ability or a precise way of working. Their temperament is more like that of a retriever than a pointer, and a griffon shows a tremendous willingness to please. Hence the happy housedog moniker.

The origins of the wirehaired pointing griffon date back to nineteenth-century Holland. In 1873, Eduard Karel Korthals set out to create the ultimate walking hunter’s gun dog. Over the next 10 years, he meshed various bloodlines to create the modern-day griffon, including German short-haired pointer, Braque Français, spaniel, otterhound, French barbet (a water retriever) and a setter. It is generally agreed that he succeeded in his quest.

“It’s rare to find a dog that can hunt effectively in rough cover and snow at 10 below zero, or at 70 degrees in the near-constant sun of early August, retrieve ducks in ice-fringed lakes, and still behave themselves in the house around family, strangers and other dogs,” said Roger Hull, president of the Greatland Chapter of the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association.

NAVHDA promotes dogs bred and trained to hunt and point game on land and water. In his role with NAVHDA, Hull has amassed a

wealth of experience with all types of hunting dogs, but for him the griffon stands out.

“It is rare to see ‘non-performers’ or griffs with temperament issues, and even rarer to see ones that hunt for themselves rather than for the handler,” said Hull. “I’m sold on this breed as being perfectly suited to what I do in the field and to our home environment. It’s hard to think of something I would want to improve.”

The breed’s popularity in the Wood River Valley is in part due to an infiltration from the south. Griffons are prevalent in southern Idaho, thanks to a handful of professional breeders and a chapter of NAVHDA. Tews Ranch, just north of Shoshone, operates a hire-a-hunting-dog outfit that works almost exclusively with griffons.

“I like ‘em because they’re a mellow dog,” explained ranch owner Rusty Tews. “They’re not bred to be an aggressive dog. They’re an interesting-looking breed, and they’re funny. They seem also to have something of a cult following.”

In fact, Tews, who has worked with many hunting dogs throughout his career, finds it hard to say a bad word about the griffon, but when pushed he relents. “Well, if you wanted a serious dog,” he begins, as one of his five griffons begins to writhe on the grass in front of him, “they ain’t serious. This is about griffon for you,” he said laughingly. “They sure like to roll. And, they’ll hunt anything. My dogs get bored, they’ll start hunting mice.”

So, there it is, so versatile they can give the household cat a run for her money in the vermin race, the griffon is a breed apart. The purebred tag is countered by a *Lady and the Tramp*-like appearance. Throw in their intense desire to please and it’s easy to see how the griffon has captured the hearts of so many in our valley.

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