



# A Different Kind of Bird Dog

By Jill Hedgecock

When I got the call from Northern California Vizsla Rescue wanting to know if we'd be interested in a seven-month-old male pup, I hesitated. Was I crazy to be considering bringing a bird dog into my home? How would a sporting dog bred for generations to hunt birds react to Walli, my African Grey parrot? But after talking to the volunteer, the breed did sound ideal for our family.

I wanted a mid-sized, intelligent dog with little fur that would make a good family pet. My husband wanted an energetic dog that would be a good running companion. A Hungarian Vizsla seemed the perfect match...except I worried that Walli would equate to grouse or waterfowl in a Vizsla's mind.

Still, what harm would there be in meeting the dog? Besides, the floor of Walli's sturdy cage was at chair height. We could keep the pup away from the parrot.

One look at Bumper who still had that loose skin appeal of puppies and I was smitten. When that bundle of energy waggled across the room, leaned his body against mine, then turned his panting, happy face to sneak a kiss, I knew he'd stolen my heart. My children giggled as he slurped their faces. My husband, Eric, grinned. Bumper had found a new home.

A streak of red scrambled inside the house as I opened our front door. Keen to explore all rooms all at once, Bumper rushed by Walli's cage in the front room without noticing the pale gray creature that looked askance at him. The oblivious pup traversed the dining room, dashed into the family room, then settled on exploring the kitchen.

Walli shook her feathers, a miffed expression in those mischievous yellow eyes. Being ignored would never do.

"Hello bird," she called.

Bumper lunged back into the dining room. He spotted the fluffed out beast, planted his feet and skidded to a halt on our hardwood floor. Perhaps a room length was close enough.

"Hello," Walli said.

"GGrrr," Bumper replied, the first noise I'd heard him make.

"Walli-bird," Walli said, presumably introducing herself.

"GGGrruff," Bumper replied and took a step backward. His entire body shook.

"He'll be a great guard dog," my husband said.

"It's alright, Buddy," I said as I patted Bumper and glared at my husband. This buoyed Bumper's courage and he ventured halfway into the living room where Walli's cage resided.

"B-uuurrd," Walli screeched.

Bumper's four feet left the ground as he leapt straight up in the air, then scrambled back to my side.

"Grr-ruff, ruff," Bumper offered from behind my legs.

"A big brave dog," my husband chimed in.

I didn't respond. I was intrigued. Mutual disinterest had existed between Walli and our previous dogs, a Chihuahua-terrier, a collie, and Mandy, an Australian shepherd. For some reason, Bumper was different. I couldn't understand it. Walli has always disliked quick movements. Bumper hadn't stood still since he arrived, even as he hid behind me, his front paws moved up and down like a musician marching in a parade.

"Mandy-bird," Walli tried.

Mandy had been gone for over six months now and, in that time, I couldn't recall Walli speaking her name. I knew African Grays were intelligent, but Bumper, a pure red, short-haired dog, looked nothing like my shaggy black-tri Australian shepherd. Yet, she seemed to be trying to figure out what to call this strange creature.

Bumper crept closer to the cage. The short fur at his shoulder and rump stood on end as he inched his way forward.

"Aren't Vizslas supposed to be bird dogs?" my husband teased. I stuck out my tongue. In truth, relief is what I felt. His hunting instinct hadn't taken hold. Perhaps Walli was too small to fit Bumper's primal image of game bird.

Walli climbed down to the bottom of the cage to get a closer look. She clicked her bill ^ a sign of approval. Bumper was only a body length away. Tail parallel to his spine, he curled his front leg into perfect point position.

"Walli," my parrot chirped.

"Roo roo roo," Bumper responded, as he tucked tail and dashed back to the dining room.

I avoided looking at hubby-dearest on whose face I suspected held a smug expression.

The next morning Bumper was everywhere, collecting items of interest, socks, stuffed animals, and clothes. He went everywhere, that is, except near Walli's cage. I must have said "Bumper. No!" one hundred times as I chased him from room to room.

"Bumper! No!" I screeched as I entered the kitchen to see a sheep-faced pup and a big chunk missing from the loaf of banana bread I'd left cooling on the counter.

From the next room Walli echoed, "Bumper! No!"

"See," I said to Bumper. "Even Walli agrees."

"Bumper! No!" was to become my parrot's favorite saying over the next few weeks.

As Bumper settled down and ventured closer to the cage without barking, Walli dropped the "No!"

"Bumper" she'd call. Then I'd hear toenails clacking over the hardwood floor of the dining room and Bumper's expectant look.

"Bumper." Walli would croon, trying to get him closer.

Usually it worked, if for no other reason than Bumper wanted to get a whiff of Walli's food dish.

As my bird dog grew bolder, he'd shove his nose against the cage bars. I worried a nasty chunk of his nose would disappear, but Walli seemed quite taken with the attention and merely clicked her beak in approval.

A month later I knew all my worrying was for nothing. Bumper was sniffing at the parrot's food dish. As Bumper sniffed at the meat, fruit and seeds in Walli's food dish, my parrot reached in and grabbed a chunk of chicken, then dropped it on the floor of her cage. This wasn't unusual. She often discarded food without even a nibble. Walli cocked her head, looking down at the meat. Bumper nudged the cage with his nose and whined. Walli crawled down the side, lumbered over to the morsel, picked it up and presented it to a delighted Bumper.

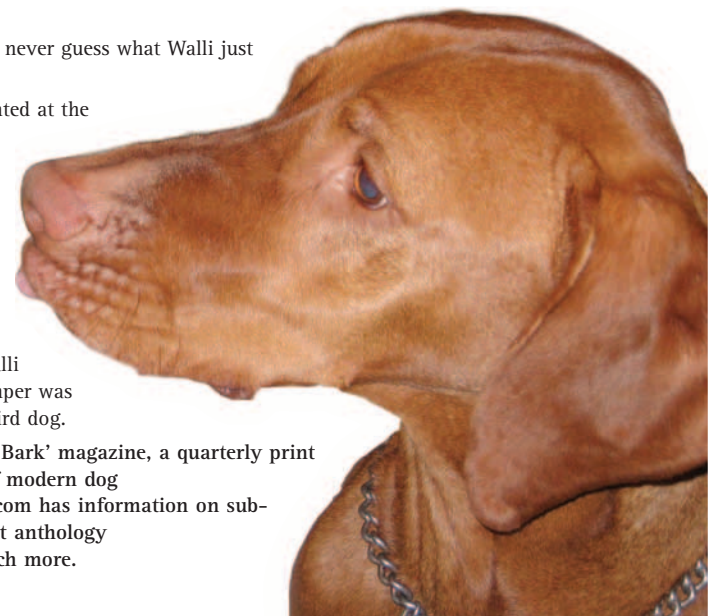
"Honey," I called to my husband. "You'll never guess what Walli just did."

Eric appeared from the next room. I pointed at the cage still not believing what I'd just witnessed.

"She fed him," I said to my husband. "Walli picked up a piece of chicken and brought it to him."

Eric said nothing. We stood side by side and stared at the two animals standing nose to beak, gazing at each other like young lovers. Who would've guessed Walli and Bumper would become friends? Bumper was indeed a bird dog - a different kind of bird dog.

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