

Boating with a Black Brindled Behemoth

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Photos by Rick LeBlanc

Most people do not believe us when we say we live on a 40 foot boat in the river with a one hundred and twenty pound mastiff onboard. Once we assure them that it is indeed so the next question is, “Why don’t you get a smaller dog?” Herein lies the story of why?

The quick reasons are these. We never have to worry about an eagle carrying our small “pony” off the bow of our boat in its talons. We do not have to worry about pirates boarding our vessel when we are not onboard. Jumping up and onto rocky shorelines does not require any assistance from us. Our big girl needs to go to shore as often as a Pomeranian or a Poodle. In fact, our dog’s bladder is substantially larger, of course, and can hold out for up to twelve hours in a pinch.

Another big advantage is the attention she attracts. My two sons call her a “Chick Magnet”. We have met many really great people because of our dog! Everywhere we go



people stop us and want to ask questions about her. What kind of dog is she? A rare breed Italian Mastiff called a Cane Corso. “How much does she weight?” “One hundred and twenty pounds.” “How much does she eat!!?” Surprisingly, our galley helper only eats five cups of dry food per day and is forbidden human cuisine. “Is she friendly?” After she has leaned up against you for a back rub you will have the answer to that question.

We often say she has more friends then we do. I have been walking Kona around a marina and have people stop, say, “Hello, Kona.” and begin patting her without taking any notice of me. They may have met her the day before when my husband, Rick, took her for her outing and she is not easily forgotten. Once you’ve pet her velvet black ears and stroked her silky coat you won’t easily forget her. You cannot easily forget the weight of her body as she leans up against you while you enjoy petting her massive muscular form, especially if she accidentally puts her big paw on one of your feet. She is a gentle giant; agile, intelligent and extremely loveable.

She travels well with us as long as the sea is not rough. When that happens she stands in the saloon and pants. If the weather gets really bad I usually lay down in the saloon and she then lays on top of me for reassurance, which, as I’m sure you can imagine, makes for an even more unpleasant ride.



When we are underway on a bright sunny day and sitting out on the bow, she is happy to hang her head over the side and watch the sea go by. If another boat passes nearby she seems to be able to read the waves and knows when we are going to be rocked about for a bit by the passing wake. She will either quickly move back inside the boat through the pilot house doors or crouch down low until rocking motion has ceased.

Although I have said she is able to hold on for up to twelve hours between shore leaves, there have been times when we have had to make emergency runs to shore while underway. One such time was while we were traveling north in Johnstone Strait on the BC coast of the Pacific Northwest. We did not want to stop because the sea conditions were good and the current was with us. Instead, we deployed our tender, a twelve foot Polaris RIB (rigid inflatable boat) with a 50 horse 4 stroke engine which we tow behind us while underway. (We're scuba divers so we need a substantial tender) While I was at the helm with the boat in neutral Rick brought the tender up to the pilot house gate on the starboard side. Kona jumped in with her lifejacket fastened and the two of them carried on to a carefully chosen beach for a quick "pit stop" on shore. Meanwhile, I continued up the Strait at our usual cruising speed of seven or eight knots and when the shore duty was complete dog and Captain caught up to the mother ship and re-boarded.

We have found Kona to be a great alarm system not only for the boat but also while we are hiking. We hiked one summer in the woods at Sonora Island in the Discovery Islands area. As we were trekking through the forest Kona suddenly stopped with every hair on her back from the tip of her short stubby tail to the space between her two velvet ears standing straight up! She began a low throaty growl and could not be coaxed to go forward. Up until then and to date I have not seen her behave in this way. Because of this unusual behavior on her part I accepted her warning and I would not advance one step further along that trail either! We could not see or hear anything but she was certainly disturbed about something. "The nose knows!" After waiting about five minutes and making a lot of noise and throwing sticks and rocks into the brush surrounding the area we felt comfortable to move forward again. Kona agreed and we proceeded to the lake without further incident.



One night while peacefully at anchor at Turnbull Cove in the northern reaches of the Broughton Archipelago Kona stood on the bow and again began her low throaty growl indicating that something was amiss. We looked to the shoreline and there was a black bear turning over rocks scavenging for delicate morsels found under them.



On another occasion at Prevost Island in the Gulf Islands she spotted a small herd of angora goats on the shore line feasting on the apple trees there. They were standing up on their hind legs to reach the fruit from the higher branches; agreeably a most unusual posture and therefore to Kona a potential threat to us. She held her head high in the air and sounded the alarm that we were in a dangerous area and kept close watch on the shoreline for the rest of the afternoon. It became even more

apparent to her that she must keep this vigilant watch when she spotted two marmots scurrying along the rocks at low tide.

Kona loves our tender, the Catch-Up. She knows when she gets out in that boat it is her ticket to high adventure and exploration. She positions herself in the bow with her two front feet on the anchor locker. When the boat is moving fast her ears flap back in the wind and resemble the white wimple hat tips Sally Field wore when playing the part of the Flying Nun. From this vantage point she keeps a sharp lookout for deadheads, dolphins, seals and whales.



We were once in our tender laying a prawn trap in Booker Lagoon, off Wells Passage in the northern Broughton Archipelago off Vancouver Island. This lagoon is famous for the resident dolphins that frequently “buzz” boats coming into the lagoon to frolic in their wake. One of these dolphins chose our tender to buzz and Kona thought we were under attack from sea monsters below. As the dolphin playfully swam under and around our tender Kona growled and

stamped on the bottom of the boat with her front legs much the same way a polar bear will rear up on its hind legs and crash down with its weight to break through ice or snow to seize their prey hiding underneath. She stood up on the edge of the pontoons and growled and barked and became increasingly distressed by this dolphin “assault”. We

had to abandon the prawning and return her to the mother ship before we could continue our mission. She did not appreciate being left behind with such pending danger still in our midst but we wanted to enjoy the dolphins' antics and attempt to take some photographs.

Another unexpected advantage in having Kona with us is she enjoys digging for clams. Once I crouch down and begin looking in earnest for a good clam bed she is right beside me ready to help. If I am only busying myself picking up oysters off the beach Kona will amuse herself by flipping over rocks and crunching up the tiny crabs that live under them. She will even defend us and herself from these small crabs if they stand their ground and wave their pinchers at her. When this happens she will crouch down with her back end in the air and growl and bark and dig a trench with both her front feet as she backs away and tentatively takes a poke with her nose at the brave crustacean.



About two years ago she learned to swim and that happened quite by accident. She was walking out to meet my sons as they stood on a sandbar off the lovely sandy beach at Sidney Island off the southern coast of Vancouver Island. She was comfortable to go chest deep but suddenly found herself over her head with the boys only a few feet out of her reach. She paddled only a short distance and then was relieved not only to be back with her feet on the ground but beside her two favorite boys as well.



She now enjoys swimming out to fetch a stick but that has to be done systematically with a certain ceremony attached. There is a definite sequence that has to be adhered to. First you throw the stick out only as far as chest deep for her to retrieve it. When she returns to shore you have to pretend to want the stick back and growl and crouch down and behave like another dog attempting to steal her prey. Her hair goes up on her back in mock annoyance and much growling begins yet when the command, "OUT" is

spoken she instantly drops the stick and waits to fetch it out of the water again. Each time the stick goes a little farther out until eventually she is swimming and does not mind a bit. If you stop because you have had enough she will whine and look at you with her big brown eyes until you throw the stick out again. Only she gets to decide when the game is over. This is usually signaled by her chewing the stick up with her 1500 pounds

per square inch jaw power until there are only small pieces left of what once was a sizeable stick.

The next day you can throw a stick out into the water thinking that she will surely swim out for it after the fun she had the day before, but she will refuse and walk away. It all has to be a build up to the “over-her-head” condition or no go on her part. Consequently, when admirers ask, “Does she like to swim?” the answer is a complicated one.

We hate to leave her when we go kayaking or scuba diving. As soon as she sees us haul out the scuba tanks in the stern and hears the air blast out as we set up our gear she heads for the saloon and stays out of the way.

She has perfected the “hang dog” look when we pull away from the boat and she is left behind. She has determined that the best way to get back at us for this insensitive conduct is to get up on the queen island bed in our stateroom while we are gone and settle in for a nice comfortable nap until our return. She has plenty of time to get up and away from the crime scene because she either hears the motor on the tender as we approach or the clamor we make climbing out of our kayaks before boarding the boat again. If it were not for the rumpled bed clothes her little revenge tactic would go undetected.



People have asked us will we choose a smaller dog next time and the answer is no. A dog on board, large or small, keeps you active and moving. If we did not go to shore two or three times a day we would likely be couch potatoes moving from one anchorage to another getting little or no exercise. Kona goes out after breakfast for a short walk-about and in the afternoon we almost always have a hike somewhere on shore. After supper and before we retire for the night Rick takes her out one last time before we go to sleep.

She loves to be with us wherever we go and we enjoy having her along. She is great company when you want to check a crab trap, hang a fishing line out or just take a short putt around your anchorage as you watch the sun go down. She keeps us company, safe, exercised, and entertained by her wonderful personality. Who could ask for a better boating companion than that? So what if she takes up the same footprint as two adults standing in your boat. To that we say, “The more the merrier!”

