



# It's a Dog's Life (Jacket!)

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*photos by Chris Edmonston and Amanda Suttles*

*Stella models the Kurgo Surf n' Turf life jacket.*

The last thing we want is for Fido to fall overboard, creating panic onboard and a potential safety nightmare. Fitting him for a life jacket is easy—really!—if you follow a few simple tips.

Some of the most important safety items on any boat are the life jackets—for you, your passengers and your “best friend.” Since BoatU.S.’s last report on this topic 12 years ago, the canine life jacket market has taken off by leaps and bounds. Back in 2000, BoatU.S. came up with four viable canine life jacket models. This time, BoatU.S. was easily able to double the number of life jackets tested.

While it may seem as if all dogs have an innate ability to swim, many dogs simply don’t take well to water. Dogs with low body fat, such as Greyhounds, or dogs with age or health issues may have trouble. Life jackets are a good idea even for dogs that love the water. A long day in the water can get tiring, even for the best swimmers—a fact that was proven on our day of testing.

Most of our test life jackets came in a variety of sizes, so we were able to try them out on a variety of dogs—from a 12-pound rat terrier, to a 130-pound Newfoundland and six other dogs in between. There are also different types of foam and construction materials in use today, as well as

an inflatable model. With prices ranging from about \$20 to more than \$100, there’s a vibrant dog life jacket market and a life jacket for every budget.

## Top choices

The life jackets we tested performed differently based, in part, on the size of the dog, so we broke down our test results on life jacket size, rather than brand. We rated on a 1- to 5-point scale, with 5 being the best score. The six scores for each life jacket were averaged for the final score. Life jackets were rated on the following factors:

- Ease of fit and adjustment
- Comfort when worn dry
- Adjustment needed when wet
- Swimming characteristics and water performance (how well the jacket floated the dog or helped its ability to swim)
- Observations from the dog’s owner



Here's Jackie, wearing an Outward Hound jacket.



Murphy, the extra-large Newfoundland, wearing a Kurgo Surf n' Turf.

## Some things to consider before purchasing

Is the dog likely to jump in the water? Is the dog heavy? Will the dog want to lie down or will it be active? If you can, take your dog to the store to try on the life jacket, or at least make sure you can take it back. See how the life jacket fits, and how hard it is to adjust for a good fit. Check where the straps hit—you don't want the straps or buckles rubbing sensitive parts. Also, you'll want to check the way the foam padding rides on the dog—too much foam in the wrong place will make it uncomfortable, if not impossible, for the dog to sit or lie comfortably.

One feature that testers found universally important: a lifting strap/handle. If you've ever tried to pick up a swimming dog, you'll agree that having a lifting handle makes getting the dog back into the boat much easier. If your pet needs to be on a leash, having a ring on the collar is another important feature. Safety features to consider include having reflective tape and a life jacket made of bright colors to make it easier to spot the dog in the water in adverse conditions. And, keep in mind, if the jacket has Velcro-style closures, your dog's shedding might clog it up and necessitate frequent cleaning.

### Small dogs

Our small dogs, a 12-pound rat terrier (Spring) and a 20-pound Jack Russell (Skipper), neither of which are "water" dogs, had decidedly negative outlooks on taking a plunge. Because they were small, active dogs, there was less wiggle room for a poorly fitting life jacket. Everything from strap and buckle location to amount and placement of the foam had to be just right for the dog to be comfortable. The life jacket that best suited both dogs was the West Marine neoprene jacket, which just edged out the Outward Hound. The West Marine life jacket is a good value as well, coming in at a price of \$34.99.

### Medium dogs

Our medium dogs, a 36-pound border collie (Zip) and a 40-pound golden retriever pup (Stella) seemed to be much more willing to take a swim than our small dogs—not much of a surprise, especially for Stella. There's a substantial size difference

### Online extra

For full test results on each life jacket, along with videos of the dogs testing the life jackets, and for a terrific gallery of members' pets aboard, visit

[www.BoatUS.com/Magazine](http://www.BoatUS.com/Magazine)

Click on "Archives" and "It's A Dog's Life (Jacket!)" under the June/July heading.

between a small and medium life jacket, and the fitting was easier for Stella and Zip than it was for Skipper and Spring. The life jacket that best suited both dogs was the Outward Hound priced at \$29.99, which just edged out a foam jacket from West Marine called the Pet Flotation Device, or cleverly called the "PFD."

### Large dogs

Our large dogs, a 62-pound golden (Jackie) and a 70-pound golden (Guinness) were more at home in the water than they were on the shore. The large life jackets tested had a greater amount of surface area, which is one thing to keep in mind on a hot summer day, especially for our friends that sport a little more fur. The life jacket that best suited our large dogs was the Outward Hound because of overall performance for active dogs in the water. The economical \$24.99 West Marine Pet Flotation Device followed that life jacket—the same results as for the medium-sized dogs.

### Extra-large dogs

Our biggest dogs, a 90-pound Chesapeake Bay retriever and a 130-pound Newfoundland were very comfortable in the water. Life jackets for these dogs seemed to be the most forgiving for getting a good fit. Adjustments, when needed, were made easily, and the price for the jackets averaged around \$50. The life jacket that best suited both dogs was the Outward Hound, just beating out the MTI Adventure Wear Underdog and the Kurgo Surf n' Turf, which were tied for second place. All three of these life jackets did an exceptional job at keeping these heavy dogs' hind section afloat, leading to a more horizontal and natural swimming posture while in the water, which greatly reduced fatigue. ☐

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