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Review of Life jackets for Dogs

Critter's vest has best buoyancy while MTI has the best price.

Unlike humans, dogs instinctively know how to swim and most are very good at it. However, our canine friends can't tread water forever. If your dog falls overboard

and becomes separated from the boat, it will eventually tire and could drown. A doggie life jacket can help. Pet PFDs not only keep the dog afloat, but function well as retrieving devices. Each has a handle on the top that you can use to snatch your critter with a boat hook and then grab and lift the dog into the boat.

Practical Sailor has tested a variety of life jackets for people in the last year, and in collecting these products, we noticed an increasing number of personal flotation devices for pets on the market. West Marine and Boater's World carry their own doggie PFDs, and we came across several other brands on the web. In all, we rounded up seven different PFDs from the same number of manufacturers. The Boater's World OTE (On The Edge) life jacket is made by Kent; and a Japanese company makes West Marine's Deluxe Pet Vest. All of the jackets are made of foam flotation, except for the Critter's Inflatable, a new inflatable that can be set to automatic or manual inflation. The Critter's jacket was designed by Dan McCormick, a mechanical engineer with the Coast Guard's Office of Boating Safety. McCormick used to work with PFD manufacturers and Underwriter Laboratories in establishing PFD standards, and he conducted design reviews (including inflatable PFDs) for Coast Guard approval. To avoid any conflict of interest, he has switched jobs and now makes sure boat manufacturers are in compliance with Coast Guard regulations. McCormick developed the Critter's Inflatable after his friend, who is a



The Critter's Inflatable pet PFD, with its 25 pounds of buoyancy, kept the chin of the PS test pooch high out of the water. The vest's inflating device can be set to operate automatically or manually.

dog owner and a boater, complained about the uncomfortable fit of the conventional pet PFDs. "He knew about the more comfortable fit of the inflatable PFDs and wondered why there wasn't an inflatable for dogs," McCormick said. "The rest is history."

The Critter's Inflatable is the most expensive in our group: \$100, followed by the preserver from Ruff Wear (\$70). The least expensive is the OTE/Boater's World (\$15).

In some ways, it's easier to choose the correct PFD for a human than a dog. First of all, because there are no performance or design standards for pet PFDs, manufacturers do not have to provide buoyancy ratings. There is no universal system of sizes and types (because dogs come in so many shapes and sizes). Some makers size their jackets by the dog's weight, others by the dog's size. For instance, the Ruff Wear jacket we tested, a medium, is for dogs with a girth of 27 to 32 inches, and a minimum of 21 inches from the base of the neck to the base of the tail. A medium NRS is sized for 40- to 60-pound animals.

How We Tested

Our test subject was an 8-year-old, 50-pound male English springer spaniel named Murphy.

We had Murphy try out each jacket while on land. The test team, which included the dog's owner, noted how easy it was to secure each vest's clips and straps. Except for the inflatable, all of the coats wrap around the dog's back.

Two straps with plastic clips are used to secure the body of the coat, while a third clip (and on a few jackets a Velcro strap) is used to join the collar section at the throat. Murphy walked around in each coat for a few minutes. He seemed comfortable in most of them. The owner was concerned, however, about the position of the back straps on some of the PFDs, fearing they were too close to Murphy's crotch.



The Critter's Inflatable, pictured here, and the Ruff Wear Float Coat both rated Excellent for fit.



We took Murphy on our Twin Vee test power boat, dropped him in calm water, and had him swim in each jacket for five to 10 minutes. We noted how well the PFD fit and evaluated how well it kept the dog afloat. The better jackets allowed him to easily keep his chin above the water, and they lifted him high enough so that his back was parallel with the surface.

Using each jacket's lifting strap, a *PS* tester pulled Murphy up and over the side of the boat (about 30 inches of freeboard).

What We Found

None of the PFDs interfered with the dog's ability to swim. Murphy seemed comfortable in every model.

He probably was pretty uncomfortable during the lifting exercises, however. His owner did not like the jackets with the thin underbelly straps because they dug into his midsection. (We didn't perform the lift test with the Plastimo because the strap went directly across his crotch.) The dog was probably most comfortable

when being lifted with the Ruff Wear. This coat extends down the sides of the dog and meets at the center of the midsection, so the pressure is distributed over a larger, padded area. Plus the straps and clips are on the outside of the coat. The straps on the NRS were better than average, too. They're wider, with a stitched-on strip of soft, neoprene-type material.

Our test team liked the perceived comfort level and fit of the Critter's Inflatable, the Ruff Wear, and the NRS, but the latter two fell short in the buoyancy department. Murphy's back was a few inches below the surface when wearing each of these vests. Ruff Wear's Niki Singlaub said that fit and comfort are just as important as buoyancy. Ruff Wear coats are designed to allow dogs to swim in their natural positions.

The West Marine, OTE Boater's World, MTI, and Plastimo provided better buoyancy, in our estimation. The Critter's Inflatable was the hands-down buoyancy winner, however. With its 25 pounds of buoyancy, it kept the dog's chin and back two to three inches out of the water. The Critter's Inflatable was a little complicated to put on our dog, with its multiple clips and adjustable straps. But the device is made well and thoughtfully designed. It has wider straps and larger clips than the others, and its grab handle consists of two layers of vinyl straps instead of one. The Critter's Inflatable, which comes in three sizes for dogs from 6 to 200 pounds, also has a metal ring to attach a leash. Most of the other PFDs have plastic clips.



All of the pet PFDs tested came with a grab strap on the back of the jacket, making retrieval of an overboard critter easier. However, the straps on many of the jackets tested cut into Murphy's underbelly, especially when he was lifted out of the water.

Conclusions

For dog owners willing to pay \$100 for a PFD, the Critter's Inflatable is an excellent choice, in our opinion. It's comfortable and cooler than the foam vests and provides more flotation. As with any inflatable, regular inspection of the device and proper care and maintenance is paramount.

The dog's activity level and your sailing grounds should be considered before buying the PFD. Does it need the added buoyancy of an inflatable? Or is your pooch one of those constantly in and out of the water, running up and down the beach that needs a less obtrusive vest? For the latter, we suggest the Best Buy MTI Adventurewear. While it did not fit our pooch as well as the Ruff Wear or NRS, it provided better lift, has a reflective stripe on the back, and is only \$30.

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