BEING BORN WHITE can be a death sentence if you’re a Boxer. Being black, if you’re a mongrel, can be just as fatal. Hsin-Yi Cohen and Claire Horton-Bussey examine how colour prejudice can be deadly for our canine friends...
JAKE SAT UP EAGERLY - hoping for a smile, a friendly word - but the family passed him by. Again, it was the fifth time today. His wagging tail slowed as they walked past, then drooped forlornly and he slowly lay down. He shut his eyes. Far away, in distant memory, he remembered a family. His family. They had taken him from his mother’s warm body to a new home and he had been so excited. But then they had left him - for hours and hours alone each day. He knew they went to a place called Work. He wanted to go with them - so he learnt to escape, to try to find them. But a man caught him every time and brought him back. Finally, his family had brought him to this place and left him here.

He’s not sure how long he’s been here now. He’s heard the nice lady, who brings him food, sigh and say “three years” but he is not sure what that means. He doesn’t know why he has to stay here, why no families ever want him. They always come up eagerly to his kennel but then their eyes look funny when they see him. Was there something wrong with the way he looked? He had all his legs, and his ears and tail. He could jump and run, but also sit politely. He doesn’t know why they never like him. He just knows that he is so tired of being alone, of waiting and hoping...

On the other side of the county, Tamara Delaney was driving through the cold, windy afternoon, feeling sorry for the two Rottweiler puppies she was carrying in her car. Their owner had just committed suicide and with no one willing to claim them, she had volunteered to transport them to the Gemini All Breed Rescue in Minnesota. As she pulled into the rescue’s parking lot, the familiar sounds of frantic barking filled her ears and she wished again she could do more to help. Even after 15 years of rescue work, Tamara still found it hard to think of all the dogs waiting for homes. Hopefully, these two puppies would not have to wait long, she thought, as she dropped them off and hurried back to her car. Then she stopped. A pair of beautiful brown eyes met hers, Jake.

“He was so striking to me, with his beautiful face and waggy tail,” Tamara remembers. “When I was told he had been there for approximately three years, I was aghast. I asked why and the rescue owner told me that big black dogs don’t always find homes quickly. I was baffled.”

Arriving back home, Tamara couldn’t get Jake out of her mind. She decided the least she could do was to help find him a home - and so her campaign began.

No interest

“It took six months of my children and me making posters and driving them all over to advertise that he needed a home. We also spoke of his wonderfulness to all we met who were looking for a dog with just good, old “word of mouth.” Then I began to realize that nobody was interested in a well-mannered, already fully up-to-date, healthy, male black Lab-type dog. It was discouraging and really sad. After six months, one person did offer to give him a home out of doors. It broke my heart. The only home that wanted him, wanted him out of the house.”

Blacklisted

Coat colour is superficial, isn’t it? A dog’s temperament and health are more important than the shade of his fur? Then why are rehoming centres packed with wonderful, fit, loving black dogs?

Rescue workers across the country embraced the website. They had all been long aware of the unspoken “black dog syndrome” and were frustrated at how little they could do to help their darker canine residents, many of whom are put to sleep just to make room for more adoptable light-coloured dogs or die within the system while waiting a lifetime to be noticed. With the euthanasia policy in place at the many “kill shelters” across the United States, most black dogs are simply counting the days on Death Row. But now there was a voice for them. Tamara and the Black Pearl Dogs organisation could act as a middleman, helping to coordinate efforts between shelters and rescues, removing black dogs from Death Row, spreading information about them and facilitating adoptions.

For Tamara, however, the educational aspect is just as important because many people - even animal lovers - are not aware of the black dog stigma and the plight they are in. She is certain this is due to lack of education or a misunderstanding about black dogs.

“We all know that a prejudice is a prefomed opinion, usually an unfavourable one, based on insufficient knowledge, irrational feelings, or inaccurate stereotypes. I also think some of the breeds in the last 50 to 60 or so years that have been misunderstood by certain groups of people (Rottweilers, Dobermanns etc) have affected how we think about a large black dog. You go to a movie, watch a show or read a book... what dogs are they using to show evil or ferocity? Most commonly: a big black one.”

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and this has evolved in the modern world into labels for negative personal emotions, in particular Churchill’s famous quip about struggling with his “black dog”, which has become the universal metaphor for depression. Indeed, places such as Australia’s educational, research and clinical facility for depression and bipolar disorder call themselves the Black Dog Institute.

It’s doubtful nowadays that people would allow fairytales and superstitions to dictate their actions, but it is not improbable that they are unconsciously influenced by all the negative connotations surrounding black dogs, leading to a prejudice against them. However, it might even be simpler than that. It could simply be that black dogs are just too ordinary.

This is what Steve Broomfield, regional centre manager for the southern adoption centres at The Blue Cross, believes. “Black dogs often take longer, especially larger ones. People tend to overlook them more easily. Darker dogs don’t have the facial expression of lighter/multicoloured dogs and so don’t always look as endearing.”

Too common

Lucinda English, communications manager at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, finds a similar situation at her centre. “We do find it harder to rehome black dogs. They are sometimes overlooked, as there are so many of them and they don’t stand out as much; the colour is so common that a lighter or unusual-coloured dog will catch a person’s attention more.”

While the problem in Britain is not as bad as in the United States, there is still a noticeable trend in black dogs losing out on the adoption stakes. Many rescue centres have taken specific steps to address this. At The Blue Cross, Steve says that they talk to prospective owners and match the dogs very carefully, suiting the dog to the person. He feels that when prospective owners are properly introduced to black dogs, they don’t overlook them.

Battersea takes an even more creative approach. “We try to draw attention to black dogs and cats by giving them colourful necklaces,” says Lucinda. “We also put up ‘Look at me’ signs by their kennels and promote them on posters around the home. We try to get all our visitors to focus on each dog’s personality, and how the dog would fit with their lifestyle regardless of appearance.”

The new black

These are exactly the sort of ideas that Tamara suggests on the Black Pearl Dogs website - ranging from tips on how to photograph a black dog correctly (to avoid a nondescript black blob) to planning themed adoption days, such as catwalk Tux and Tails shows, where black dogs, adorned with bow ties and flower corsages, are walked down a runway accompanied by an MC announcing the finer qualities of each dog. While Britain may not - thankfully - have need of an organisation like Black Pearl Dogs yet, many appreciate the work it is doing. As Lucinda says, “We believe any organisation that helps to rehome unwanted and abandoned animals responsibly is a good idea.”

With the successful growth of the site, Tamara is full of aspirations, such as expanding the website and obtaining non-profit charitable status for Black Pearl Dogs, but her real mission is still rehoming individual black dogs and educating the public.

“If just one person walks away from this website with a new awareness and they, in turn, share this with just one other person (and so on)... mission accomplished. Just like in the movie Pay It Forward it is my dream that Black Pearl Dogs is a domino effect, if you will.”

And so Tamara intends to change the world, one black dog at a time. ::

SPECIAL FEATURE

Black and homeless...

Freddie

Freddie is a bouncy Labrador cross, come into The Blue Cross as a stray. He is a smart, suitable dog who needs an owner to continue with his basic training and socialising. He will need time to settle into a new home, as he is not known how long he lived as a stray. Freddie needs someone who is around most of the day and who has a garden where he can play and explore. He is a great dog who just needs that special someone to give him, the time he needs.

To adopt Freddie call The Blue Cross in Burford on 01993 820461 or email battersea@bluecross.org.uk.

Bruno

Bruno is a friendly and play/lo, but cannot live with other dogs or cats. He loves children and would make a great addition to any family. He can be left for up to four hours on his own and is a clever chapp. He is looking for a family which can give him all the love and attention he deserves.

To adopt Bruno call The Blue Cross in Tiverton on 01884 852 291 or email tiverton@bluecross.org.uk.

Sky

Sky is a boisterous, feisty black Lab cross with spirit; she is definitely not for the shy and retiring type! Sky is looking for owners who have owned large breeds or Labrador types previously, with experience of knowledge of food possessive, possessive, strong-willed dogs. Sky needs to live in a calm, active, multi-carer adult household, as she can be attention-seeking. Owners must be enthusiastic about training and be prepared to keep her mentally and physically stimulated. Experienced older teenagers will be considered if they are able to maintain consistency in the household.

Sky needs to live in a semi-rural or rural environment. A house is essential, due to her size, with a garden for burn-offs and training. She could live with a non-problematic, mature, male dog with a similar temperament.

Please call Battersea’s Behaviour Unit on 020 7627 7894 if you are interested in Sky, or email behaviourrehoming@dogshome.org and quote ref 2006/04334.

Ludo

Ludo, a bouncy Labrador cross, came into The Blue Cross as a stray. He is a smart, suitable dog who needs an owner to continue with his basic training and socialising. He will need time to settle into a new home, as he is not known how long he lived as a stray. Ludo needs someone who is around most of the day and who has a garden where he can play and explore. He is a great dog who just needs that special someone to give him, the time he needs.

To adopt Ludo call The Blue Cross in Burford on 01993 820461 or email battersea@bluecross.org.uk.

Bruno

Bruno is a friendly and play/lo, but cannot live with other dogs or cats. He loves children and would make a great addition to any family. He can be left for up to four hours on his own and is a clever chapp. He is looking for a family which can give him all the love and attention he deserves.

To adopt Bruno call The Blue Cross in Tiverton on 01884 852 291 or email tiverton@bluecross.org.uk.
Docking for cosmetic reasons will soon be banned – but killing puppies for cosmetic reasons continues, with dogs being culled just because of the colour of their coat.

**Docking for Cosmetic Reasons**

The practice of docking and cropping dogs’ ears and tails has long been controversial, with many animal welfare organizations and veterinarians arguing that it is inhumane and unnecessary. However, despite growing public awareness and opposition, the practice continues in some parts of the world, particularly in countries with little regulation.

**Killing Puppies for Cosmetic Reasons**

A recent article in *Dogs Today* highlights the ongoing issue of puppies being killed simply because of the color of their coat. The author, Claire Horton-Bussey, shares her experiences as a volunteer with the White Boxer Rescue Centre in the UK.

Claire encountered a situation where a breeder refused to help a puppy in distress because of its color. Horrified, the owner bought the puppy for £250 and took it home at just four days of age. Why had the breeder been so uncaring towards the defenceless puppy? Because it was white.

The puppy’s new owner later contacted the White Boxer Rescue Centre, and the story became public. Sheila Dawison, who had been worrying about the breed for some time, was surprised. In the 15 years she had been working with Boxer Rescue, she had seen the worst cruelty towards the breed she loved. Why had the breeder been so uncaring towards the defenceless puppy? Because it was white.

The breeder’s actions were not unusual. For many years, the Boxer Breed Council in the UK has had a rule stating that white pups should be destroyed at birth, unless they are deaf. This rule was introduced in 1991 as a way to prevent the spread of fawn (brindle) and fawn patched coats in the breed. However, this rule has been the subject of much controversy, with many animal welfare organizations, as well as the American Boxer Club, arguing that it is inhumane and unnecessary.

Claire’s experience with the breeder was far from isolated. She contacted the White Boxer Rescue Centre, and many other rescue organizations had received similar reports. The rule had been in place for many years, but its implementation continued, with many breeders still destroying white pups as soon as they were born.

**The Rescue Effort**

Claire and her colleagues at the White Boxer Rescue Centre worked tirelessly to rescue as many white pups as possible. They contacted the breeder and arranged to meet Sheila in dark country lanes, handing over tiny, tiny pups to her to hand-rear. "I would usually insist that at the very least the pups would have their mothers’ milk for at least three days,” says Sheila, “but the breeders wanted shot of them early. In case people saw them then.”

**Silent Witness**

Needing to leave the rescue story at that time, Sheila had no idea that her stance on this issue would eventually lead to her being vilified. Across the Atlantic, the American Boxer Club’s Code of Ethics states that “the Boxer Standard defines the following disqualifications: Boxers that are any colour other than fawn or brindle, Boxers with a total of white markings exceeding one-third of the entire coat.”

**Conclusion**

The issue of cosmetic reasons for killing or destroying puppies continues to be a contentious one. While some organizations continue to argue for the right to destroy white pups, others argue that the practice is inhumane and unnecessary. As animal welfare organizations continue to work towards changing these rules, it is important to remain vigilant and continue to raise awareness about the issue.

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**Feature by Claire Horton-Bussey**

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“I suddenly realised that white pups were being destroyed or left out in the cold to die, as people didn’t want the expense of vet fees to put them to sleep, or couldn’t bring themselves to drown the pups.”

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Viewing a litter of newborn Boxer pups is a unique experience. It is always surprising to see how much love and care goes into raising these beautiful creatures.

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“Docking and cropping practices continue to be debated, with some countries banning it altogether.”

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Silent witness...
I started all these years ago," Sheila says. The general pet public is more open to white boxer dogs, and many myths have been dispelled about coat colour. For example, not all white boxer dogs are deaf! Sheila says that 10 per cent of white boxer dogs are deaf, but says many coloured dogs are, too. "The minute you get a white boxer that is difficult to train, people test it for deafness. If you get a scatty coloured boxer that is hard to train, people just put it down to being an exuberant boxer - they don't even think that it may also be deaf."

See hear awareness of training deaf dogs has increased so much over the last decade that many people now realise that deafness is not a huge disability in dog anyway, and this has also helped Sheila’s organisation. In fact, she often has waiting lists of people who want a white boxer because they’ve heard that they are hard done by, or simply because they find them more attractive than their darker coloured siblings.

The difficulty is that since the breed is based on white dogs, and since there is such demand in the show ring for ‘flashy’ dogs (those with striking white markings), white puppies will always crop up in litters. Some exhibitors are even calling for black-masked/white coloured dogs to be forgone, in order to reduce the use of white-marked dogs in breeding programmes - and hence the number of white pups born. At the moment the Kennel Club breed standard states that white markings are acceptable, provided they do not exceed one-third of the ground colour.

In the German Shepherd dog, white dogs are also frowned upon, though the breed standard is more forgiving, wary saying that although whites and near whites (as well as blues, liver and albino) are highly undesirable, “Colour in itself is of secondary importance, having no effect on character or fitness for work.”

Canine geneticist Dr Malcolm Willis is very much a ‘GSD man’ and had his first dog in 1953. He remembers a photo from the 1930s of a great-looking white GSD, Bondwood White Domino, and has added: "The minute you get a white boxer that is difficult to train, people test it for deafness. If you get a scatty coloured boxer that is hard to train, people just put it down to being an exuberant boxer - they don't even think that it may also be deaf."

“People say to us that white German Shepherds are ‘airheads’ or ‘plain crazy’. Dogs look softer and gentler than coloured ones. Someone will ask, If they can stroke one of our dogs, and when they ask what the breed is and we tell them, they say, ‘No, it can’t be - I’m frightened of German Shepherds!’”

Clearly, the colour prejudice that works against black dogs in rescue, works in favour of their white kennelmates - in the general public’s eyes at least. Hopefully, this will start to filter through to the show ring and stop unnecessary culling of healthy pups whose only crime is to be born white.

Lovely Casper needs an owner who can cope with his energy, as he has plenty of energy, but is also deaf! He is a friendly and happy dog, who responds well to hand gestures and loves his treats! Casper is looking for a home with older children, and possibly with other canine companions, but no cats.

White and homeless...

Casper
White Staffordshire Bull Terrier
18 months old

White Sammy
Two years old

Libby

White Saluki cross
18 months old

Smidgon
White Saluki cross
18 months old

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