

Black & white



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...

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?

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 is 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 Allbreed 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 realise 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."

So Tamara did what her heart had been begging her to do all along: she adopted Jake herself. And with him came an inspiration - to help other black dogs. She started researching 'black dog syndrome' and was shocked at what she discovered - that black dogs, particularly larger breeds (such as Newfoundlands, Chow Chows, Labradors, Rottweilers and their crosses), are being euthanased at a horrifying rate in pounds and shelters across the United States because people keep ignoring them in favour of lighter-coloured dogs.

Often overlooked

It's a phenomenon all rescue workers are aware of, although few are sure of the reasons for it. Some, such as Jill Wimmer, a shelter manager at a no-kill shelter in Atlanta, find that they can easily adopt out three dogs in the time it takes her to find a home for one big, black dog. Even in American pet shops black dogs are often overlooked - which is one reason why light-coloured puppies are usually stocked.

With the support of her husband and the benefit of her teaching background, Tamara launched an educational website, www.blackpearldogs.com, which she named 'Contrary to Ordinary: The Black Pearls of the Dog World' - aimed at raising awareness of the black dogs' plight, addressing the superstitions and prejudices against them, and encouraging people to see beyond a dog's coat colour.



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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 adoption.

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 preformed 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 mishandled by certain groups of people (ie

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 fierceness? Most commonly: a big black one."

Tamara is right: black dogs carry menacing connotations. In the ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Norse mythologies, dogs are often associated with death and the supernatural, and black dogs in particular often feature as harbingers of death or emissaries of the Devil. Through the Middle Ages, this continued to develop in folklore, particularly in Britain and Europe where sightings of devilish black hounds are often recorded and black dogs are usually associated with the 'border-spaces' between this world and the next, such as graveyards and ley lines.

Spooky stories

The British Isles alone seem to be overflowing with spectral black hounds: in Somerset, a black dog called Gurt Dog is frequently seen; Cornwall has various tales of the Devil's Dandy (or Dando) Dogs; Devon has the Yeth (Heath) or Wisht Hounds; in West Yorkshire, there is the Guytrash; and on the Isle of Man, Peel Castle is haunted by the menacing phantom dog called Mauthe Doog. Perhaps most famous is the phantom black dog of Dartmoor, upon which Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hounds of the Baskervilles* was based.

The association between black dogs and the 'otherworld' has led them to be regarded as earthly omens of disaster and thus people feared them even more. Seeing a black dog was believed to be a premonition of personal calamity

and this has evolved in the modern world into labels for negative personal emotions, in particular Churchill's famous quote 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.

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Battersea takes an even more creative approach. "We try to draw attention to black dogs and cats by giving them colourful neckscarves," 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 premise with promise. An altruistic domino effect, if you will."

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



For further information visit Black Pearl Dogs website at www.blackpearldogs.com

Black and homeless...

...can you help?



Freddie
Black collie cross
5-7 years old

Freddie arrived at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home in June 2005 because he kept escaping when left alone. Freddie is fairly typical of an older dog, in that he can be quite aloof, but, once he has built a bond with you, he is more keen to interact. Freddie is looking to live in an area with a low dog population, and needs a large garden for training and stimulation. Experienced owners are needed, particularly of collie types, and an adult household is preferred (though older teens may be considered). Freddie could live with a female dog, if it were a good match, but cannot live with cats.

If you feel you can offer Freddie the right type of home, contact Battersea's Behaviour Unit on 020 7627 7884 or email behaviourrehomeing@dogshome.org and quote his reference number 2005/20506

Ludo
Black Labrador cross
Two years old

Ludo, a bouncy Labrador cross, came into The Blue Cross as a stray. He is a smart, excitable dog who needs an owner to continue with his basic training and socialising. He will need time to settle into a new home, as it 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 822483 or email burford@bluecross.org.uk



Bruno
Black Lab cross
Five years old

Bruno is friendly and playful, 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 chap. He is looking for a family who can give him all the love and attention he deserves.

To adopt Bruno call The Blue Cross in Tiverton on 01884 855 291 or email tiverton@bluecross.org.uk

Sky
Black Labrador cross
Eight months old

Sky is a bolshy, 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 or knowledge of food possession behaviours and strongwilled 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 who could cope with her mad moments.

Please call Battersea's Behaviour Unit on 020 7627 7884 if you are interested in Sky, or email behaviourrehomeing@dogshome.org and quote ref 2006/04334



Pale beyond the pail

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

VIEWING A LITTER of newborn Boxer pups just a couple of months ago, a potential owner noticed that one pup was away from the rest of the litter. She asked why the pup was separate and if it was okay. The breeder replied, "It'll live or die - it depends whether it can get over there," nodding to where the dam was, with the rest of her pups. The breeder refused to help the puppy in distress.

Horrified, the owner bought the pup 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 pup's new owner later contacted the White Boxer Rescue Centre, and related the story to its founder, Sheila Dawson, who wasn't at all surprised by the tale. In the 15 years that she's been running White Boxer Rescue, she's seen the very worst cruelty towards the breed she loves - just because of coat colour - and has hand-reared many a newborn pup that would otherwise have been culled.

Sheila founded the White Boxer Rescue Centre in 1991. She had initially been involved in showing red Boxers, which opened her eyes to what was going on behind the scenes, in many breeders' homes. She says, "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."

"At the time, most of the Boxer rescues were affiliated to clubs, and it was in the rules - and still is - that white Boxers should be destroyed at

birth, so even the rescues wouldn't get involved."

Indeed, the Boxer Breed Council code of conduct still states that white puppies should be destroyed at birth, and this was only recently amended (in March 1995) to include the word 'humanely' - now reading: "White puppies should be humanely destroyed at birth." There is at least a recognition that some people won't destroy the pups, with a statement saying that, if they are retained, they should be checked carefully for deafness, and if they are deaf, they should not be sold.

Breed club members were duty bound by the rules, and those that couldn't face putting healthy - but white - pups to sleep, had nowhere to turn, so Sheila set up the White Boxer Rescue Centre. The early days were very stressful, with Sheila regularly receiving threats and abuse for going against the established status quo. Breeders who wanted their white pups to live would phone anonymously and arrange to meet Sheila in dark country lanes, handing over tiny, tiny pups for her to hand-raise. "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 they had them."

Silent witness

Needless to say, Sheila's own show career was over because of her stance, "It was a no-go," she says. "What I was doing was deemed so controversial at the time that no judge would have placed me."

Luckily, 15 years on, there is much less hostility towards her and white Boxers in general. However, researching this article has been very difficult, as no one I tried to speak to would agree to be quoted and lips were shut tight. "As club members, we have to accept the rules," was the general comment made by those contacted.

I could find no one who would publicly defend the ruling that white dogs should be destroyed; nor would any club member criticise the rule. I encountered just silence - a closed



shop - and eventually had to admit defeat. Perhaps I was naïve to think that if people believed something to be right, they would be open about defending their position. Maybe there is an element of shame associated with the procedure - otherwise, why would people be reluctant to talk? But the shame clearly hasn't reached the point of demanding change and revoking the rule. Are people too scared to rock the boat by speaking out?

Researching the breed's history, it seems most peculiar that there is a modern antithesis against white dogs. Early photos of Boxers, dating back to the 1890s, show successful white dogs (and black-coated ones, and white with brindle/fawn patches) at the German Boxer Club shows. In fact, a founding sire of the breed, an English Bulldog called Tom, was white with fawn patches. His litter with Alt Schecken, a white Bullenbeisser-type with brindle, produced Flocki in 1895, the first Boxer registered in the German stud book.

The breed flourished and was used extensively in the First World War, guarding prisoners of war and also taking communication cables between trenches. White dogs could easily be spotted, of course, so dark-coated ones were favoured, as they were less conspicuous.

Post-war, in the early 1920s, a new breed standard was adopted, banning

white dogs or those with heavy white markings, as it was considered that guard dogs should be dark.

Now, more than 80 years on, tradition continues, even though the Boxer can hardly be considered as a working breed - primarily he is a show dog and a popular pet.

To the rescue

All around the world, the white Boxer is vilified. Across the Atlantic, the American Boxer Club's Code of Ethics state: "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" and the infractions include registering a Boxer who is not of the approved colour, or even selling such a pup. Rehoming to a rescue organisation is also forbidden - if the dog will be sold on to a new owner from the centre.

Fortunately this is not the case in the UK: breeders that ignore the ruling that white pups must be destroyed can - and do - now sell pups or hand them to breed rescue, many of which now liaise with the White Boxer Rescue Centre.

Boxers generally have quite large litters - and Sheila says that an average litter will have between one and three white pups. Luckily, many now are given the chance of life. "The overall mood in the breed has definitely changed since

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I started all those years ago," Sheila says.

The general pet public is more open to white Boxers too, and many myths have been dispelled about coat colour. For example, not all white Boxers are deaf - Sheila says that 10 per cent of white Boxers are deaf, but says many coloured dogs are, too. "The minute you get a scatty 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 often 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 a 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 pups will always crop up in litters. Some exhibitors are even calling for black-masked/whole-coloured dogs to be favoured, 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, wisely saying that although whites and near whites (as well as blues, livers and albinos) 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, who was sired by a Champion.

In the GSD, as with the Boxer, aesthetics and tradition appear to be



behind the modern discrimination. Malcolm explains that von Stephanitz, the man recognised as the 'father of the breed' and who wrote the first breed standard, took a dislike to white Shepherds, considering them to be degenerate. "He decreed, in the late 1800s, that white was deleterious and the dogs inferior, but this was not true," says Malcolm. "White GSDs are no different to coloured ones." However, because whites were considered so undesirable, they were excluded from breeding programmes, and those who supported the white coat were left mainly with only other white dogs to breed with. "Most breeders put white dogs in the bucket, but one or two said, 'What's wrong with these white pups?' The tragedy is that the kennels that specialised in only white dogs, breeding white to white, had a narrower choice and gene pool. As a result, they produced inferior dogs - not because they were white, but because they couldn't choose the best dogs in the breed, regardless of colour."

Von Stephanitz's anti-white stance still abounds, however, and many

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myths are still perpetuated about white dogs. For example, there's a common belief that white dogs are more highly strung and neurotic. In *Animals in Translation*, written by American animal scientist Temple Grandin, she says, "Pure white animals (and people) have more neurological problems than dark-skinned or dark-furred animals, because melanin, the chemical that gives skin its colour, is also found in the midbrain, where it may have a protective effect." White chickens, Dalmatians and black-and-white paint horses, she says, can all be "airheads" or "plain crazy".

Albino problems

However, Temple mainly refers to albino animals. She says, "I am definitely against human beings doing things like deliberately breeding Dobermann Pinschers because they look so pretty. These animals are not normal and they suffer. People who own albino Dobermanns report that their dogs have poor vision, intolerance to sunlight, skin lesions, and problems with temperament, usually aggression. In one survey, 11 per cent of owners said that their dogs had bitten people. That's an enormously high number considering how rare dog bites are in comparison to the number of dogs living with humans."

Of course, white GSDs and Boxers

are not albino, and Malcolm says there is no evidence to suggest that a paler coat affects temperament. Yes, you can get poor-quality whites, just as you get poor-quality dark GSDs, but coat colour itself is not the cause.

The White and Long Coat German Shepherd Society, set up in 1986, agrees. Delia Kelly, editor of the club magazine, says, "White dogs are exactly the same as coloured ones. There have been white GSD guide dogs and working dogs - and one has just won the Therapet Dog of the Year competition in Scotland."

It took Delia three years to find a white GSD when she set her heart on one 25 years ago. Today, the dogs are not culled as they used to be, and are actually growing in popularity in the pet world. She says, "People say to us that white GSDs look softer and gentler than coloured ones," Delia explains. "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!'"

So, although they might be discriminated against in some pedigree circles, fortunately white dogs are often favoured as pets. Where black dogs languish in kennels, white ones stand out more and Dogs Trust and Wood Green Animal Shelters both note that although sometimes people are suspicious that a white dog might be defective in some way (notably with deafness), usually they are rehomed fairly promptly.

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. ::

The White and Long Coat GSD Society organises shows, newsletters, and fun events. Membership costs £12 (single), £15 (joint), or £10 (OAPs and juniors). To join, call membership secretary, Linda Wild, on 0115 922 3829, visit www.walcss.50megs.com or email linda@wild.fsnet.co.uk

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White and homeless...

...can you help?

Casper
White Staffordshire Bull Terrier
18 months old



Lovely Casper needs an experienced home, 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.

If you can offer Casper a home, please call Dogs Trust Glasgow on 0141 773 5130 for more details.

Libby
White Samoyed
Two years old



When Libby came into the centre she was in quite a state and had to have her fur clipped, as she was so matted. The centre staff have taken great care of her and she is now the picture of health. She gets on with other dogs and is housetrained.

Libby needs an experienced owner, who will groom her thick coat daily. She needs an adult-only family, or one with older teenagers.

Call Dogs Trust Bridgend on 01656 725219 if you are interested in offering Libby a forever home.



Smidgon
White Saluki cross
18 months old

Smidgon is not only stunning - but also super playful! He can be shy at first with people, but he really comes out of himself when he knows you. He

is a real character, and a joy to know. As he is bouncy, he shouldn't live with small children, but he will be fine with teenagers.

Call Dogs Trust Newbury on 01488 658 391 for further information.