

Black dog bias?



Liz O. Balen / Los Angeles Times

Some shelters say black dogs such as Jelly Bean are less likely or take longer to be adopted than light-colored ones.

Shelter officials disagree on whether dark-colored pets are passed up for lighter-hued ones. Some shelters make darker canines more appealing to counter any misperceptions.

By Craig Nakano
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For many dogs awaiting adoption, the speed with which they find a home may rest not on their breed, gender or age but on one trait that has no bearing on their personality or temperament.

Shelter officials have dubbed it black dog syndrome -- the propensity of dark-coated animals to be passed over for adoption in favor of their lighter counterparts.

Skeptics say the syndrome is an urban legend, but shelter and rescue leaders insist the phenomenon is very, very real.

"It definitely exists," said Madeline Bernstein, president of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Los Angeles. She cited many causes, not the least of which is a misperception that black dogs are mean. "It's that old thing of light is good and dark is evil. The light-versus-dark thing is so ingrained in our consciousness in books and movies. It transfers subliminally in picking out a dog."

It doesn't help that many would-be pet owners now start their search on shelter and rescue websites, where animals' back stories are often written up like the treatment for some Lifetime heart-tugger, each bio accompanied with a canine glamour shot. The problem: Black dogs often don't photograph well. Facial features disappear, and animals can appear less expressive.

"You can't see their eyes very well, and people seem to connect with the eyes," said Ricky Whitman, spokeswoman for Pasadena Humane Society & SPCA.

When prospective adopters do venture to a shelter, black dogs sometimes fade away into the kennel shadows. "They almost become invisible," Bernstein said.

Reliable quantitative studies on the problem are few, and Ed Boks, general manager of the Los Angeles Animal Services department, said his data indicate black dog syndrome is a myth.

In the last 12 months, he said, 27% of the 30,046 dogs taken in by his department were predominantly or all black. Of those that were adopted, 28% were predominantly or all black, he said.

Whitman said the question isn't whether a black dog will get adopted, but how long it will take. The average wait at her shelter is two weeks, she said. Black dogs may linger two months.

Karen Terpstra, who until recently was executive director of the Humane Society of Kent County in Michigan, said the problem is national. "We'd have a purebred black Lab, 2 or 3 years old, pretty much the perfect age, and it would sit there for weeks waiting to get adopted," said Terpstra, now chief operations officer for SPCA Cincinnati. "A tan Lab would go in days."

The lengthened stays create additional problems: Because black dogs are harder to place in homes, shelters often have a glut. "Then you have the problem of people thinking they're ordinary and common, not unusual and interesting," Bernstein said.

To combat the problem, savvy shelters keep their black dogs in their best-lighted kennels. A bright bandanna around the neck helps a dark animal stand out, and colorful toys can lessen the fear factor.

Last year Terpstra's former shelter in Michigan and the Austin Humane Society in Texas independently launched a Black Friday campaign on the day after Thanksgiving, reducing the adoption fee for any black animal. Mike Arms, president of the nonprofit Helen Woodward Animal Center in Rancho Santa Fe, created a program to help black cats, which he said encounter the same challenges as black dogs. Arms' campaign offers a free dark-haired feline with the adoption of any other cat. The program's name: Me and My Shadow.

The Pasadena shelter goes a step further, training dogs to venture from the depths of the kennels to come sit in front as visitors walk by. "People are charmed," Whitman said, and the dogs have a better chance of making a connection. And when all else fails, Bernstein said, SPCA-LA staff encourages adults to bring their children to shelters. "Sometimes," she said, "kids don't see color the way grown-ups do."

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