

COAT COLORS

MYTHS AND THE FOLKLORE THAT SURROUND THEM

By Dr. Carmen L. Battaglia



In the canine world there are four main colors: black, brown, white, and red, and they come in many variations and shades. Some become so popular they are given their own special names such as gold, yellow, cream, blue, black and tan, grey, etc. With so many colors to choose from, it is not surprising that a preference for or against a certain color was destined to develop.

Interviews with dog owners and breeders confirmed that most have a favorite color, as do members of the general public. In some cases, their likes, dislikes and attitudes for and against a certain coat color can be linked to cultural folklore and attitudes they developed early in life. One of the best places to learn about their likes, dislikes and attitudes was to examine the myths and folklore surrounding black dogs and cats. This search uncovered a complicated network of events and beliefs that permeate many cultures today. The behaviors and special meanings given to the color black can be found in the ideas about happiness, death and bad omens, all of which can be linked to stories about witches. In most cultures, children learn at an early age the myth about black dogs and cats and witches.

There are several theories as to origins of the superstitions surrounding black dogs and cats, but for the best answers, we only need to review the history of the 13th and 14th centuries in Europe and the consequences of the Black Death that had both immediate and long-term effects on populations across the world. Often referred to as “The Plague” or the “Black Death”, it was one of the most devastating pandemics in human history, peaking in Europe between 1348 and 1350 and affecting an estimated one-third of the continent. The Black Death had social, economic, political and religious consequences. People began to believe that only God’s anger could produce such horrific displays of suffering and death, and no one in the 14th century considered rat control a way to ward off the plague. Giovanni Boccaccio, an Italian writer and poet of the era, questioned whether it was sent by God for their correction or that it came through the influence of the heavenly bodies,^[3] and Christians began to accuse Jews of poisoning public water supplies in an effort to ruin the European civilization.

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Europe suffered a significant death toll from the plague with estimates ranging between one-third to one-half of the total European population. Most scholars estimate that the Black Death killed upwards of 75 million people^[2] in the 14th century at a time when the entire world population was still less than 500 million.^{[4][7]}

Because 14th-century healers were at a loss to explain the cause of the Black Death, many Europeans ascribed supernatural forces, earthquakes and malicious conspiracies^[6] to it. The scapegoats for the Black Death were mainly heretics. Lepers were also a part of the blame game. After the plague had died down, during the 17th century a different kind of plague appeared in Colonial America during the 1690s. This was the plague of witchcraft. People were blamed and considered to be a witch for any anomaly that could not be explained.

While the association between black, evil and witchcraft had its beginnings with the plague, it was later promoted in literature, film, and television. Many films and television shows portrayed black dogs as aggressive and growling in order to protect villains in secluded areas. The superstition about the color black continued to gain popularity when the faces of dogs and cats were shown as dark, making it often difficult to see their eyes and expressions.

Children born in the 18th century were taught that black was the dress code to be worn at funerals and that black dogs and cats could carry out nefarious schemes against people. Later they learned to give credence to several other myths which played out in the dress codes seen during Halloween and at costume parties. Today, the myth about black dogs and cats reaches across many societies. They have the power to influence behavior and they are legendary.

Over the centuries black cats and dogs have interested scholars who studied the psychology and sociology of these cultural beliefs and the stories that connect them. Their writings show that certain beliefs about the colors of animals have been passed down

from one generation to the next. While all of these myths and folklore have history, their origin begins with a rumor followed by a number of stories involving an unhappy or unexplained incident. Each produces a behavior that can be tied to an event or a story that is negative. The frequency with which each story is repeated influences others and, in time, begins to permeate the society. For example, most Americans have heard that when a black cat crosses their path it is a sign of bad luck and perhaps death. Most owners of black dogs and cats can recall an incident where a person had seen their animal and crossed the street to distance themselves from their black animal. In time, these fears became more real and drove the popularity of the folklore and myth that surrounds black dogs and cats.

The myth and folklore about a dog's coat color is not limited to America. Throughout British history there are stories about a large dog known as "Black Shuck". According to British folklore, Black Shuck terrorized East Anglia in the 16th century, he towered seven feet tall, with flaming red eyes and shaggy black hair. This folklore became more interesting when a group of archeologists reported they had unearthed this dog during a dig among ruins at Lewiston Abbey in Suffolk. Their reports show the remains may belong to a 'male dog', standing seven feet tall and weighing 200 lbs. Experts are currently carrying out radio carbon dating tests on his remains.

Children living in England grow up hearing stories about Black Shuck and what happened to those who saw him at night. The myth about this animal continues to gather support as more and more adults are overheard saying that just seeing him was a sign of death. Some say he is as big as a horse. Folklore says he foams at the mouth as if deranged and rabid, and that he ravenously focuses on hunting for his next meal.

Scholars from the Islamic culture have also written about the myth and folklore of color. Ancient literature mentions that the

Governor of Medina petitioned the Prophet Mohammed to eliminate all stray dogs from the city. This story focuses on the homeless dogs who were thought to be the cause of rabies and bad luck they brought to the residents. Mohammed responded by declaring that all stray dogs would be exterminated. Later he retracted his decree for two important reasons. The first was based on his religion. He remembered that dogs constituted a race of Allah's creatures, and that only Allah could make such a decision. The second was more pragmatic. He was reminded that many dogs, particularly those used to guard, hunt and herd, were needed by merchants and farmers. He clarified his decree to say that all stray dogs would be eliminated including all black dogs because they were thought to be the devil masquerading under their black coat.

The literature on this subject shows that the myths and folklores about the color of a dog's coat thrives in many cultures. In Eastern Asia, and particularly in Japan, the devil dogs are white and considered to be a predictor of death to the person involved with one.



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Color	Color Description	Count	% of Total
000	?????	59	0.0026%
007	Black	78,225	3.4247%
009	Black and Brown	3,885	0.1701%
010	Black and Cream	68,884	3.0157%
014	Black and Red	55,495	2.4296%
016	Black and Silver	123,374	5.4013%
018	Black and Tan	1,729,404	75.7131%
019	Black and White	801	0.0351%
034	Black White and Tan	857	0.0375%
037	Blue	216	0.0095%
061	Brown	441	0.0193%
062	Brown and Black	834	0.0365%
076	Cream	846	0.0370%
091	Gold	198	0.0087%
100	Gray	7,004	0.3066%
101	Gray and Black	1,619	0.0709%
103	Grey and Tan	1,223	0.0535%
123	Liver	125	0.0055%
140	Red	363	0.0159%
164	Sable	85,287	3.7339%
176	Silver	4,145	0.1815%
195	Tan	970	0.0425%
199	White	111,547	4.8835%
230	Wolf Sable	2,364	0.1035%
234	Black and Gold	4,301	0.1883%
257	Tan and Silver	1,232	0.0539%
262	Brown and Tan	435	0.0190%
999	Conversion Default	19	0.0008%
	TOTAL	2,284,153	100.0000%

The color of animals and the special meanings given them reaches many parts of a society. In one study of shelter workers, it was reported that black Labrador retrievers were rated 27 percent less likely to be friendly than yellow Labs, and that black dogs, regardless of breed, were twice as likely to be rated as aggressive. The depth to which a myth and folklore can permeate a culture is not always well-understood, but in the 21st century we know that the myth and folklore about coat color continues to thrive in a va-

riety of ways. For example, owners of show dogs and their breeders are known to have preferences for coat colors. Some prefer a certain color because their breed standard considers certain colors more important than others. Some standards fault or disqualify specific colors from the show ring. Why a breed standard prefers and faults a color is not easy to find, and for most breeds the answer lies in a breed's history, function and purpose. In many cases, coat colors are simply a matter of knowing what colors were popular when the breed was developed.

To learn more about a breed's coat colors, I reviewed the distribution of coat colors in my own breed. The data comes from the AKC which shows that for registered German Shepherd dogs only 3% are black. These data include show dogs and those owned by the general public.

There is no data to support the theory that coat colors, including black, are all treated equally. In breeds that are multi-colored, black is usually in the minority. When judges were asked about judging solid colored dogs, some reported that black dogs are more difficult to judge because of their black face makes it hard to see their expression.

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About the Author

Carmen L. Battaglia holds a Ph.D. and Master's Degree from Florida State University. As an AKC judge, researcher and writer, he has been a leader in promoting the better ways to breed dogs. An author of many articles and several books, he is also a popular guest on TV and radio talk shows including several appearances on Animal Planet. His seminars about breeding, structure, pedigree analysis, selecting sires and choosing puppies have been well received by breed clubs all over the country. Those interested in learning more about his articles and seminars should visit the website <http://www.breedingbetterdogs.com>