

# Big Black Dog Syndrome: Are loving pets being left behind?

By Megan Durham

It's always heart wrenching to walk alongside a long line of kennels. So many animals, not enough willing people to take them home. Chewy is just one of many, but somehow he manages to stand out. A beautiful chocolate lab, his eyes are constantly perked up for the faintest sound of people walking by. He's energetic and eager to please, instantly sitting and lying down on command.

He's all the more noticeable when compared to his more subdued kennel mate. Kyra, an older light yellow lab that either isn't trained or doesn't care to play. She spends her time sitting in the corner and ignoring the passers by, watching Chewy's tail wag uncontrollably.

Then again, maybe she knows she doesn't have to try to impress anyone. Unlike Chewy, her sign says that she's already been adopted.

Unfortunately this scene is familiar to many shelters and animal activists across the country. They argue that black dogs and cats linger on in shelters long after their lighter-colored counterparts and end up euthanized at a much higher rate, especially the larger breeds. There's even a name for the phenomenon: Big Black Dog Syndrome, or BBDS.



But why would black pets be hard to adopt? One explanation is that darker animals tend to be negatively stereotyped in superstition and pop-culture. One only has to think of the number of times they've seen a growling Doberman or hissing black cat in a movie to realize that the truth of this.

Mary Jo Spring, executive director of the Hermitage Cat Shelter, acknowledges that some adopters might balk at black cats due to superstition. "Certainly black cats do seem to stay in the shelter for a longer time. Sometimes we really need to talk them up to get them adopted."

But she thinks there's more to it. "It's the exotic cats that go first, the flashier Siamese or the ones with blue eyes. It's sad but the black cats just seem to blend into the crowd."

That idea makes a sad sort of sense. In the generally poorly-lit and crowded world of shelters lighter animals are more noticeable. And since dark coats are genetically dominant, lighter animals stand out against the dark crowd.



Photography by Sarah Flo Harmon

Jenny Rose, Community Relations Manager for the Humane Society of Southern Arizona, tends to agree. "On average, animals whose coats are darker do have longer stays at the Humane Society," she said. "Darker animals have a tendency to blend in with their surroundings much easier than lighter-colored animals."

"Often, they simply get overlooked when potential adopters visit our kennels."

To combat this, the dog adoption kennels at the Humane Society have been painted teal and the traditional steel cat cages have been replaced by individual white plastic kennels. Both improvements are geared at helping to show off the darker animals. But not everyone is convinced that color is the real problem.

Justin Gallick has volunteered at the Humane Society for eight years now and isn't sure that there is a correlation between color and adoption rates. "I have friends in shelters elsewhere who say that a black dog coming in is a death sentence but here there are so many animals coming in and out that it doesn't seem to make a difference," he said. "Really, it's the large, mixed breed males that tend to stay the longest."

The same mixed opinions are also apparent at Pima County Animal Control. The friendly Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) volunteers there are eager to talk about the issue, especially Bonny and Kevin Hartnett. They have fostered animals for over seven years now, and have had lots of experience with BBDS.

"Whenever you have a group of animals, the lighter ones always go first," Kevin explained.

"And then there was Jet. He was the cutest, sweetest little black dog," Bonny recalled, her smile wide. "Usually small dogs go quickly, but no one seemed to want him."


Eventually they decided just to keep Jet for themselves. It's a decision they don't regret, but now leaves them with less room for new fosters.

But they both feel the animals that stay here the longest aren't differentiated by their shade as much as their breed.

"It's the mutts," Bonny lamented. She explained that even though the mixed breeds have better genes and not as many problems as the purebreds, people irrationally look down at them.

"It doesn't matter what color they are," she added.

Looking around the kennels, the truth of what she says quickly becomes apparent. Most of the animals that have been here longer do have darker coats, but almost all of them are also mixed breeds. These are the ones that no longer care who walks by. They barely bother with their food, as if they have lost hope.

In the end, whether they're here because of their hue or breed doesn't really matter. What matters is that these wonderful pets are being overlooked for something as simple as appearance. The old adage comes to mind to never judge a book by its cover. We're taught not to judge people by appearances, but to look within for beauty and worth. So why should a dog be any different? 

Megan Durham is a born and raised Tucsonan with a degree in Writing from the University of California at San Diego. She enjoys rock climbing, contact juggling, and playing with her adopted black cat.



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