

Another Shade of Brown

Recently some breeders and exhibitors have raised questions about a particular coat color seen in our breed called ash. It is not commonly seen and usually appears as taupe or shades of silver/gray, similar to the color of some Weimaraners. Interpreting color in Chesapeakes often fuels many questions in judge seminars too because our breed's colors vary widely. Questions like these are beneficial because they provide an opportunity for all to discuss and learn about unusual CBR traits such as the ash color. We can then apply the gained knowledge toward judging and to breeding programs, with the preservation and well being of the breed in mind. This article will explain why the ash color is acceptable, including historical and genetic references. Also discussed is the need for breeders to be cautious when working with this color. Finally, the new definitive paragraph composed by the JBEC is included. This will replace the old wording in the article "Color In The Chesapeake Bay Retriever" (ACC Website, 2004)

The taupe or gray color has always been in Chesapeakes and is referenced by Jay F. Towner, a Maryland breeder, whose records covering a period from 1860 – 1904 became available to the ACC through Mr. Alex Spear. Towner's records document his breeding and litter information, and include discussion on all aspects of the standard. "One man tells of hunting in 1862 with two outstanding dogs on the lower Patuxent River—one, "Jeff was a reddish yellow or sedge color, while Lee was gray or ash colored."

The reason the ash color is acceptable is because it is actually a genetic dilution of the brown or liver color. A diluted brown or liver would fall into the category of "any color of brown, sedge, or deadgrass..." (CBR Standard, 1993) Depending on the shade of gray, silver or taupe, an ash-colored dog might be registered as dark deadgrass, tan or light brown. Also, as with all Chesapeake colors, the ash-colored dog must have yellowish or amber-colored eyes.

The yellow or amber eye in the ash-colored dog must be emphasized because of the impact dilution genes can have on correct eye color. To explain further, all Chesapeakes carry the brown/liver color gene, abbreviated as bb. There are two kinds of dilution genes, the brown dilute gene (dd) that causes the gray/silver/taupe color, and the chinchilla (cchcch) gene that creates the deadgrass colors. Both are recessive, and both can also cause paling of the eye color. It is evident that dd and cchcch, acting alone or in combination with different eye color genes, can cause hazel or blue eyes. (Willis, 1989) Blue or hazel eyes are not acceptable colors in keeping with the standard. Non-yellowish or amber eye color by itself would not be a disqualification, but is a fault. Breeders must be cautious when considering an ash-colored Chesapeake in their breeding program. Any color Chesapeake could be the carrier of a dilution gene, but it would not be visibly apparent because the dilution genes are recessive.

People will always have a personal color preference even though the standard states that one color is not to be preferred over another. Some consider the ash color a desirable attribute in the field because of the camouflaging effects. Others do not care for the color at all. The standard gives color a weight of 4 in the positive scale of points. John Hurst, another early breeder, addresses the color preference this way: "Soundness, size, conformation, in fact every characteristic which pertains to the dog's physical perfection should precede the item of color..." (1924) In addition, focusing our preferences too strongly on color or any one trait can be detrimental to the overall well being of the breed. "A common mistake that is sometimes made by both the judges and the breeders is to place undue emphasis on one trait. Those who do soon learn that in time, the overall quality of the pups being produced will begin to drift toward the breed average and these offspring will begin to show all of the variations found in their breed." (Battaglia)

The "Color" article is part of the supplemental material given to judges at seminars and is also available on the ACC website. Current wording addressing ash in the "Color" article says: "Some of the deadgrass shades can be very light almost white in appearance. There is also a grayish tone (unofficially called "ash") that is generally registered as dark deadgrass by many breeders." The JBEC has composed a new paragraph to replace the current wording and better define the color:

"Historic records show that some of the deadgrass shades can be very light, almost white in appearance, while darker deadgrass colors can include diluted shades of brown called ash, that appear as either gray or taupe. The almost white and ash/taupe/gray shades are not commonly seen, but are acceptable. Eye color for these diluted shades, as with all coat colors, must be of yellowish or amber color."

The JBEC would like to thank all who participated in the discussions around the ash color issue. Breeders and judges are encouraged to continue asking questions and discussing CBR traits. It is through discussions like these that learning takes place and problems can be resolved for the benefit of our breed.

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