

Bright is the New Black

Black Beauty Bandana Project aims to get attention for overlooked dogs

BY KATINA ANTONIADES



The phenomenon is so familiar to shelter staffers that it has a name: “black dog syndrome.” That inky Lab mix in kennel 4B waits for weeks or months while his next-door kennel neighbors, a red hound and a husky mix, find homes relatively quickly.

Black dogs seem to have the deck stacked against them: They’re common in many shelters, their coats make them more difficult to photograph well, some people find their appearance frightening, and many adopters seem to prefer more colorful canines.

Marti Houge, founder of One Starfish Rehoming Connections in Columbus, Wisc.—a group that assists potential adopters in connecting with rescue groups and adopts out a small number of dogs—didn’t

learn about the problem until she got involved in rescue work. “I’ve always had a liking for black dogs, and I assumed that everyone else thought they were especially beautiful,” she says.

As a professional animal photographer, Houge recognizes the obstacles shelters and rescue groups face in taking appealing, effective adoption photos of darker dogs. “If they don’t have the right lighting or use a flash inside, [the dogs’] eyeballs look just like light bulbs, and there’s no detail in the body and nothing to make it stand out. ... They look like black blobs,” she says.

After seeing a few photos online of adoptable black dogs wearing bandanas, Houge realized the difference a touch



A turquoise bandana adds some color to Bill, a dog in the care of the Charleston Dog Shelter in Arkansas.

of color can make and decided to start a project to distribute free, eye-catching bandanas to shelters across the country. Not exactly a skilled seamstress herself—she says she can’t even sew on a button—Houge recruited a couple of her group’s previous adopters to help.

Houge’s effort, which she dubbed the Black Beauty Bandana Project, has now been in operation for a couple of years. She scans Petfinder.com for shelters and rescue groups that seem like they’d get a boost from the program; she has distributed bandanas to about 25 organizations so far. Many send back notes of thanks and photos of adoptable pooches sporting the colorful pieces of cloth.

One of those organizations is the Warrick Humane Society in Newburgh, Ind. Manager Andrea Taborn says the bandanas have helped the shelter’s black dogs get noticed and find homes sooner than usual. “Typically, they just blend in and are overlooked,” she says.

Houge says she hopes to simply give black dogs equal chances for new homes. “I know a bandana on each dog isn’t going to get them all adopted, and I don’t want them adopted at the expense of other dogs,” she says. “I want people to look into their eyes, and see the beauty that I see there.”

Houge is seeking volunteers in any state to make bandanas and help with distribution logistics; contact her at frostwoods@powerweb.net.