

# *THE COLOURS OF THE PULI*

In 2016 the Canadian national club, Puli Canada, formed a Standard Revision Committee to look into making changes to the Colour section of the CKC Puli standard, in particular to consider adding the masked fawn colour.

During their discussions the members of the committee did a lot of research into the history and genetics of the colours found in the Puli, consulting many books and articles on the breed. This article is a summary of some of the history and genetics we found. I am not a geneticist so I don't intend to try and explain the heredity of Puli colours except in the most general terms. There is much that is still not clear on the subject, and more research is needed to map the genetic variations in our breed.

Many people think the Puli only comes in black as that is the dominant colour in the breed and by far the most frequently seen. Grey and white were also allowed in the Canadian standard which was approved in 1980. In the standard prior to 1980 jet-black and white are mentioned as follows: "Though jet-black and white are accepted in the standard they should not be encouraged, as those are not the typical colours for the Puli." This phrase was dropped in the 1980 revision. Very few grey or white Pulis are seen in either the Canadian or American showings compared to the blacks.

The three Hungarian herding breeds, the Puli, Pumi and Mudi, were bred interchangeably up to the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the names Puli and Pumi were often used for very similar dogs depending on the area in which they were found. The Puli and the Pumi were identified as separate breeds from about 1920. According to the FCI Pumi standard, allowable colours are black, grey, fawn in all shades, preferably with a dark mask, and white. The Mudi, much rarer than the Puli and the Pumi, earned separate breed recognition in 1936, and the FCI Mudi standard allows fawn, black, blue merle, blue-grey, brown, and white. Both breeds permit small white markings on chest and toes, but they are both basically solid-coloured breeds. The Pumi and the Mudi have a wider range of allowable colours than the Puli; it's possible that the colours were defined more narrowly in the early Puli standards to help distinguish it from its two cousins.

The Puli was originally a breed of many different colours. Records from the early 1920s in Hungary list the following colours for the Puli noted by scientists and breeders who began to take an interest in the Puli as a breed separate from the Pumi: white, cream, dove grey, silver grey, olive grey, blue grey, slate, iron grey, steel blue, pale yellow, rusty black, black with white hairs intermixed, and jet black. Pulis with large patches were also seen.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, the first standard for the Puli was published in Hungary in 1920 at about the time of separation from the Pumi, but described mainly character, not colour. Registration was very hit-and-miss as some breeders didn't bother to register their puppies, even if they came from registered parents. During the 1920s some puppies were registered as brown, light-brown, reddish-brown and greyish-brown, as well as black. The Hungarian standard was revised in 1935 and included only black, grey and white.

Following World War II, in the 1940s and 1950s selective breeding began in Hungary, first eliminating brown pigmentation and particolours, and then concentrating on black, and as it is the dominant colour it quickly spread. Black became so fashionable that breeders began to think of it as the only true Puli colour, whereas in previous years it had been something of a rarity. An article published in the Hungarian magazine *A Kutya* (The Dog) in 1956 mentioned that Pulis were found in various colours, including white, black, cream-like, steel blue, pigeon grey, frosty, coffee brown, chocolate brown, reddish brown, and the so-called “green” Puli – the colour of a greyish-brown bread roll. The same article described the “Police Puli” (the tallest of the sizes at the time) as being black, grey or deer-like (fawn).

Colours other than black, grey and white were eliminated from breeding as they were considered a disgrace and a danger to the purity of the breed, though of course they continued to appear in litters due to the magic of recessive genes. Grey was considered acceptable as many black Pulis fade to grey as they age, although researchers have found several other genetic variations of grey in the Puli. One gene acts on some of the fawn dogs that have black masks, ears and tail, and which usually also have black hairs scattered throughout the coat which show that they carry the gene for black. These dogs often gradually fade to grey.

The FCI standard of 1960 even described black as the preferred colour, but the next revision published in 1966 read as follows: "Pulis are of different colours. Black, several shades of grey and white are bred at present." This wording would appear to leave the door open to the possibility of other colours being acceptable in the future.

In Hungary white had been known to occur prior to World War I, but was not popular and was almost rendered extinct after World War II due to breeders favouring black, and the fact that white is recessive to black. A few breeders began to take an interest in the whites and their popularity increased. All countries now consider black, white and grey as acceptable colours with no preference given to any; most countries also include one or more of the fawn variations as acceptable.

There is more than one genetic white. One is the pure white with black pigment right from birth; another is the fawn that gradually becomes lighter and lighter until it looks white, when it is in reality a very pale cream. Some of these have incorrect brown pigment, and often show their true colour genetics by having cream or yellowish hair, particularly in the newly grown hair and around the ears. I've also been told about white puppies that were considered partial albinos – born with pink pigment and skin and blue eyes, but with colour receptors in their eyes so were not true albinos.

The Canadian Kennel Club Stud Book is published each year and lists all litters born and puppies individually registered. In the last 30 years, Puli puppies have been registered as: apricot; beige; black, fawn markings; black and grey; black and tan; black, white and tan; blue; cream; gold; golden; and of course black, grey and white.

The genetics of Puli colour have not been well studied, though there has been some useful research done in recent years. Sheila Schmutz, PhD, at the Department of Animal and Poultry Science at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada, has done a considerable amount of research into Puli colours, and has identified the Puli as having three basic colours: black, white, and fawn. Each of these, however, has more than one genotype; for example, Dr Schmutz has identified more than a dozen genotypes in the Puli for black, most of them carrying recessive genes for white and/or fawn. It is not surprising that the fawn shades ranging from cream to reddish-brown occur in the Puli, as DNA research appears to show that white in the Puli is actually a dilute of red.

One of the fawn variations is the masked fawn. In the puppy and young adult the colour is generally a reddish-fawn, with a black mask, ear tips and tail tip. Both black and white hairs are intermingled through the coat. The colour is called “maszkos fakó” in Hungarian, which translates literally to “masked faded” or “masked pale” because it tends to lighten with age, and the dog often becomes a light fawn or cream or even grey while retaining the black mask, and often the black ear tips and tail tip too. In Hungary “fakó” does not refer to a specific colour, it is used to describe any pale coloured Puli except white, which is confusing for English speakers. I read a report from one English visitor to Hungary who was anxious to see some “maszkos fakó” Pulis and was surprised to be shown several dogs that to her eyes were clearly grey.

The FCI standard for the Puli is written in Hungary, considered to be the country of origin of the breed. The masked fawn was included in the FCI standard revision of 2000, but not the solid-coloured fawns which lack the black mask. It is known that masked fawns were appearing in litters in the years following World War II but since they were not considered desirable at that time their existence was kept quiet until they were allowed to be registered in 1964. Breeders then became more interested in them and Experimental classes were offered for them at shows. They became eligible for national championships in 1973, and on their inclusion in the FCI standard in 2000 were then able to earn international championships. Currently they are shown in the classes with the blacks and greys; white Pulis have their own classes.

The Puli has always been described as a solid coloured dog, and this question always comes up when considering the masked fawn, a dog clearly with dark markings on a paler background. Several breeds have similar colouring – the tawny Briard, the Tervuren, the Leonberger, for example - and within those breeds this is not considered to be bi-coloured. By including masked fawn in the FCI standard the Hungarians obviously also consider it to be basically a solid colour with black trim. In my experience the greys are not strictly a solid colour either as they are rarely the uniform grey of a breed such as the Weimaraner. Grey Pulis very often have varying shades on the same dog depending on the proportion of black hair to white; sometimes the contrast between the light grey and dark grey areas on the dog is quite noticeable.

The solid-coloured fawns have caused problems in Puli breeding in Hungary as the very light shades often fade to white as the dog ages. These dogs appear to be white though genetically they are not, and can produce puppies of a darker colour. As white Pulis are shown in their own classes under FCI rules and may not be interbred with other colours, this has caused difficulties for breeders who wish to produce pure whites. As a result the solid-coloured fawns without the dark mask are not listed as an acceptable colour in the FCI standard, and only the pure white Puli

with no hint of cream or yellow hair is acceptable. Some of the fawns that have no black hairs whatsoever are dilutes and will have brown pigmentation, and that is not acceptable in a Puli of any colour.

The masked fawn Puli is accepted in all countries that hold dog shows under FCI rules, currently a total of 84 in most of Europe, Central and South America, the Far East, and two countries in Africa. The Puli standards of the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand list both the masked fawn and solid-coloured fawn Pulis as acceptable, calling the colour “apricot.”

The 1980 CKC standard stated that: “Accepted colours are black, reddish-black, grey-reddish-black, all shades of grey, and white.” Under Disqualifications the standard states that: “Colours other than those mentioned as acceptable.” This effectively disqualifies fawns, and is the only standard in the world to do so. When the standard was revised in 1980 it reflected the FCI standard of the time which listed only black, grey and white as acceptable colours.

The first AKC standard written in 1936 reads: "All colours are permissible. The most preferred are white, shades of gray or cream with darker ears, and black." The standard was revised in 1960 and omits the mention of cream, so the Puli Club of America must have decided that it was no longer acceptable. Ellanor Anderson, author of the book *How to Raise and Train a Puli*, was a prominent breeder and exhibitor and was the Chairperson of the standard revision committee at the time. In her book, written in 1964, she mentions that “buffs and tans and goldens appear in the breed occasionally,” and also mentions that “yellowish-white” hairs appear in the coats of white Pulis at times. As the first Pulis were imported into the USA in 1935 the fawn/cream colour with and without dark ears must have been known in the USA from the very early days.

The current AKC standard mentions only black, grey and white as acceptable colours, but has no disqualifications and therefore in theory any colour can be shown in the USA, and a number of fawn Pulis have completed their American championships over the years, the most recent being in 2015. A Puli named Ch Pusztafi Ambro is pictured on the cover of the May 1973 issue of *Dog World* with the caption that he is: “the only corded gold (fawn) champion in the United States.”

Anyone who has been in Pulis for more than five minutes knows the name of the late Leslie Benis. Les was a prominent breeder and exhibitor originally from Hungary who immigrated to California in 1956. He was very well-respected and enjoyed considerable success with his Pulis in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which he imported from Hungary and others he bred in the USA. He came from a family of Puli breeders and he greatly influenced American breeders at a time when information was difficult to obtain from Hungary as it was under Soviet control. Les introduced America to what he believed was the correct Hungarian style of Puli, at the time very different from the American-bred Puli of the day, which was much larger and had a brushed coat. Les insisted that the corded coat was the only correct grooming style for a Puli and pioneered its exhibition and acceptance in American showrings. He was strident in his opinions and was not afraid to voice them in the defence of his beloved Puli breed.

He believed that any colour other than black and grey were created for the tourist market, and that both white and fawn were man-made colours in the breed. He thought that white may have

come from crossing with small Komondors or even Maltese, and that the fawn may well have been the result of “a sexually overactive mutt.” He commented in his book *This is the Puli* that during his research he was unable to find any written references for the existence of coloured Pulis. Other writers, however, seem to have done so.

Les wrote an article for Puli News in 2004 asserting that only black, rusty black and grey Pulis were shown prior to WWI. However, a breeder named Magdolna Kállay is documented as exhibiting several white Pulis from her Galgavölgy Puli kennel prior to WWI, and she continued breeding and showing them between the two wars. In the same article Les mentions that whites appeared in two different regions at the same time (he doesn't mention a date) and expresses incredulity, but why would that be such a surprise? Several breeders had been working to produce whites since WWII when the colour was feared to be extinct, and in the 1950s Dr Imre Ócsag, President of the Hungarian Sheepdogs National Species Council, put out a call to breeders to attempt to save and popularize the whites. It's not beyond the bounds of possibility that two breeders managed to do so at about the same time. As a recessive colour it can hide for generations. Even if Les was right and Komondor and/or Maltese were introduced to help it along, it's irrelevant now. White is a thoroughly accepted colour with many excellent white Pulis around the world.

Like many other Puli owners and breeders I learned a lot from Les, and I admired his forthright opinions and obvious passion. He made a huge and positive impact on the Puli breed, but I have come to believe that he may not have been right all the time. His dislike of any other colours in the breed except for black and grey and his insistence that some were artificially introduced flies in the face of much evidence that other colours have been present in the breed from historical times, probably through the genetic link with the Pumi and the Mudi, both of which allow a greater range of colour, and it was the suppression of them in the Puli that was man-made.

There are still some mysteries to be solved regarding Puli colour genetics, and it's certainly true that black, white and grey are not the only colours that can pop up in a litter and surprise the breeder! I personally know of white, masked fawn, black and tan, and brown puppies suddenly appearing in litters with backgrounds of many generations of black Pulis.

Finally, the Standard Revision Committee formed by Puli Canada reached agreement to include the masked fawn, following the example of the country of origin, and also added wording to better describe white and grey. The revision to the Colour section of our standard was approved by the Canadian Kennel Club in July 2017.

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**August 2021**