

BASIC BODY COLORS OF THE AUSTRALIAN SHEPHERD

This writing is meant to be as basic as possible with no use of technical terms. It is meant to answer some questions ASCA receives and to help the novice and beginning breeder. The information contained here is regarding the BODY COLOR of Aussies without discussion of white or copper trim.

THE BASIC BODY COLORS OF AUSTRALIAN SHEPHERDS ARE RED & BLACK

1. THE BLUE MERLE IS GENETICALLY A BLACK DOG POSSESSING A MERLE GENE (which breaks up the black color into a pattern of black and gray patches). The gray shade may range from light silver to a dark gray.
2. THE RED MERLE IS GENETICALLY A RED DOG POSSESSING A MERLE GENE (which breaks up the red color into a pattern of red and beige patches). The beige shade may range from a light ivory to a dark tan.

IMPORTANT!! IN THIS WRITING, BLACKS REFERS TO BOTH SOLID BLACKS AND BLUE MERLES. RED REFERS TO BOTH SOLID REDS AND RED MERLES.

Remember, all blacks and blue merles have black noses and eye rims, and all reds and red merles have liver (brown) noses and eye rims.

In the breed, there are non-recognized colors which are considered undesirable. These colors are disqualifying faults per the ASCA Breed Standard. These include sable, brown merles, brindle, gray/slate, diluted red, and yellow. The genetics of these colors are not discussed here. The reader should realize that if these colors exist in a properly colored dog's ancestry they may be produced.

The four recognized colors for the Australian Shepherd are: Black, Blue Merle, Red, and Red Merle. One basic rule of genetics the reader needs to know is that gene pairs determine characteristics like color. ONE GENE COMES FROM EACH PARENT. With color, THE DOMINANT GENE is the one you will SEE. The RECESSIVE GENE is the one trait that you DO NOT SEE UNLESS IT IS PAIRED WITH ANOTHER SAME RECESSIVE GENE.

BLACK IS DOMINANT OVER RED!!!!

Keeping this in mind, the genetics for Aussie colors are constant and simple:

1. A dog with TWO black genes is BLACK/BLACK – its color will be BLACK. This dog only has BLACK GENES to pass on thus ALL of its pups will be BLACK.
2. A dog with ONE BLACK gene and one RED gene is BLACK/RED. – Its color will be BLACK. It can produce both black or red pups. When the BLACK gene is passed on, black pups will result. When the RED gene is passed on, ONLY IF paired with a RED gene from the other parent, will the pups will be RED. These blacks are often referred to as “red carriers” or “red factored”.
3. A dog with TWO RED genes is RED/RED – Their color will be RED. TWO REDS PRODUCE 100% REDS! As you can see, there is no black gene to pass on. If a red is bred to #1 above, all the pups will be black but all will carry the red gene. But if the red is bred to #2 above, both black and red pups may result.

For the breeder, the only real uncertainty arises because #1 (BLACK/BLACK) and #2 (BLACK/RED) look exactly alike. If a black dog has a red parent, it will ALWAYS carry the red recessive gene. However, if it comes from two black parents only test breeding or genetic DNA tests will tell if the dog is BLACK/BLACK or BLACK/RED.

You can see from this that the color of the grandparents or ancestors of the red dogs play no part in the colors they will produce. Red genes are all the dog has to pass on. A red dog from two black parents has the same genetic makeup for color as the red dog from two red parents. Occasionally a red will show up in a long line of only black ancestry. This happens when those black dogs were BLACK/RED and carried the gene down but not seen.

All properly colored Australian Shepherds are ONE of these three!! Remember, each parent possesses two genes for color and each puppy will inherit ONE GENE for color from each parent

AGAIN, BLACK REFERS TO SOLID BLACK AND TO BLUE MERLES. RED REFERS TO BOTH SOLID REDS AND RED MERLES.

-----originally an ASCA handout in the 1980's by Terry Martin