

Gazette May 2009

## The Eyes Have It.

In several discussions with Borzoi breeders I have asked the question why you want a dark eye in a Borzoi. The answer unanimously is – because a dark eye is more beautiful. This led me to wonder is it because it is more beautiful or because our standard states “dark in color, intelligent but rather soft in expression, never round, full nor staring, nor light in color...” and we have taken this to be more beautiful. While working with Michigan State University (MSU) on a related eye problem in Papillons, I had the chance to discuss the topic with an Associate Professor in Comparative Ophthalmology.

In fact, there are many reasons you would want a dark eye. According to Dr. Simon Peterson-Jones DVM, PhD, at MSU, pigmented cells are important for normal ocular function. The pigment in the eye helps makes the tapetum, lcidum (the reflective structure under the retina) more like a mirror, and the darker the eye the more light will bounce off the tepetum improving vision –including night vision. This is different than in humans, where too much reflection would impede close up vision.

A Borzoi is a sight hound. By design the way they hunt a borzoi needs to be able to see at great distances. A keen properly functioning eye is important to the breed. Dr Peterson-Jones noted that ocular malformations are genetically associated with lighter eyes. The color connection has also been documented. In the horse ocular anomalies in the Rocky Mountain Horse have shown an undeniable linkage to the silver dapple color. In mice, there has been a documented relationship with abnormalities with eyes and immune systems. According to Dr Peterson-Jones malformations are seen more frequently with color dilute animals including cataracts and eye defects. It is quite possible that when our standard was written stating, “pigment dark,” there was a sound reason. This may have been to keep certain defects that are associated with lighter eyes at bay.

As for the shape being more oval or almond then round, Dr. Peterson-Jones pointed out that with an almond shape there is less of an occurrence of entropion and ectropion. An oval eye lid is better in the field to keep out foreign objects and debris. An almond eye also has a more eastern and exotic look which takes into consideration the geographic origins of the Borzoi.

It is important to consider even small parts of the standard may have significant relevance beyond just beauty. Some of these ideas may be controversial, but with further studies and genetic testing we may have concrete proof of some of the relationship of eye, pigment and color with health benefits.

On a poetic note, when you gaze into a borzoi’s eye the darker the eye the better the reflection. As a result, it just might be that reflection may be an image of our selves. From a dog’s eye seeing a little of ourselves in our borzoi, even if it is just a reflection, is something quite rewarding and beautiful.

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