

# The Angels Among Us Adopting Unwanted, Imperfect Pets

Cute young pets get adopted at record speed, while certain groups of less-adoptable pets can spend years waiting in animal shelters for their forever homes. Tragically, some of these 'less-perfect' pets - especially senior pets - never make it out alive. Do you have what it takes to be an 'angel?'

**Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)**

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The third week in September is Adopt a Less-Adoptable Pet Week
- The hardest-to-adopt pets in shelters and rescues across the U.S. are senior dogs and cats, pets with medical problems, dogs of a particular breed, shy pets, and those who must be the only pet in a home
- Black pets, and especially large black dogs, are also among the hardest to find homes for, a phenomenon known as "black dog syndrome"
- Shelters, rescue organizations and animal welfare groups are focused on programs to promote hard-to-adopt pets, including special adoption events, educating the public about the benefits of adopting "imperfect" homeless animals
- If you're considering a hard-to-adopt shelter pet, it's important to plan ahead and ensure you have the resources you'll need to care for an animal that may be getting up in years, or isn't in great health, or has been abused, or a large, powerful dog who requires a firm hand and lots of exercise

It's the third week of September, which means it's Adopt a Less-Adoptable Pet Week.

If you love animals, it may sadden you to realize that certain pets are considered less adoptable because they're not "perfect." But as anyone who's ever opened their heart and home to a "less desirable" pet can attest, these animals are as loving, joyful, and grateful to their adoptive humans as any other pet.

## What Makes a Pet 'Less Adoptable'?

Several years ago, Petfinder.com conducted a survey to learn which types of pets are least likely to be adopted from animal shelters across the U.S.

Of the shelters and rescue organizations surveyed, almost all had pets they were having a very hard time finding homes for. About a third of these facilities housed pets who had been waiting for homes for one to two years, and over a quarter had animals who had been waiting over two years.

By far the pets least likely to find new homes are older pets. Next are pets with medical problems, dogs suffering from breed prejudice (primarily bully breeds and breed mixes), **[shy\\_pets](#)**, and dogs or cats who need to be the only pet in the home.

Large dogs, black dogs, and pets with special needs also tend to languish in shelters much longer and are euthanized more often than animals considered more desirable by adoptive families.

## Senior Pets

This is perhaps the most heartbreaking situation of all. Older pets who've lived their whole lives with their favorite human or family are relinquished to shelters for any number of reasons — ill health, incontinence, or another condition of old age, or perhaps the pet's owner has passed away and the family doesn't want to care for the dog or cat left behind.

Adoptive parents tend to shy away from **older pets**. They're not as cute as puppies or kittens. They may develop serious, expensive health problems. Sitting in their cages, they don't seem as perky or eager to please as younger animals.

Also, many people who come to shelters looking for a new pet have recently lost one, and they simply can't face the thought of losing another beloved companion to old age within a few years.

Tragically, many older pets live out the remainder of their lives in shelters or are euthanized to make room for more adoptable animals. This is no way for a once cherished pet to spend the time they have left.

If you're thinking about adopting a shelter pet, an older dog or cat just might be exactly what you're looking for, so I encourage you to keep an open mind. Just a few of the reasons to consider a furry retiree include the fact that seniors tend to settle in quickly, have fewer accidents, and usually don't require around-the-clock supervision like many younger dogs do.

## Pets With Medical Problems or Special Needs

I can't think of a more selfless thing to do than to offer a forever home to a debilitated or abused dog or cat — a pet who will never be entirely "normal," much less "perfect." There are angels among us, and many of them are caring for an adopted pet (or often, more than one) who requires special knowledge and extra special care.

## Bully Breeds

These breeds account for an estimated 70% of pets who wind up in shelters in urban areas. These pets have a bad reputation, thanks in large part to careless breeding, dog fighting, and years of wholesale abuse and neglect.

Thankfully, there are animal welfare organizations such as the rescue group Out of the Pits. These groups and others like them are doing wonderful work in educating people about bully breeds and breed mixes, and helping these dogs reach their potential as therapy and law enforcement dogs, agility competitors, and family pets.

If you'd like to know more about this topic, **Best Friends** is also a good resource. This organization took in 22 of Michael Vick's dogs, now called the Victory Dogs. It's fascinating and uplifting to learn about the progress these animals have made over the years since their rescue.

## Black Animals

Shelter and rescue pets with black coats suffer from what is known as "black dog syndrome." These animals are very hard to adopt out. They stay in shelters longer than pets with lighter coats and are euthanized more often. Sadly, if a black pet also happens to be a large breed dog, he's doubly unlucky.

Shelter professionals have several theories on why the anti-black pet phenomenon exists:

- Some believe it's a result of superstition. The myth that black cats bring bad luck has spilled over to black dogs as well, making them less desirable as pets.
- And then there's the fact that black dogs are frequently used as symbols of evil in books and movies. There is also discrimination against large breed dogs like the mostly black Rottweiler and Doberman Pinscher.
- Some shelter workers feel black dogs don't have a look that attracts the attention of potential adopters. They can appear older than their years if they have a bit of white or gray around the muzzle or eyes.
- It can also be difficult to see a black dog well under shelter lighting, especially her facial expressions. Lighter coated pets often appear to have more expressions simply because it is easier to see subtle movement in their faces than it is with a black coated dog or cat.
- Since some people actually give up their black pets to shelters because they don't want black fur on their new furniture, it's safe to assume a percentage of potential adoptive owners pass those animals by for the same reason.
- Often visitors to shelters will see several kennels in a row with black dogs. It's possible some assume there must be a problem with those particular dogs since they're all kept in the same area of the facility.

Fortunately, shelters and animal welfare organizations are taking steps to extinguish black dog syndrome.

Shelter volunteers recognize housing black pets throughout the facility rather than in "clumps" is helpful. They are also doing things like putting brightly colored blankets and toys in the kennels of black pets and using colorful neckwear to catch the eye of visitors. In addition, they've discovered photos of black pets should be taken in well-lit areas of the shelter — preferably outdoors on bright, sunny days.

## Would You Consider a Less Adoptable Pet?

**Adopting a new furry family member** isn't a decision to be taken lightly. Done right, it requires research, planning, preparation, and an honest assessment of what kind of pet would thrive in the environment you provide.

And while I would love to see every hard-to-adopt pet in every shelter across the world find a home, what's most important is matching the right owner with the right animal. Too many new homes become temporary stopovers for pets who wind up back at shelters or meet an even worse fate.

Each time a dog or cat is returned to a shelter, the odds that pet will find a forever home get much worse. So, if you're considering adopting a pet who is older ... or one with a health condition or other special need ... or an animal who has been **abused** ... or a big, powerful breed ... I hope you'll make sure ahead of time this is the right decision for you and your family.

For people with the resources to do so, there are few things as rewarding in life as providing a forever home for a less desirable pet — one who would normally be passed over day after day, for months or even years, by most visitors to the shelter.

Once adopted, many of these pets require a significant investment of time, energy, patience, money, and love. But the return on that investment is the unconditional love and loyalty of a pet who often somehow seems to understand you were his last best hope for a loving home.

### **Sources and References**

National Today, Adopt a Less-Adoptable Pet Week – September 18-24, 2023

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