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When Aaron Jones walks Gozer, his Rottweiler-hound mix, people cross the street to avoid them. Mothers scoop up their children. A lost motorist once rolled up the windows and drove off after spotting the dog. One woman screamed.

"He's the nicest dog I know," said Jones, 33, of Oakland, Calif. "It's hard to understand all the fear."

Gozer isn't aggressive and doesn't look mean or bark, Jones insists \_ people are afraid of the dog purely because it's big and black. As a puppy, Gozer was passed over for at least a month before Jones took him home.

According to animal shelter officials, big, black dogs like Gozer have more trouble finding a happy home than do other dogs. Some shelters even have a name for it: "Big black dog syndrome."

Nobody tracks the problem nationally, and local shelters often keep only limited data on the sizes, breeds and colors of the dogs that are adopted or put down, according to the Humane Society and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"But anecdotally," said Stephen Musso, executive vice president of the ASPCA, "that's what we hear from shelter after shelter: Big, black dogs just don't get adopted."

At the city animal shelter in Rogers, Ark., big, black dogs almost always make up the bulk of the animals put to sleep each month. Last month, 13 of the 14 dogs killed by the city were large and black \_ mostly Labs, shepherd mixes, pit bull mixes and Rottweillers, said Rhonda Dibasilio, manager of the city Animal Services Department.

It's not just that large dogs can be frightening: Animal shelters say black dogs of all sizes are difficult to photograph for online listings, and are hard to spot against the shadows of their crates and cages in dimly lighted kennels.

Older black dogs with a little white in their muzzles can look elderly. Bigger breeds like German shepherds or Chows aren't as fashionable as small, cuddly lap dogs.

Then there's the reputation. The idea of a big, black dog unleashing destruction is a common theme in books, movies and folklore as diverse as "The Hound of the Baskervilles," the "Harry Potter" series and "The Omen."

Even the common sign "Beware of Dog" depicts a big, black dog, teeth bared and gums dripping. The notion that the animals are menacing is so pervasive that Winston Churchill famously called depression "the black dog."

People are often wary of dark dogs because it's difficult to read their expressions, said Paul Nicosi, the dog

behavior specialist at *Bide-A-Wee* animal shelter in New York City. Without defined eyebrows, a playful grin might be construed as an angry grimace, he said.

"There isn't a lot of contrast between black eyes and a black face, so people can't get a handle on how the dog is feeling," Nicosi said.

Joseph Giannini, owner of the Chicago dog-walking and doggie day care service Urban Out Sitters, said people may subconsciously snub big black dogs because they aren't comfortable with what the pet may say about the owner.

"If I'm out with a Yorkie I definitely get treated very differently than if I'm walking a big Rottweiler or a dark pit bull mix," he said. "You look at the owner of a big, black dog and you might think, 'Oh, there's a tough guy. I better avoid him and his mean dog.'"

It doesn't help that a quirk of dark-dog biology has led to an overabundance of large, black dogs, said Alex Yaffe, who founded Heartland Lab Rescue, a network for rescuing abandoned Labrador retrievers in Oklahoma. Labradors and pit bulls are resilient dogs who tend to have big litters of five or more, which increases overpopulation.

One black dog, Coal, took more than six months to find a home despite a sweet temperament, excellent recommendations and a featured spot on Yaffe's Web site. "He was just black," Yaffe said. "That was his one offense."

The Web site [blackpearldogs.com](http://blackpearldogs.com), a resource devoted to increasing public awareness of the "big black dog phenomenon," offers some lighthearted reasons to adopt a big, black dog: Their color doesn't clash with furniture or clothing, hides dirt well, and is easy to accessorize. In other words, black dogs could be the new black.

The dogs do appeal to those who want protection on walks late at night, or men who seek a canine boost of machismo, said Sandra DeFeo, the co-executive director of the Humane Society of New York.

And there's a certain contingent of dog lovers who specifically seek out black dogs because of their connection to the trendy Black Dog bakery on Martha's Vineyard.

"But either way, feelings aren't based on fact," she said. "Any dog can be friendly or unfriendly \_ big, black dogs and little Chihuahuas alike."

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***Highlights: Bide-A-Wee***