On The Trail Of Lost Breeds...

Although many breeds in the history of dogs no longer exist, their blood still runs in the veins of some of today’s breeds. We follow the trail of…

Old French Hounds

text and illustrations by RIA HÖRTER

Courtesy TON POPULIER

The history of French hounds is old and complicated because of a complex process of evolution.

In the famous caves of Lascaux in the Dordogne, there is a prehistoric wall painting showing a man and his dogs hunting deer. Later, the Romans occupied France and noticed that the Gauls used hounds. What’s not clear is when and how the different types of hounds disappeared and today’s breeds appeared.

The many different types of French hounds have a multitude of names, mostly with a geographical connection: Bretagne, Artois, Gascogne, Normand, etc. Unfortunately, dog writers were not always consistent with the names, a complicating factor.

In the maze of French hound breeds, one needs a guide; I found mine in Mr. Ton Populier of the Netherlands, a hounds connoisseur par excellence.

FRENCH ARISTOCRACY

By the 17th and 18th centuries, several hound breeds had been developed in France. They were used for the petite vénérerie (small game, such as hare and rabbit) and grande vénérerie (large game, such as wild boar, wolf, red deer and roe deer). As in other European countries, royalty, the nobility and religious orders hunted. Farmers, villagers and ordinary subjects were not allowed to hunt.

The well-known 14th-century manuscript Le Livre de la Chasse (The Book of the Hunt) by Comte Gas-
ton de Foix (‘Phoebus’) contains 87 breathtaking miniatures showing various hunts, huntsmen and dogs. Today’s hounds can be recognized in some of the types.

George Johnston and Maria Ericson’s Hounds of France, Disciples of Diana (1979) considers the impact of the French Revolution (1789-9) and First and Second World Wars on the vénérie: “The subsequent dispersal of the French aristocracy brought a serious curtailment of hunting, and the national and international events which overwhelmed France between 1789 and 1944 were not exactly conducive to the continuation of venery and hound breeding and it was not until the end of World War II that the French could take stock of the sport and resume the activity.”

GRAND FAUVE DE BRETAGNE

The Grand Fauve de Bretagne (Brittany) was first mentioned in the 16th century. Four pure lines existed, their colors forming part of their names: Chien (dog) Blanc, Chien Noir, Chien Gris and Chien Fauve (white, black, gray and tawny).

The Chien Blanc was a fast stag hound, the Chien Noir a slow but excellent tracker. The Chien Fauve and Chien Gris were rough-coated.

As for characteristics, dog writers said they were unruly and difficult to control during the hunt. Because of their temperaments, the Chiens Fauve were used for hunting dangerous game – wolves and wild boar, for example. In the 16th century, the line was found almost exclusively in Bretagne, a region in northwest France.

Now and then, a good Chien Fauve found a home in the royal kennels. In 1520, ‘Miraud’ was presented to King Francis I (1494-1547) by the Breton Admiral Claude d’Annebauld (ca. 1492-1552).

19th century dog writers, too, criticized the Grand Fauve’s temperament. The dogs were first-class hooligans, killing a sheep or goat as readily as they killed game. The Grand Fauve failed as a pack hound. Its fierceness, unruliness and passion for game couldn’t be found in any other French hound and these characteristics finally proved fatal for the breed.

Liberé, Égalité, Fraternité

The motto Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood, introduced during the French Revolution (1789-95) and still in use, caused the destruction of many valuable packs of hounds in the 18th century, when hunting with dogs was considered a decadent pastime for the rich.

WOLF HUNTER

The last breeder of Grand Fauves and the last wolf hunter in Bretagne was Baron Maurice Halna du Fretay, who wrote about the breed in his memoirs Mes Chasses de Loups (My Wolf Hunts), 1891: The Comte (Count) de Boldesrues, a 19th-century wolf hunter, owned more than 80 Grand Fauves. After Boldesrues’ death, his dogs came into the possession of Comte de St. Prix, who crossbred the Grand Fauves with Bloodhounds, trying to temper their disposition, although without success. In the 1850s, the pack was sold to the Vicomte de Madec. In 1865, de Madec’s most beautiful dog, ‘Lourdaud’ – a powerful dog with a deep chest and rough coat – was photographed in Paris.

Baron Halna du Fretay bought the pack from de Madec (his uncle) in 1866; Lourdaud was likely still in the pack. When the baron was looking for fresh blood, French hound specialist Henri Comte Le Couteulx de Canteleu advised him to use the Grand Griffon Vendéen. The result was a strong Vendéen type and the dogs became smaller in size.

When big game disappeared in France, so did the demand for large dogs. In the 1880s, Baron Halna du Fretay killed the last wolves in Finistère, a district in the extreme west of Brittany.

At an 1889 dog show in Paris, Henri de Lamandé entered more than 10 Grand Fauves. One of them, ‘Fanfare II,’ is pictured in the 1904 edition of de Bylandt’s Hondenrassen (Dogs of all Nations). Fanfare II was substantially smaller than her ancestor Lourdaud.

The Grand Fauve de Bretagne became extinct, but the type was preserved in the Briquet Fauve, whose name was later changed to Griffon Fauve de Bretagne.
BASSET D’ARTOIS

The Basset d’Artois was a large, heavily-built tricolor hound. During a meeting of the Club du Basset Français on May 26, 1889, the name “Basset Français à poil ras des variétés Lane et Le Couteulx” (French short-haired Basset, types Lane and Le Couteulx) was changed to Basset d’Artois. (Artois is a region in northwest France.) The president of this club was the French hound specialist mentioned above, Comte Le Couteulx de Canteleu. Both Le Couteulx and Louis Lane bred Bassets d’Artois, but each had his own type. Le Couteulx emphasized strength and workability; Lane was breeding dogs with noble heads and rather long ears. However, Lane’s dogs had crooked, dwarf-like legs that hampered them when working.

In 1898, when its standard was published, the breed had characteristics of both types. Around 1900, Leon Verrier combined the two types in his breeding and became a successful exhibitor as a result.

Lane’s kennel disappeared during the First World War, but being a breed judge and fancier, his influence was considerable. The name Basset Artésien was chosen under his leadership. The old Basset d’Artois types became extinct – or, rather, merged into the present Basset Artésien Normand – and the name Basset d’Artois was removed by the FCI from its breed list.

The Basset d’Artois is not to be confused with the Chien d’Artois, a 24-inch (60-centimeter) dog resembling a large Beagle at first sight.

CHIEN NORMAND

There are now 27 hound breeds in France. A considerable number are named after their region or district of origin – the Grand Bleu de Gascogne, Basset Artésien Normand, Griffon Fauve de Bretagne and Griffon Nivernais, for example.

The name of the now-extinct Chien Normand refers to its origin in Normandy, another region in northwest France, situated between Brittany and Picardy. A descendant of the Chien Normand is the Basset Artésien Normand, a cross between the Chien d’Artois and the Chien Normand. It’s true that a cross between two French hound breeds is a mixed breed, but the offspring of such a mating can lead to a new breed.

The breed standard and several pictures of the Chien Normand – including the bitch ‘Vesta,’ who lived in the Paris Zoo – were printed in de Bylandt’s book Dogs of All Nations (1904).

CHIEN DE BRESSE

The Chien de Bresse, a rough-haired hound, about 27 inches (68 centimeters) at the shoulder, that existed until the end of the 19th century, was used for par force hunting, in which the game was chased to exhaustion before it was killed. It was one of the ancestors of the Griffon Vendéen and was similar to the Griffon Nivernais. One of the last breeders was the Comte Le Couteulx de Canteleu; the last Chiens de Bresse were entered in the Swiss studbook in 1896.

In 1904, de Bylandt wrote: “Cette race n’existe plus, elle est complètement perdue.” (The breed no longer exists; it has vanished completely.)

GRAND CHIEN BLANC DU ROY
( THE KING’S LARGE WHITE DOG)

The (Grand) Chien Blanc du Roy (also du Roi) is another type of extinct French hound. One of its descendants is the short-haired Grand Vendéen, the ancestor of various Griffons, rough-haired hounds originating from the Vendée, a region in the west of France, south of Brittany.

There is a kind of Adam-and-Eve story about these “large, white dogs of the king.” A Normandy nobleman named Gaston advised another nobleman to give his white hound ‘Souillard’ to Anna Maria de Bourbon, Princesse de Conti (1666-1739). Anna already owned a white bitch, ‘Baude,’ who was mated several times to Souillard. Their offspring were acquired by King Louis XVI of France and lived at the royal court until the French Revolution (1789-95).

The Chien Blanc du Roy is the ancestor of the
present-day Billy, Poitevin and Porcelaine. The Billy can be considered a 19th-century reconstruction of the Chien Blanc du Roy.

French painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686-1755) painted a great many hunting scenes with French hounds, and it is known that he painted the dogs of King Louis XV (1710-74) at the Palace of Versailles. In 1722, he painted a portrait of Henri Camille, Chevalier de Beringhen, with a type of dog that resembles the Grand Chien Blanc du Roy.

**CHIEN GRIS DE SAINT LOUIS**

“Saint Louis” refers to King Louis IX of France (1214-1270), the only French monarch to be declared a saint. It is not exactly known what the Chien Gris looked like, but its color could have been wolf-gray with silver-gray markings, or mouse-gray with “hare-gray.” 16th-century dog writer Jacques du Fouilloux stated that they were common and described them as gris (gray) on the back with tan or red forequarters and legs.

Tradition has it that King Louis IX brought dogs back from “the country of the Tartars,” i.e., northern and central Asia. It is known that the king participated in the seventh (1248-54) and eighth (1270) crusades, and therefore it could be possible that he brought dogs from the Orient. But it’s also possible that the crusaders acquired dogs from the Balkan countries; today, various short-haired hound breeds still exist in that part of Europe.

The Chien Gris has been extinct for several hundred years. Pierre Méngin stated in his book *Le Chien et ses Races (The Dog and its Breeds)*, 1889, that around 1881, several Chiens Gris were entered at a dog show in Paris. They belonged to a M. Cruchent, a hunter and exhibitor who, it was said, had found the dogs somewhere in France. He managed to get the dogs entered and judged as Chiens Gris de Saint Louis, but it turned out that the dogs were crossbred from a dark-gray Briquet or Griffon Nivernais bitch and a Grand Bleu de Gascogne male.

**REGENTS**

The list of lost French hound breeds is longer than those mentioned above. There was, for example, the Bleu de Foudras, a blue-mottled hound of medium height and construction, believed to have been extinct since the 18th century.

The Chien de la Loue was similar to the modern Porcelaine. In the reign of King Charles IX (1550-74), they were known as Regents. Until 1570, Charles reigned under the regency of his mother, Catherine de Medici, hence the name.

As well, there was the Chien d’Auvergne, a tricolor dog a little smaller than the present-day Gascon Saintongeois. As was the Chien Fauve, it was an excellent wolf hunter.

And who has heard of the Merlants? According to George Johnston and Maria Ericson in *Hounds of France, Disciples of Diana* (1979), these light-colored hounds resembling the Gascon-Saintongeois were used in the 17th century for stag hunting.

**Next: Old Mastiff types**

We have tried to find the names of all photographers. Unfortunately, we did not always succeed. Please send a message to the author (riashorter.com) if you think you are the owner of copyright.

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