The need to inter-breed

As gundog gene pools narrow, should we revive the inter-breeding that led to the development of the Labrador, asks Ingemar Borelius

Retriever owners today don't realise that during the 19th century the retriever was one breed, divided by different colours and coats. At that time the wavycoated retriever, the forefather of the flatcoat, was the dominant one, with the curlycoat being less common. But there were smoothcoated ones and yellow retrievers with different coat structures long before the breakthrough of the breeds we know.

But all those retrievers were built on a common fundament and crosses were quite frequently made until modern times. Judi Seall's beautiful and informative book *The History of Retrievers: Compiled from the Scrapbooks of H. Reginald Cooke*, talks about well-known flatcoats being used actively in Labrador breeding, with dogs competing in the flatcoat ring and their litter-mates in the Labrador ring. It seems obvious that qualities we consider to be characteristic for the working Labrador today were infused from the flatcoat strains via the melting pot that shaped the modern retriever.

Noses to the ground

"To improve the Labrador as a gundog," she writes, "flatcoat blood was introduced, in other words to try to breed retrievers that would keep their noses to the ground and not in the air as often seen in the Labrador."

LOTTA OLSSON / J. SCOTT MCCOMB / ANN EDMANSTRANDER

Horton Max **(born 1913), a successful winner in the Labrador ring. His grandfather,** ***Jimmy of Riverside*** **(born 1906), was one of the great winners in the flatcoat ring**

GB Ch ***Tonggreen Sparrowboy*** **had six lines back to the (Labrador/flatcoat) inter-bred** ***Pewcroft Plague*** **in a six-generation pedigree. He is one of the pillars of the modern show flatcoat**

A major break between the breeds occurred when *Horton Max* was starting to win Challenge Certificates in the Labrador ring during the 1910s. He was renowned for being a three-quarter flatcoat and a quarter Labrador. An intense debate began; the patrons of the retriever world agreed that things must change, the Labrador club was established in 1916 to protect the new breed and new inter-breeding rules were set by the Kennel Club.

According to those rules, retriever inter-breds were allowed to trial as a variety of their own. If bred back to a specific breed for two generations the offspring could be registered as a pure-bred retriever again.

Strongest brand

In 1921 and 1922 two inter-breds won the Retriever Championship handled by Charles Allington. These were perhaps not used in the pure-bred lines, but their litter-mates were used by well-known Labrador breeders.

It seems as if most inter-breds were absorbed by the working Labrador strains because, as the "working retriever", the Labrador could offer the strongest brand. One of the most influential inter-breedings was the one between the first yellow Labrador FTCh *Haylers Defender* and the golden retriever *Haulstone Rusty*. This inter-bred appeared four generations behind FTCh *Haulstone Larry*, the first golden to win the Retriever Championship in 1937.

But it had a much larger impact on the subsequent Haulstone generations, being the subject for a continual line breeding. FTCh *Haulstone Bobby* – with six lines back to the Defender-Rusty inter-breds in a five-generation pedigree – had a strong impact on the early Holway goldens and many other well-known working golden kennels.

There is no doubt that inter-breds played a major role in the working flatcoat as well. The inter-bred bitch Bibby (Labrador-flatcoat) appeared behind the successful working flatcoat lines between the wars, important in the gene pool when the breed was restored after World War II. But the most influential inter-bred was the bitch *Pewcroft Plague*, registered as a pure-bred in 1939. According to a letter from her

breeder and owner Stanley O'Neill at the end of his life, she was an inter-bred, by his own dog *Pewcroft Puzzler* and probably out of the well-known Labrador *Poppleton Black Tulip*.

The Pewcroft kennel played a leading role during the restoration years after the war and practically all leading breeders founded their kennels on the close descendants of *Pewcroft Plague*, as the subject for a continual line breeding. The last flatcoat inter-breds (flatcoat-golden) were made in Scotland during the 1960s, adding new blood to the significantly narrow flatcoat gene pool in Britain and the Nordic countries.

When the inter-breeding option was closed in Britain around 1970 – as far as I know it didn't exist in other countries – thoughts about narrowing gene pools and the consequences when it came to hereditary diseases were perhaps not that much in focus. There are good reasons to believe that the shutdown of this valuable breeding tool was caused by concerns within the show fraternity; that minor infusions of "blood" from other retriever breeds would damage conformation qualities.

"Narrowing" trend

But the continual line breeding being used to improve the quality of all pure breeds is slowly narrowing genetic diversity. Seen from a longer perspective, the dominance of the greatest stud forces is accelerating this "narrowing" trend, when the role models are multiplied uncountable times in the extended pedigrees of most target-bred dogs. The consequences are most critical within the minor gundog breeds and the "closed" sub-populations within the gundog breeds, when it reaches a critically low level of genetic diversity.

Geneticists in the Nordic countries have commented on these risks and growing concerns among the Nordic kennel clubs has led to a number of cross-breeding programmes between "cousin" breeds. In Norway there is an ongoing project to restore the hunting lundehund, crossing with three Nordic spitz breeds. In Sweden studbooks are reopened between the four domestic hound breeds, which are used for rabbit and hare hunting. The Finnish Kennel Club is supporting a number of parallel cross-breeding programmes.

SE U (U) Ch *Sugar Loaf Non Violence*, a third-generation inter-bred (cocker/Clumber), shows her working ability

The only cross in the Swedish gundog world was made in 2002 between a Clumber bitch and a highly merited working cocker. In the second generation thereafter, two bitches from two different litters were examined by a specialist judge and certified to be fully typical Clumbers. In the following generations there are certificate winners in several countries, including the Nordic countries and Britain. A fifth-generation bitch bred in Britain, *Venaticus Isabella*, was only the third Clumber since 1938 to win a Certificate of Merit at an Any Variety spaniel field trial.

An inter-breeding programme is not about creating new breeds like the Labradoodle or the sprocker. It is about restoring a genetic diversity that has been lost, causing increased levels of hereditary diseases in our dogs. We must learn that there is a new awareness among the dog fancy that crosses could generate healthier and more functional dogs, generating a rapidly growing demand for the new cross-breds. The targeted breeding of good-looking and/or good working dogs is of little value if the owner couldn't be given reasonable guarantees to get a healthy and well-functioning dog that was likely to live beyond 10 years of age.

I'm sure that the thoroughly planned cross-breeding initiatives in the Nordics will be followed in other vulnerable breeds. But in the longer perspective the restoration of the historical British inter-breeding rules, freely allowing crosses between cousin breeds – wisely defined by our forefathers in 1916 – is the best way to go. What's the risk? If an inter-breeding programme produces typical, sound, good-looking, good working dogs, they could contribute to a healthier and more functional breed. If not, they won't be bred from, which applies to most litters of pure-bred dogs.

***Spindel's Crossline* was the grandchild of a working cocker dog and a Clumber spaniel bitch, being examined and qualified in Sweden as a pure-bred Clumber**