

Basic Coat Colors

Equine Science – Chapter 3

Horses come in many colors, and the genetics of coat color is very complicated. New cutting-edge information about coat color is being discovered in worldwide equine genome research project.

This document will focus on the common names for the majority of coat colors of horses and the descriptive words used for coat-color patterns. Like the names of the parts and regions of the horse, this is basic information for horse people. A good understanding of horse colors and description terms is important for proper and accurate identification of animals.

Different breed associations vary in some of the terms they choose to describe particular coat colors (much as they vary in terms they use for markings). When registering an animal with a breed association, be sure to use the color descriptions accepted as correct by that association.

The naming system presented below for identifying horse colors incorporates the “common” language and terms used to horse people and breed associations.

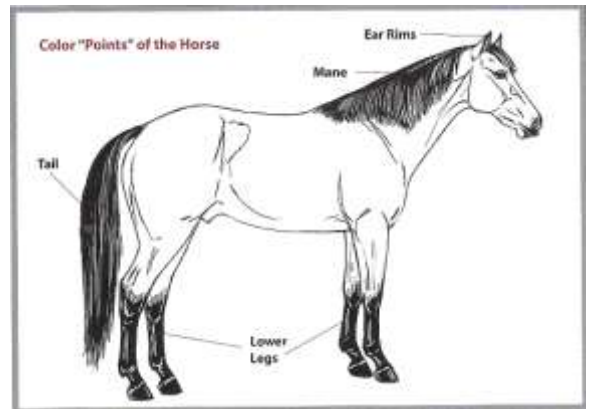
- **Base Color** – Another name for coat color. When determining the color of a horse, first look at and name the base coat color. Important point: White is always a “covering over” of the base coat color. When naming the coat colors of a horse, ignore the white and name the base coat color first.
- **Points** – When talking about horse colors, the term “points” refers to the:
 - mane
 - tail
 - lower leg
 - ear rims.

Most of the names used to identify the colors of a horse are determined by looking carefully at the base coat color and the colors of the “points”.

Descriptive Terms

Below are a few terms used to describe coat-color traits in horses. These traits can be observed in many of the different coat colors of equines.

- **Mealy** – refers to a modification of basic dark coat color in which areas of lighter color are seen on the flanks, girth, lower belly, inside of the legs, muzzle or above the eyes.
- **Dorsal Stripe** – a stripe of color down the center of the animal’s back. Other names for a dorsal stripe in equines include back stripe, lineback and eel stripe.



Mealy affect



Dorsal Stripe

- **Primitive Markings** – markings similar to those seen on asses and on some of the more primitive breeds of horse. The markings are darker than the animal’s base coat color. These markings can include any or all of the following: dorsal stripe, wither stripe or cross, zebra marks

around the knee, hocks or lower legs, cobwebbing or spider-webbing on the forehead.

- **Dapple** – a circular pattern or ring-shaped pattern in the horse’s coat. May appear as an intermixing of two slightly different shades of the same base coat color, creating a dappled pattern. A good example would be a “dapple gray”. Many horses exhibit dapples in the spring when they shed their winter coats. Dapple patterns appear in the coats of some overweight horses.

- **Flea bits** – small flecks of color over the base coat color of an animal; usually brown or red in color. The color of a horse with this coat pattern is referred to as “fleabitten”. A good example would be a “fleabitten gray”.
- **Blood mark** – a dark colored “splotch” on the basic coat color. Many horseman refer to this type of mark as a “handprint”. Blood marks are generally brown or red in color and seen on a lighter base coat color, but they can also be seen on darker base coat colors.
- **Ink spots** – also called “pawprints” or “bear paws”: small-dark-colored spots seen in the white areas of some paint/pinto horses.

The Dark Colors

There are 3 basic dark colors for horse:

- **Black** – the entire coat color is black and all points are black. There are no brown or reddish-colors hairs around the flank, muzzle, lower leg or girth areas. Black horses can have white markings.
- **Bay** – basically a reddish-brown base coat color with black points: black legs, mane and tail. Bays range from mahogany bay, blood bay, and red bay to sandy or light bays. Bays do not have lighter-colored areas on the flank, girth or muzzle, around the eyes or on other parts of the body. Bays can have white markings.
- **Chestnut (also called sorrel)** – chestnut horses are basically of a red coat color that can vary from dark chestnut, red chestnut or liver chestnut to a sandy or light chestnut. The mane and tail are never black, there are no other black points. The name and tail can be the same color, darker than, or lighter than the base coat color. If the mane and tail are very light in color, they are referred to as flaxen. Many chestnuts have white markings.

You may hear chestnut-colors horses referred to as a sorrel, and the term “sorrel” is used for registering animals in some draft-horse breeds, the American Quarter Horse Association, and a few other breed associations. Beyond those uses, the terms “sorrel” is becoming less common.

South American horse people do a more precise job than North Americans in describing “chestnuts”. They make a clear definition and description of horses with the basic red body color and then separate out the colors of the points:

- alazán – red-colored horses with red points
- tostado – red-colored horses with darker red-colors points
- ruano – red-colors horses with lighter-colors points or a flaxen mane and tail

In the United States, the easiest way to describe a red-colored horse is to first name the body coat color and then use additional terms, if needed, to specify the color of the points. An example would be “liver chestnut with flaxen mane and tail.”



Black



Bay



Chestnut



Brown



Buckskin



Dun

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Modified Dark Color

Brown coat color in horses is a modification of the base coat color of black or bay.

- **Brown** – many brown horses are essentially black horses with the “mealy” modification of the basic body color. Many essentially black horses have the mealy effect or lighter-colored areas, around the flanks, girth, and lower belly, inside the legs, on the muzzle, or above the eyes. Some breed associations refer to this color as “seal brown”. You also may hear the term “black bay” used for these horses.

Other “brown” horses have the mealy effect imposed over the entire coat: The whole body is brown in color, with no black points. Color can range from a very dark, almost black color to a lighter mouse brown.

Current genetic research indicates that the “sooty” genetic modification of the base coat color of bay also produces a brown coat color in horses.

Brown horses can have white markings.

Dilutions of the Basic Dark Colors

There are many genetic “dilutions” of the basic dark coat colors into something lighter. More is being learned about these complicated coat patterns through genetic research.

- **Buckskin** – yellow-colored body with black points. Shades of buckskin can vary from dark, dusty, golden and sooty to the lighter silvery buckskin color. Buckskins can have white markings. Also specified in most breed associations’ standards, buckskins do not have a dorsal stripe.
- **Dun** – dun refers to horses that do have a dorsal stripe. Many dun horses also have some of the other “primitive markings” mentioned above: wither stripe or cross; zebra marks around the knee, hocks or lower legs; cobwebbing or spider webbing on the forehead. Colors vary greatly and range from a dark red, golden, tan and palomino dun to a very light cream dun. Points can be the same as the basic body color or a darker color, which can include black. Duns can have white markings.
- **Grulla (or grullo)** – grulla horses are a subgroup of dun-colored horses. These horses do have a dorsal stripe and can have primitive markings. The shades of grulla vary greatly, but grulla generally is seen as a very diluted basic dark coat color with a grayish or silvery look to it. The most distinguishing factor for grullo horses, compared to the basic dun-color horse, is that these horses consistently have black points and generally have darker-colored or black heads that are in contrast to their basic lighter coat color. Some grulla horses have blue eyes.
- **Palomino** – yellow horses with no black points. Generally palominos have pale manes and tails that are lighter than their body color. Base coat colors vary from a rich golden color to a very light yellow. Palominos can have white markings.
- **Cremello/Cream** – the very palest coat-color dilution that is not white. The basic coat color is cream. Cremello or cream horses have pink skin and blue eyes. Points can be the same color as the body, darker than the body, or lighter, to nearly white. Cream-colored horses can only result from breeding horses with palomino and



Grulla



Palomino



Cremello



White



Gray



Roan

photos: Bob Langrish, except where otherwise noted

photo: Barry Ernie

buckskin-colored horses in their genetic lineage. This is an interesting fact to remember, as many breed associations do not allow registration of cream or cremello horses. Cream-colored horses can have white points. In some cases, the faint line of visible difference between the basic coat color and a white marking is the only deciding factor in determining that a cream-colored horse is not actually a white horse.

The White Color Patterns

There are many different white color patterns in horses. They range from the true white horse to the Appaloosa. Below is a description of most of these “white color patterns”. Equine genetic research is unraveling more of the mysteries of white color patterns in horses.

- **White** – few horses are solid white in color. White horses have pink skin and dark-colored eyes. The entire base body color is white, spot on the skin. White horses occur in only a few breeds: They are seen, though rarely, in Tennessee Walking Horses, Thoroughbreds, and Arabians. Occasionally a white horse occurs in another breed. Albino horses are not white horses, as albinos have pink eyes.
- **Gray (of Grey)** – a true gray horse is a horse with white-colored hairs dispersed throughout the coat, and with dark-colored or “pigmented” skin. In many cases, true gray foals show their gray horses that are born black, bay or chestnut but “gray out” as they age. As a horse ages, the coat typically has more and more white hair. Many aged gray horses appear white, but their dark-pigmented skin distinguishes them from true white horses (see above).

There are many variations on the basic gray coat pattern, such as dapple gray (a circular pattern in the coat), fleabitten gray (dark colored flecks on a gray coat color), rosettes (bursts of white on gray coat color), and rose gray (gray on red coat color). In a few cases, gray horses have primitive marks, especially when they are young. These primitive marks can include a dorsal stripe and zebra stripes on the legs. Gray horses can have white markings.

- **Roan** – a roan coat has white hairs individually scattered among and intermixed between the base coat-color hairs. This is not to be confused with all-white patches of hair. Many roan horses do not have the roan color on their entire bodies; the head, mane, tail and lower legs may be of the darker base coat color. Roan horses are rarely dappled.

Roan horses are born roan or shed to roan with the very first shed of the foal coat. The most important fact to remember about roan horses is that their coats do not change over time in the way a gray horse’s does; in fact, some roans’ coat color darkens with age. Roan coats can also look different from one season to another, tending to appear lighter in color after the spring shed, medium-colored in the summer months, and darkest in the winter months. Even so, a roan remains a roan.

The most common roan coat colors are:

- **Blue roan** – base coat color = black
- **Red roan** – base coat color = bay
- **Strawberry roan** – base coat color = chestnut

Small dark-colored spots on a roan coat are called “corn spots”. Roan horse can have white markings.

- **Paint/Pinto** – one of the most complicated coat colors to understand is the paint or pinto coat pattern. Paints/pintos belong to a “white-color pattern” group, which is characterized as having “patches of white” or a “white spotting pattern”. The words “paint” and “pinto” do not only designate a type of coat-color pattern; in the U.S., Paints and Pintos also have two different breed associations.

For the purpose of this document, the words “paint” and “pinto” will be used interchangeably to mean the same thing; a white spotting pattern that is not uniform. In the past, the words piebald (white on a black horse) and skewbald (white on any other color than black) were used to describe paint/pinto horses, but today the use of these terms is becoming less common.

The system used for naming horses’ colors within the Paint Horse registry is relatively new; so if you need to specify color for a horse in this registry, be sure to refer to the most current resources available.

Today paint/pinto horses are described first by naming the base coat color and then by specifying the pattern of white spotting that is over the basic coat color. There are two main types of paint/pintos – tobiano and overo. The word “overo” is used for any paint/pinto horse that is not a tobiano. The term overo includes 3 coat patterns – frame, sabino and splashed white.

So there are 4 distinctly different paint/pinto coat patterns – 1) tobiano, 2) frame, 3) sabino, and 4) splashed white.

- **Tobiano** – generally has white feet and lower legs. The head tends to have more dark color than white. The white on the body usually crosses over the back, the neck or somewhere on the topline of the horse. The white areas tend to be clearly defined by a sharp line between the base body color and the white spotting pattern. The base body color tends to have a vertical look. Think of “tobiano” as “dripped with white”. Tobiano horses have dark eyes.
- **Overo** – a “non-tobiano” paint/pinto-colored horse, which can have one of the following coat patterns:

- **Frame** – generally has dark feet and legs. The head tends to be mostly white. Most frame-patterned horses have white on the middle of the sides of the body and the neck. There is a clean line between the base coat color and the white spotting pattern; however, it is generally more ragged than that of tobiano horses. This color pattern tends to have a horizontal look.

Think of “frame” as having white sides. Blue eyes are very common in frame-patterned horses. It is important to mention that these horses can carry a gene called “lethal white”. This gene can cause a condition called “lethal white-foal syndrome” (LWFS), in which an affected foal dies within a few days of birth.

- **Sabino** – has extensive white on the legs and head. Sabino horses can have different base colors, but many are shades of roan. Almost all sabino horses demonstrate a speckled or flecked white coat pattern with jagged edges. Think of sabino as the speckled, flecked, and jagged colors paint/pinto horses. As confusing as the paint/pinto colors are, remember that the sabino pattern is

characterized by having mostly white legs and a significant amount of white about the head. The most classic example of a sabino horse is the Clydesdale breed – although Clydesdale breeders call horses with this coloring “roan”. Occasionally a “lethal white” foal results from crossing 2 sabino horses. Sabino horses can have blue or partially blue eyes.

- **Splashed white** – usually has white legs and a white underbelly (underpinning or ventral side). May also have white up the underside of the chest and neck. The head and face tend to have a significant amount of white. The white areas are crisp and clearly defined by a sharp line between the base coat color and the white spotting pattern. Think of splashed whites as being dipped into a vat of white paint, legs first! Some splashed-white horses are deaf. The normal eye color is blue. This color pattern is seen more in the European breeds and is somewhat rare in the United States. Distinctions between sabino and splashed-white color patterns can be subtle and difficult to differentiate. Checking the coat colors of a horse’s parents can be helpful in determining whether its coat is sabino or splashed white.



Tobiano



Frame (one Overo pattern)



Sabino (one Overo pattern)



Splashed White (one Overo pattern)



Leopard

- **Leopard** – Another major type of white spotting pattern is horses. Leopard spotting patterns are generally seen in Appaloosa and Pony of the Americas breeds. These horses can have:
 - One base coat color with the “white leopard spot pattern” or
 - Areas of one dark base color and additional colored areas that are “dilution colors” of that base coat color – with the “white leopard spot pattern”.

In other words a horse could demonstrate one of the 3 basic dark coat colors, a dilution of this dark coat color, the leopard white spotting pattern, and also have white markings! Some horses with the leopard spotting pattern have sparse manes and tails, a trait known as “rat-tailed”. In recent years, many breeders have successfully bred away from the rat-tailed trait, which is considered undesirable by many horse owners.

The leopard white spotting pattern includes several descriptively named sub-patterns:

- Mottled
- Frost
- Snowflake
- Varnish roan
- Speckled
- Blanket
- Leopard
- Few-spot leopard

Horses can exhibit combinations of two or more of these distinct subpatterns.

Some other Coat Colors and Terms

In talking with horse people, you may hear coat-color names and terms that have not been discussed in this chapter. Some more “coat colors”:

Silver Dapple	perlino	Champagne
isabello	red silver	Smoky
ribbon paint	chocolate silver	brindle
ghost paint	claybank	tovero
halo paint	lobo dun	albino
calico	golden dun	

Some more coat color terms:

Sooty or smutty	war bonnet
white stripping	yellow-eared
ticking	black-eared
frosty	shadow
lacing	halo
varnish spots	“Bend Or” spots or “Ben d’Or” spots (named after a famous race horse)
bird-catcher spots	medicine hat

A Final Comment about Coat Color

The naming system for a horses’ coat color is very complicated and may be difficult to understand. If you learn the information presented in this document, you will know much more about coat colors than the average horse person does! We can hope that some day, when more genetic information about coat color is known, the different breed association will cooperatively determine “common language” to be used in describing coat colors for all horses, regardless of breed or registry.