

TAIGAN

Sighthound of Kyrgyzstan

By Jutta Rübesam

All photographs by the author



Almaz Akunov, breeder, hunter and founder of the hunting festival “Salburun,” with two of his Taigans. Photo by the author.

It happened by chance, about 40 years ago, that I saw an Afghan Hound and fell in love with her. Her dam had been imported from Kabul in Afghanistan and her father came from German show lines. She had just had puppies — without any official pedigree, since she was not registered — and I took one of them home, a female called Saika. With her, my interest in native eastern Sighthounds was born.

One of my later dogs was a desert-type Afghan Hound, bred from Afghanistan imports and Russian dogs that were the offspring of Afghanistan imports. When Kamal died at the age of 17 years and nine months I looked for a new dog to join the family. At that time I had heard of a breed called Taigan, very similar-looking to native

Afghan Hounds, that originated from the mountains of Kyrgyzstan — a landlocked country north of Afghanistan and south of Russia. A friend knew about a litter in Rus-

sia. And so, the Taigan female Burya jumped into my life!

Burya was her official, registered name, but since this is a Russian name and I wanted a Kyrgyz name for a Kyrgyz dog, I decided to call her Taalai. I found the name on the Internet saying it means luck; I felt that was appropriate because Taalai means luck to me! Later I found that in Kyrgyzstan this is a man’s name, and it is not considered nice to give a human name to a dog in that culture — and a man’s name for a female dog at that! However, luckily the Kyrgyz people only laughed at me, the crazy Western woman, instead of being angry

when I told them the name of my dog!

Taking Taalai to a dog-racing event in Germany and telling people what breed she was, I met a young girl from Kyrgyzstan who took me home to her country and her family for her next holiday. A great dream I have had my whole life since first owning Sighthounds came true: to visit the country

*“A great dream came true:
to visit the country of origin for
my breed and seeing what kind
of life the dogs live there...”*



Taalai (Burya), pictured in Germany in 2014.



Eagle hunter ("Berkutchi"), 2014.

of origin for my breed and seeing what kind of life the dogs live in their home country.

So far I have been in Kyrgyzstan three times between 2014 and 2016. I have visited many Taigan breeders and owners, who showed me their dogs and told me their opinions about the breed. Unfortunately I have not so far had the opportunity to participate in a real hunt.

A WONDERFUL COUNTRY

Kyrgyzstan, home of the Taigan, is a wonderful country, sometimes called "the Switzerland of Central Asia" because it is so mountainous. Most of Kyrgyzstan is covered by the Tien Shan mountain range and the



Taigan in the mountains close to Naryn, 2015.

Pamirs, with peaks of more than 7,000 meters (23,000 feet) and high, wide mountain valleys.

The climate in those mountains is extreme. Summers are dry and hot and winters very cold with lots of snow. Humans and animals alike must expect a wide range of temperatures during the year. The Taigan, living outside in this kind of climate, mostly never vaccinated or getting veterinary care, has developed into a resistant and healthy breed.

For hunting in the mountains at an altitude of 2,500 to 4,000 meters (8,000 to 13,000 feet), the Taigan needs large lungs, blood that's adapted to the high mountain levels, great endurance and strong bones and feet, because the terrain is often stony and rough. Its prey is mostly deer, ibex (wild goat), Argali sheep, fox, badger and wolf.

"Kyrgyzstan is covered by mountain ranges and the Pamirs, with peaks of more than 23,000 feet ..."



The owner of this Taigan said this dog is one of the best in type that he ever bred, 2016.

Today breeders often select dogs especially for wolf hunting, because after the break-up of the Soviet Union, of which Kyrgyzstan was a part for many years, a lot of people went back to a half-nomadic life with their herds and therefore need protection for their animals. The people are seldom wealthy and their cattle are very important for survival.



The preferred tail type.

The Taigan hunts mostly in packs of two or more and is also trained to hunt

together with a golden eagle. Usually female eagles are used because they are bigger than the males. It is best if dog and eagle grow up together, so they know each other as hunting partners. If there is no real partnership between the two, it could happen that the eagle attacks the Taigan instead of the prey.

AN ANCIENT BREED

The Taigan is an ancient breed. Dogs looking like Sighthounds with a ringed tail are even found in petroglyphs close to the lake of Yssyk Kul in eastern Kyrgyzstan. Today the Taigan has become a kind of Kyrgyz national dog. The people in Kyrgyzstan are proud of their old Sighthound breed and try to preserve it after many were killed and crossbred during the Soviet time. Breed standards and organized Taigan shows have been developed, but there are also hunters and breeders in the country that breed only for hunting purposes. One big event, developed during the past few years to help the breed



Caravanserai Tash Rabat ruins from the 15th Century.



Brindle Taigan puppy in the At Bashy Valley, 2016.

make a comeback, is the Salburun Festival, where Taigans are judged for both type and hunting qualities.

Taigans are, in fact, becoming more popular than they used to be. My travel guide, who owned several Taigans, said that you must not accept a Taigan as present: You either have to pay for it or you have to steal it! Paying only a nominal sum is OK, but stealing Taigans is also a very common occurrence, almost like a sport. My guide had lost three Taigans this way — he even captured one of the “stealing events” on a camera he had in his yard, but sadly he didn’t get the puppy back.

The most common color (about 80% of all Taigans) is black, often also black-and-white. This color is preferred, because it catches the light and warmth of the sun and can help dogs survive during cold winters. For some breeders, a closed ring at the end of the tail, with two or three vertebrae closely knit, is a sign of pure breeding. Some



A female I saw in the mountains close to Naryn.

breeders also do not want much feathering on the tail, while others don’t care about that. In reality I often saw open tails of very different types, both with and without feathering.

One breeder explained to me that the mountain Taigan developed its long coat in the same way as the yak, the cold-resistant cattle of the high mountains of central Asia. In both animals all parts of the body that need to be protected from the cold are covered with long hair. The Tash Rabat valley was fascinating to me not just because of the many yaks there but because of the very well preserved old stone caravanserai. In the days of the Great Silk Road caravans and travelers could rest here with their horses, cattle and merchandise on their way from China to the Mediterranean. The border to China is very close behind the mountains.

PROTECTION FROM THE COLD

In Kyrgyzstan the dogs’ coats are often matted, not brushed. It is said that this matted coat is like a felt blanket for the dogs and protects them from the cold when they lie down on the ground. Usually the dogs live

outside in all kinds of weather; Kyrgyz people whom I showed a picture of my dogs lying on the sofa in the living room not only looked astonished but also laughed out loud.

“They say that this mated coat is like a felt blanket and protects the dogs from the cold ...”

They shook their heads, not able to believe their eyes.

A female Taigan that I saw in the mountains close to Naryn in central Kyrgyzstan was a very good huntress, but I was told by a breeder that her black-and-cream color is



Very typical Taigan female with her owner in the village of Bokonbayevo, 2015.



This red female whom I saw in the village of Bokonbayevo in 2014 was a very good huntress but unfortunately died after a pregnancy because she could not give birth to her puppies. Life in Kyrgyzstan is rough, not easy for humans or animals. Veterinary care is seldom available. When I took this picture the bitch had just been mated to a black Taigan, owned by Almaz Akunov, the founder of the Salburun Festival. He told me the story of this female: One day she was hunting deer together with an eagle. The eagle gave up and returned to its master; but the Taigan kept following the prey, and when the hunters later found her, she had managed to kill it. She stood beside the dead deer and waited for her owner. Such a keen hunter is a good Taigan, whatever color it is, and worthy of being bred. What a tragedy that she lost her life and could not pass this ability to the future!

not beloved by most people. Why not, if the dog is a good hunter? Isn’t good hunting and surviving in the climate the dog lives in the most important thing for a working breed and more important than color? The dog’s owner said that he thinks the color doesn’t matter and he likes his female very much!

Another breeder explained that he actually prefers black-and-tan Taigans because



Much more seldom seen than black is the color cream, shown in this female that I saw in Bokonbayevo, 2014.



Hunter with Taigans, Talas valley, 2015.

the wolf will be irritated by the “second pair of eyes,” the tan points in the dog’s face, and will stare at them and not run just away fast enough to escape. This sounds a bit like a fairy tale, but it’s just one man’s opinion!

You sometimes see a reddish color, but it is not much liked, because a related breed, the Tazi from neighboring Kazakhstan, often has this color. However, some hunters like it because, just like the cream color, reddish brown is perfect camouflage that matches

the mountain grass, so the prey can’t see the approaching dog early enough to flee.

KYRGYZ TAIGAN, KAZAKH TAZI

There was one grizzle stud dog in a Taigan kennel that reminded me a bit of the Kazakh Tazi that hunts on the vast steppes of Kazakhstan. However, this dog was bigger and stronger than the Kazakh Tazi usually is. The Taigan and the Tazi are closely related; I am sure they have been crossbred on both



Dark sand-colored Taigan with black ear fringes, black puppy and tricolor male (lying down), Bishkek 2015. These are dogs I met in the flat Chui Valley close to the capital. The owner told me that in the valley there are more bushes than in the mountain area and dogs get stuck with their long coat in these bushes. Therefore he always cuts the coat short. In the mountains, where more coat is needed because of the colder winters, that is not a problem, because bushy vegetation is rare. In this man’s view the valley dogs shouldn’t have as much coat as the dogs in the mountains.



Red Taigan, winner of the races at the World Nomad Games, 2016.



Particolor Taigan, Chui Valley, 2015.



Kazakh Tazi with owner from Kazakhstan at the World Nomad Games, 2016.



Left, Grey Taigan at the 2016 World Nomad Games, which include the Salburun festival and was held in the "Village of the Thousand Yurts" in the Yssyk Kul area. (The World Nomad Games are a sort of Asian version of the Olympics.) "Maybe he carries some Tazi blood," I was told by somebody standing beside me. He looks like a valley-type Taigan and was a fast runner (he took 2nd place in the race), but was much bigger and stronger boned than the Tazis that also participated in the race. 'Right, grizzle Taigan, valley type, Chui Valley, 2015.



sides of the borders, as most hunters breed more for hunting ability than for type. Did they maybe even develop from each other? I got the impression that there is no clear separation between these two breeds ... that they merge one into the other.

Some breeders told me that in the flat areas of Kyrgyzstan, the Chui and Talas valleys, there exists a "valley type" of the Taigan. It has less coat, sometimes a slightly higher ear-set and less angulation than the mountain-type Taigan, and shows a relationship to the Tazi without being either a Tazi or a recent mix. Others say that only the mountain type is the original Taigan. In Russia, where the Taigan is a recognized breed (for national, not FCI awards), the valley type is mentioned and described as part of the Taigan breed. This story reminds me of the discussion about the "mountain type" versus the "desert type" Afghan Hounds when that breed first appeared in the West.

I saw five particolored Taigans during my journeys, three puppies and two adults. The owners explained that this is an old color but not well liked in the breed. Some people are concerned that it could be a sign of crossbreeding with Borzoi during the time that Kyrgyzstan was a part of the Soviet Union. One owner liked the color very much, because he thinks that the prey, especially the wolf and the fox, do not recognize this

animal as a dog and is thus caught more easily!

Sometimes Taigans accompany herders and their cattle, but they are not used like a German Shepherd or Collie-type dog that runs around the flock and "tells" the sheep where to go. The Taigans run with the herds to protect them against wolves. It's debatable whether they are really suitable for

"Some breeders told me that in the flat areas of Kyrgyzstan there exists a 'valley type' of the Taigan."

this, however. I once asked an old man on horseback whom we met with his German Shepherd, and who is a Taigan breeder, about his Taigans being used for cattle. He said that this does not work well: If they are out with his sheep and cows, any time the Taigans spot something to hunt, even if it's only birds, they run away and leave the flock unprotected. He prefers using Shepherd Dogs and big guard dogs for his cattle.

CROSSES WITH GUARD DOGS

Some Taigans are born with dewclaws on their hind legs. The owners told me that this is common. Many breeders remove them in puppies, because they are afraid that the dog's ears could be injured when the dogs are running fast and the hind legs touch the ear-leather. My thought is that this might show the relationship of the Taigan to big guard dogs, in which dewclaws are not uncommon either. In his article "In the country of Jurt and Taigans," another traveler, Wolf-

gang Regar, writes that for hunting wolves, Taigans are from time to time bred to big guard dogs to produce stronger hunters. During my last visit I saw one red Taigan, about 70 cm (27.5") tall, with very big paws and a very heavy head. I asked his owner if my impression was right that his male could maybe carry recent blood from a big guard dog, but he denied it: "No! He is an absolutely purebred Taigan for many generations." When we later showed the picture of the dog to another breeder, however, he instantly said that this dog probably comes from a cross with a big guard dog — who knows how many generations back?

I think this kind of crossbreeding, Sighthounds to big guard dogs, also happened in the old days, because hunters breed what they need for their work. If you need bigger and stronger Sighthounds for attacking the wolf ... well, why not? If you



Outskirts of Kochkor, 2016. The breeder of this dog told me that he loves big Taigans, the bigger the better!



The size variation within the breed can be big, not only between males and females but also within each sex. This picture of a female (right) and a male (left) shows how great the variability in the breed can be. I asked the owner if this is normal within the breed. He said yes, and he wants them to be of different types, because he uses the small and mostly faster Taigans to catch the prey and hold it until the bigger one, who is usually slower, can approach and kill the prey. But the females are not always that small; I saw many big and strong females, too.

breed the offspring back to Sighthounds you will get dogs that are suitable for this work: strong and fast. This kind of crossbreeding in working breeds is very different from what's done in our Western, standardized breeds today. About 100 years or more ago it was common in Europe to breed this way for hunting breeds. It protects a breed from too much inbreeding, increases genetic diversity, which is important for health, and adds de-

sired ability. Today those practices are changing even in Kyrgyzstan, as pure breeding becomes more and more popular and important.

I heard different opinions about the eye color of the Taigan. Today, most people to whom I talked prefer dark eyes, but one breeder explained to me that he learned from his grandfather that the Taigan can have three different eye colors: black, red and yellow ...

WIDE GENETIC DIVERSITY

In closing, let me summarize: After three journeys to Kyrgyzstan it is my impression that the Taigan is a working breed that still has a wide genetic diversity, and that breeders and owners have more than one opinion about what a Taigan should look like. A similar variability can be found in temperament. There are Taigans with a very social behavior that fit well into our modern life and others that are suspicious about changes in their surroundings, reserved with strangers and very serious, keen and sharp hunters. The breed needs to be very well socialized and to maintain a close relationship with their owner.

Some Taigans today are scattered



Two beautiful and strong Taigan females, area of Bishkek, 2015.

around the world, and in some countries the breed is already accepted by the national kennel clubs, as mentioned earlier. While the FCI so far has not officially recognized the Taigan as a breed, at least 13 FCI member countries accept them for national, as opposed to international, awards. The Taigan is recognized on a national level in Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Estonia, Latvia,

“Breeders and owners have more than one opinion about what a Taigan should look like.”

Lithuania, Hungary, Poland and Germany, and of course in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. However, Kyrgyzstan has *two* Taigan standards — one of the hunting federation Salburun and one of the all-breed club that organizes shows in Bishkek, the country's capital. The two standards are slightly different, according to what my travel guide told me.

However, bred outside its homeland the Taigan will slowly change in conformation and character and will lose its hunting ability while adapting to the new world he is living in. It needs the high mountains, Tien Shan and Pamir, where it can hunt in the same way it has done it for centuries, to remain what it is: the Kyrgyz Sighthound!

I want to thank my travel guide, Talant Asemov, and all the hunters, owners and breeders who showed me their dogs and shared their knowledge and opinions with me: *dschong rachmat* — many thanks!

I hope you enjoyed travelling with me to Kyrgyzstan, the land of the Taigans, even though I could only show you a small part of what I have seen.

You are welcome to contact me by email if you want further information: saika.ruebesam@freenet.de



Shepherds with a Taigan and a big guard dog in the At-Bashi valley, 2016.



FACTS ABOUT KYRGYZSTAN

Geography: Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked and mountainous country in Central Asia, bordered by Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west/southwest, Tajikistan to the southwest and China to the east.

History: Kyrgyzstan's recorded history spans over 2,000 years, encompassing a variety of cultures and empires. Although isolated by its highly mountainous terrain, which has helped preserve its ancient culture, Kyrgyzstan has been at the crossroads of several great

civilizations as part of the Silk Road and other commercial and cultural routes.

Politics: Kyrgyzstan has periodically come under foreign domination and attained sovereignty as a nation-state only after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 2005 the so-called "Tulip Revolution" forced the

Map showing location of Kyrgyzstan (by arrow).

president to resign. Political stability has remained elusive, however.

Population: Approx. 6 million people.

Size: Almost 200,000 square kilometers (between Texas and California).

Capital: Bishkek (nearly 1 million inhabitants).

Kennel organization: The Kyrgyz Kennel Club, founded in 1989, became a "contract partner" with the Fédération Cynologique Internationale in 2009 but is not a full member.



Taigan male with light eye color. The look of the eagle! Bishkek, 2014.



Taigan female, Naryn 2015. This dog shows the turned-out elbows that are frequently seen in the breed. Many hunters consider this characteristic a must for a good Taigan. They say the dog can run faster, stop faster and has more power to stand and hold the prey with this front. Today, with the influence of the West, this opinion is beginning to change and some breeders prefer parallel front legs. The broad front is also much desired in this breed.



Jutta Rübesam in Bokonbayevo, 2015.



Taigan in the Ak Bashy valley.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jutta Rübesam has lived with eastern Sighthounds since she was a student of veterinary medicine about 40 years ago. She owned a Weimaraner, Afghan Hounds of the desert type, the so-called Kalagh Tazi and Salukis. Today she lives in central Germany with a 14-year-old Saluki and her Taigan female "Taalai." In 2014 her dreams to visit a country of origin of her breed became true when she travelled to Kyrgyzstan, homeland of the Taigan. Two more journeys to Kyrgyzstan followed in 2015 and 2016.

