

## **BLUE DEGUS** **CUTE BUT DEBATABLE**

Article by Julia Riedel

In Chile, degus appear in the natural agouti colour most of us know already.

However, in the past ten years during which degus were kept as pets all over the world, a new colour mutation has appeared. They are not agouti degus anymore, but have almost no brown colour in their fur coat. This leads to a silver-grey-kind of fur, which is generally referred to as a blue fur colour. Blue degus are still pretty rare. The first appearance of blue degus in Germany dates back to the late 1990s. It is still unknown whether the colour variation results from a mutation or if the blue colour appears in their natural habitat as well.

Basically, blue degus don't differ from agouti degus at all. There seem to be two varieties of the blue degus as well, for some are smaller than full-grown agouti degus and rather skinny, whereas others grow just as big as normal-sized agouti degus and are built alike, too. This is just mere speculation, though, for thorough studies on blue degus are yet to be made.

Some people say that blue degus are more dominant than agouti ones. Others cannot confirm this statement at all, though. In fact, in my own group the blue degus are the last in the hierarchy. They seem fairly easy to tame, this may be speculation as well for most blue degus come from private breeding and have not had to go through as much as many of the agouti degus in animal shelters have. It has become rather popular to breed with blue degus, for they are still so rare and people are willing to pay fair amounts of money for them. Basically, one should think breeding them isn't difficult, take a blue male and a blue female and there you go. However, there are probably only few families of blue degus; therefore, the degus are mostly related to each other. Several diseases, miscarriages and other health problems may occur due to frequent inbreeding.

If you have a blue and an agouti coloured degu, you'll most likely have agouti coloured babies. The blue fur colour is recessive, meaning you need two recessive genes for it to appear on the degu. The agouti colour is the dominant one; it'll block the blue colour. This means that there are also some agouti degus who carry the blue gene, at least if you apply Mendel's genetics. However, research studies about degu genetics and the fur colour in particular are yet to be made.

Many people who have bred blue degus didn't know about inbreeding difficulties, which resulted in blue degus being of weaker health than agouti ones. This caused the wide-spread opinion that blue degus are more likely to get ill, harder to get better, and won't grow as old as their agouti brothers. In the last years, however, the belief has spread that blue degus can be just as healthy as agouti degus, whereas agouti degus who are a result of serious inbreeding can be of equally weak health as the black sheep among the blue ones.

In general, blue degus are just as cute and cuddly as agouti degus. This applies the other way round as well, of course. They might add a bit of extra colour to their owner's degu herd, but it remains to be argued whether this is really important. Blue degus are only the first colour change known among degus, and the history of other pets (rats in particular) shows what can become of the human craze to create ever more new colours and outer appearances. It really should be our job as responsible degu lovers, to inform, but to put a halt to target-oriented, colour-based breeding which can do more harm than it does any good.