

# Not so simple Sumi

Sumi isn't what it used to be. Drawing on his experience in the 'field', Mike Snaden discusses why this is both a good and a bad thing for koi keepers

## About the author:



**Mike Snaden** is the proprietor of Yume Koi in Bristol, specialising solely in very high end koi. He has supplied three out of the last four BKKS Grand Champions. Mike's specialised field is water and growing koi to their maximum potential, as a Japanese breeder would. This approach has given him considerable insight into koi.

**S**umi, or the black colour markings on a koi, is regarded by many as simply an extra dimension of colour which turns our Kohakus into either Sanke, or Showa. This article looks at the importance of Sumi quality, and how it develops.

Sumi is an aspect of koi that carries a

great deal of importance in Japan. This importance is directed not only towards its quality, but also its style and where it falls on the koi.

Over the years Sumi has changed somewhat – in some ways this is for the better, but it has its drawbacks, which we will discuss later.

For Showa to be highly valued it is important to think about Sumi placement. Sumi is only appreciated where it falls on white ground, and as you see with this one, the Sumi on the white ground is of very high quality. Once the Sumi has fully developed, a Showa should still have areas of clean white ground that can be appreciated, and preferably all three colours on the face, much like this example



Over the years Sumi has changed somewhat – in some ways this is for the better, but it has its drawbacks

This customer's Shiro Utsuri was nissai, and 48cm. You can see there wasn't a great deal of Sumi on the surface in this picture, but the few parts of Sumi that were showing were of very high quality



Any koi with an element of Sumi (Sanke, Showa, Shiro Utsuri) offers a great deal of excitement to the koi hobbyist. This is because in many cases the progress and change within these koi can occur at an astonishing rate, or become something very different to what you envisaged. Sometimes you can get lucky with such koi, but it is often the case that you buy a koi you have high hopes for, only to find that it didn't measure up to your expectation. Understanding Sumi types and its development can drastically reduce the risk of buying koi that won't ever achieve your dream.

### where sumi develops

One of the most important things to consider when it comes to Sumi is how it develops, or more to the point, where it develops first. This will also help you establish Sumi quality, so we will cover this point first. In Sanke, Showa, and Shiro Utsuri, Sumi will develop at the rear end of the koi and closer to the lateral line first. It will then work its way up from the lateral line and forwards, finishing on the shoulder area last. In the case of Showa and Shiro Utsuri, Sumi will develop on the head as if it were a completely separate entity – this will show development much sooner than the shoulder area, yet often continue to progress even after the shoulder area has finished up.

If you think about Sumi developing in this manner, it can make a big difference not only in choosing koi with good Sumi distribution, but it will also help you choose a koi that will end up with a good front to rear balance of Sumi when it grows up. This is particularly useful to bear in mind when buying Shiro Utsuri or Showa, as a koi that has a heavy bias of Sumi towards the rear will often

This is the same koi, having resided at our place for the past season, and now measures 65cm as sansai. Despite running warm summer temperatures, and soft water, you can see that the Sumi has developed greatly. When the Sumi at the rear end starts to finish, the shoulder area will be far from finished. Another two or three years should see the front to rear balance becoming very good. The head will also develop greatly over the same period



balance up further forwards as a big koi. Whereas, a young koi that is front-heavy on Sumi, will almost always end up being very front-heavy as a big koi.

### the importance of sumi quality

It is important to assess Sumi quality. In Sanke this isn't too much of a problem, but when it comes to Showa and Shiro Utsuri, you need to get as accurate an idea of Sumi quality as you can, as even if the koi develops a lot of Sumi, it doesn't mean that the quality of it will be any good. When it comes to Sumi, the criteria are exactly the same for Showa, as they are for Shiro Utsuri. So, in this instance, we will focus on Showa Sumi as an example. As I mentioned earlier, Sumi will start at the rear of the koi, and deep towards the lateral line, and progress up, and forwards from this point. So, what we need ▶

#### top tip

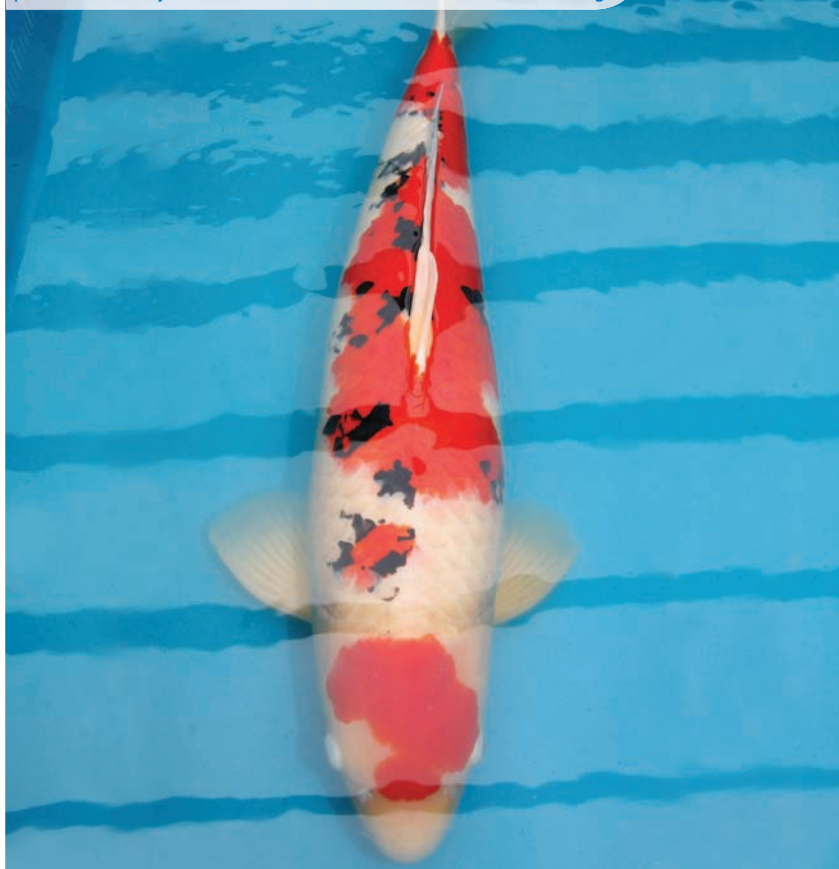
It is of paramount importance to ignore how the Sumi looks if it falls on top of red pattern, as it will always look better here.

When culling Sanke fry at say one month old, the vast majority of the 'keepers' will be heavily covered in Sumi, pretty much irrespective of bloodline

This Sanke as tosaï had very little Sumi showing, but knowing that the Sumi would be of the modern Matsunosuke style, the plunge was taken



The same Sanke but at four years old and 75cm. As you can see, plenty of Sumi has developed in a very short space of time despite not showing underlying Sumi. The gamble so far has paid off with this koi, but it is still possible that in a year or two, the Sumi could become a little overbearing



Modern day Sanke Sumi has a habit of developing extremely quickly, primarily because of the Matsunosuke influence

to look for, is evidence of good quality dark and glossy Sumi.

Look for some evidence of good glossy Sumi around the lateral line area of the tail tube (assuming there isn't good Sumi elsewhere on the koi, on white ground). It may help to bend the koi a little, as you should see the root of the Sumi widening as the scales are stretched farther apart. If you can see good Sumi that is like lacquered coal, then there is hope that you can expect other underlying areas of Sumi to come up and be of similar quality as the koi grows up. If the Sumi is grey in its appearance, or is present only in the Fukurin, then there is a high likelihood that the Sumi will never come up, or will be of low quality. With Showa, you will find any Sumi that lies on the red pattern will always look blacker than the Sumi that is on white ground. The red pattern acts like an 'undercoat' that will always make the Sumi look better than it really is, so Sumi on these areas must be completely ignored.

An interesting note with Showa is that you are wiser to choose ones where underlying developing Sumi looks similar on the red pattern, as it does on the white ground, as this kind of Sumi will usually become much better. If, however, a Showa has a lot of Sumi that looks finished where it falls on top of the

pattern, yet looks like Kage Sumi on all the white areas, then this kind of koi is best well avoided, as it is most likely that the Sumi on the white ground will never come up!

## sumi and water quality

With Shiro Utsuri and Showa there is a popular belief that water hardness affects Sumi development and that soft water will make it go down, and hard water will make it develop. Whilst this is partly true, it is more the case that low quality Sumi is affected in this manner, whereby it is influenced by both water hardness, and water temperature. But, when it comes to high quality Sumi, you will find that it will generally develop irrespective of these factors.

## the bowl test

Another way to help you choose Shiro Utsuri or Showa is to place them into a bowl and watch them for several minutes.

If you do this with a number of prospective purchases, you will find that some stay looking good for the duration, but others will have Sumi that will literally turn grey whilst the koi is in the bowl. The latter should be completely dismissed, and returned to the pond.

The same koi as Yonsai at 71cm. The interesting thing here is the koi is of Kichinai and Matsunosuke bloodlines, and yet the Sumi has appeared in the more modern manner of appearing where it wasn't expected. But, the Kichinai influence is largely responsible for the refinement within this koi's Sumi style



This Sanke is of Kichinai bloodline. As tosai this koi had a lot more Sumi, but during the period of growth between nissai and sansai, the Sumi went down. With other lines, this transition would have happened earlier in life



When it comes to Sanke Sumi things are easier in terms of getting lucky with quality, but bloodlines really tend to confuse the issue when it comes to choosing and predicting Sumi development. So, although the Sumi's apparent quality is a safer issue, the development of it is actually more of a gamble that requires a good deal of 'bloodline' understanding in order to get better 'odds'. This is where Sumi starts to get confusing...

### the changing face of sumi

Even as recently as 10 years or so ago, Sumi was a relatively simple matter as far as Sanke is concerned. It was pretty much a case of looking for Sumi quality that was apparent on the surface, and looking a little more carefully for signs of underlying Sumi that was yet to surface. Ten years ago, Sadazo was probably the most popular lineage of Sanke around, and in some ways, it was a good job too! You see, Sadazo was very 'safe' and predictable. Sure, Matsunosuke was also around, but not generally so popular in the Western World. Kichinai was also popular, and had a reputation for being very orderly and neat. Nowadays however, it is all so much more complicated.

Modern day Sumi is so much more exciting than days of old, but also requires a lot more

insight. This is predominantly because of the introduction of Magoi blood, which was initially done by Toshio Sakai (Matsunosuke), and Koi No Youhei. Since then, the majority of Japan's breeders have introduced the Matsunosuke line into their own Sanke breedings in order to increase the size of the koi produced. Most breeders however, tend to mix this line with other lineages in order to produce koi with heavier bodies, but also to try to keep the Sumi a little more orderly.

In Japan nowadays, many breeders' Sumi is criticised for being too unrefined, and unpredictable. Although modern day Sumi can be very exciting to watch, it has a nasty habit of appearing where you least expect it to. This 'new' Sumi that many breeders are producing tends to have nice quality and Kiwa, but also tends to develop on the surface, rather than from underlying Sumi. As such, it is possible to buy Sanke of this type, that have very little Sumi, and yet as big koi they can become overpowering and messy in this department. If you pay attention to the breeder's bloodlines, you can identify this kind of Sumi and use it to your advantage. What I mean by this, is that if a breeder tells you that his Sanke is of Matsunosuke bloodline, or from Sadazo line for example, this really isn't enough information to go by. For example, if a

How do you know where you are going, if you don't know where you came from?

This tosaï Sanke appears to have conventional Sumi, which is Showa Sashi (underlying front edge), as well as underlying Sumi. As such, koi like these tend to be very safe and predictable



own opinion, which may not reflect those of others.

When culling Sanke fry at say one month old, the vast majority of the 'keepers' will be heavily covered in Sumi, pretty much irrespective of bloodline. This Sumi covering is so heavy the Kohaku pattern you are looking for in the selection process can be hard to see beneath the Sumi. But, from this point on, the Sumi during the next few months of the Sanke's life, will slowly recede. But, it is my opinion, that differing bloodlines produce different speeds at which the Sumi recedes.

So comparing for example, tosaï from Matsunosuke, Sadazo, and Kichinai... In autumn, many Matsunosuke line tosaï will have very little Sumi, because it receded very quickly during the first summer. Sadazo Sumi on the other hand, has receded but retained some underlying Sumi as tosaï in the autumn. The Kichinai koi however, still look more like all the other koi did a few months earlier as fry during the selection, because the Sumi's receding process has taken place much more slowly.

You are probably now asking yourself, "What is the relevance of all this?" The answer is simple, and one that a history student gave to me... "How do you know where you are going, if you don't know where you came from?" What I mean by this is that by understanding how the tosaï may have looked as fry, and then seeing the koi as tosaï, you will then have a rough idea what the development traits of the Sumi bloodline are likely to be. So, if the koi looks to have Sadazo line Sumi, you can expect it to surface, and to creep a little when the koi gets older.

In the case of Matsunosuke type Sumi, you will find some koi with conventional type Sumi (because of the other parent being 'non-Matsunosuke'), and some will have very small flecks of surface Sumi, almost like grey scratches in the edges of the scales. The latter Sumi is Sumi that has receded very quickly as fry, and will very likely develop a lot as nissai, and becoming very heavy with Sumi as sansai. The cautionary note here is that although this kind of Sumi is great fun to watch, if you choose one with too many areas of this tiny scratchy Sumi, then the koi will most likely become very heavy and messy when big.

Kichinai on the other hand is different, as with tosaï, the koi will appear to have quite a lot of Sumi. But, in the case of the mud pond, this Sumi will continue to recede as the koi grows from tosaï through to nissai. Some koi will have Sumi return as nissai when harvested, but most don't really develop greatly until sansai and older. This Sumi, although slow in developing, often turns out nice, and very refined.

I sincerely hope that this article has been of some use to you, rather than confusing any issues over Sumi. 鯉

breeder's 'Matsunosuke' line Sanke that he is offering you is bred from a Matsunosuke female, crossed with Sadazo males, you will get offspring that will exhibit traits from each parent. So, some offspring will inherit the modern Matsunosuke Sumi from the mother, and some will have Sadazo style Sumi inherited from the male side. The same can also be said of Beni, and body types. So, don't settle for a breeder saying that his koi come from 'Bloodline X', or 'Bloodline Y', try to find out the male and female parent bloodlines, as this will give you a little more insight.

## the development of sumi

Modern day Sanke Sumi has a habit of developing extremely quickly, primarily because of the Matsunosuke influence, but other Sumi types develop in different ways. Sadazo develops slow and steady from underlying areas, and Kichinai Sumi can look quite prominent in tosaï (one year old koi), and yet the same koi as nissai (two years old) can lose most of their Sumi, only for it to re-appear as sansai (three years old) onwards, albeit in different places to when the koi was tosaï. Other Sumi lines can appear to look promising, but never surface or develop. For this reason, it is important to understand how the koi develop as fry.

## fry selection and sumi

Disclaimer time! The following is from my own observations of having been in Japan for a few summers learning breeding and culling, and is purely my

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