

A Guide to the Magnificent Bengal Cat

By C. Esmond Gay – Sarez Bengals – 2004

Sarah and I love all cats, but the Bengal has captivated us more than any other pedigree feline. We shouldn't have favourites, but we're mesmerised by this breed; they're a study in contrasts - they emulate the wild look of the Leopard Cat, yet are as gentle and as loving as a puppy – making them both beautiful and endearing companions. Having kept and bred all the generations and colours of the Bengal, this article contains much of the knowledge we've gained over the years, and may help others to enjoy the pleasures of this awe inspiring breed!

History of the Bengal Cat

Their sleek grace and astonishing spotted beauty could have stalked straight from a steamy jungle. But Bengals, the mixed offspring of the domestic cat and the *Asian Leopard Cat*, are perfectly at home prowling amongst the petunias. Even their pedigree name is as exotic as they are, being derived from the taxonomic name of their wild forebear, *Prionailurus*



bengalensis.

The true history of the Bengal is unclear because for centuries the Leopard Cat came into contact with, and would sometimes mate a domestic cat. This went unnoticed by man until 1889 when “Harrison Weir” wrote to a magazine:

“There is a rich-coloured tabby

hybrid to be seen at the Zoological Society Gardens in Regents Park, between the wild cat of Bengal and a tabby she-cat. It is handsome, but very wild. These hybrids, I am told, will breed again with tame variety, or with others.”

No one is certain if that was “the first Bengal” as facts surrounding the authenticity of it are vague. They were mentioned again in 1927, when another gentleman wrote to a cat magazine stating that: “*Malay tribes have Leopard Cats and domestic cats ‘living together’*”, and enquired whether or not they “*can survive and breed with one another*”.

The first written Leopard Cat and domestic cross mating was in 1934 in a *Belgian Science journal*, but it wasn't detailed. Then in 1946 *Jean Mill* (Sugden at the time) wrote a paper on the subject for her genetics class at UC Davis. She took a respite from these studies, and ventured back to it again in the 1960s, and this time produced Filial 1s (F1s), *the hybrid progeny of the Leopard Cat* – but, she did not immediately breed past this stage.

Jean Mill's drive to undertake such work stemmed from her research into what was happening to the Leopard Cat in the wild; poachers were shooting millions for their pelts and taking the young for the pet trade. She wanted to stop this persecution; she wanted to tarnish the fur trade and bring public awareness to the senseless slaughter of the Leopard Cat - and she wanted to provide an alternative to keeping them as pets.

At the same time, several European zoos and other research centers were studying F1s, as there was a Feline Leukemia outbreak and it was widely known that many wild cats are immune to this. By the 1970s "*Loyola University*" was at the forefront of this research and endeavored to find out if the wild cat's immunity could be replicated into domestic felines.

In the early days, Jean Mill worked with one of these people *Dr. Centerwall in Riverside*, who had produced F1s using domestics at *Loma Linda University* for his Feline Leukemia project. He first took blood to analyze and then gave her 4 hybrids, and she later received another 5 F1s from others, but they all stemmed from the same Centerwall project.



These studies continued and by the late 1970s a few cat clubs formed, all based around hybrids, and some cats were even shown around this time. Articles were also published on the breeding of both Bengals and *Safaris (a Geoffroy's Cat hybrid)* and members of these clubs bred down to F2 and F3 Bengals - and then in 1977 they registered the progeny with the "*American Cat Fanciers Association*."

Jean Mill knew that the Asian Leopard Cat is a genetically superior animal compared to the domestic cat and she didn't want to weaken this attribute to much by using too many highly bred pedigree cats. And so, in 1982 she went to India where a Zoo Curator gave her a *feral Indian Mau* - and this is how the famous rosetted domestic called "*Millwood Tory of Delhi*" came to be found in virtually all our Bengal pedigrees.

During this foundation period, various other domestic breeds were used as outcrosses, but as there were so few hybridizing Leopard Cats, inbreeding was common and the gene pool was tiny. So other cats were traced and used, including the fabled "*Bristol Cat*", which is a hybrid of the wild "*Margay*" - they are now thought to be extinct due to fertility problems.

Others such as *Drs. Greg and Elizabeth Kent* were also early Bengal pioneers, who developed their own lines using Leopard Cats and *Egyptian Maus*. This was another very successful line, and many modern Bengals will find it in their pedigrees.

Word spread quickly amongst the general public; people were mesmerized at a pedigree cat with hints of the wild Leopard in it, and that could live in one's living room. The number of breeders grew and "*The International Cat Association*" created the "*Bengal Breed Section*", and adopted the first written *breed standard* in 1986.

The breed came to the Great Britain in the late 1980s, and my fiancée Sarah and I, were amongst the first to own and breed from them in the early 1990s.

Various Generations of the Bengal Cat

The use of Leopard Cats is important to the breed as their undiluted wild blood strengthens and enlarges the Bengal's gene pool – important in any pedigree animal. But F1s are rare and complex to breed because the Asian Leopard Cat is wary, highly strung and is difficult to handle. To stand a chance of hybridizing, they *must* be hand reared around domestic cats and *never* be kept near other wild cats - and even then, only a fractional 1 in 20, will mate with a domestic cat, as their inherent inclination is to do otherwise. Rearing a Leopard Cat to hybridize is the hardest part of the process and *very few* individuals in the world have overcome the many hurdles and accomplished the great feat of breeding F1s.

To date, only Sarah and I have been successful in hybridizing in the UK, and we've bred F1s not from just 1 of our 15 Leopard Cats, but from 2 – “Sarez Little L” and “Sarez Apollo”. But, the actual birth of 50% wild blood F1s is quite straightforward as normally their Mothers are docile late generation F4s and on (*known as “Stud Book Traditions” or “SBTs”*). However, we wanted to breed early generations who would *pass on far stronger wild looks to SBTs*, and so as well as breeding regular F1s (*14+ so far*), we also mate some back to the Leopard Cat – more arduous, but the resulting hybrids have 75% wild blood.



This programme culminated in 2003, when we bred an F1 called “*Sarez Zeus*”, who has an astonishing **90% wild blood**. Due to his extreme rarity, his ultra wild look and his overtly endearing personality, he took the title of “*The World’s Most Expensive Cat*”, and bewitched both the press and public alike.

Filial 2 (F2) kittens are *two generations removed from the Leopard Cat*, and they are just

as challenging to breed as F1 babies, *but for very different reasons*; the Mothers of the 2nd generation kittens *cannot* be the more manageable SBTs as the first 3 generations of males are normally *infertile*, leaving only the early generation females to take the breed forward. *And so, even though the mating process is easier, the heightened wild instincts of the F1 Mothers, inevitably means the births of F2s can be very difficult and fraught with dangers.*

Whilst F1s are the most majestic variety of the breed, F2s follow closely behind. In varying degrees, both mimic the Asian Leopard Cat and have beautiful wild faces, superb markings and have the *presence* of a *true* wild cat. If handled a lot, they can be as friendly as SBTs, but again in varying degrees, F1s and F2s are more puppy-like and more intense.

Filial 3s (F3s) retain some wild features, but one can see them diminishing as their blood is diluted. SBTs lose some of the intriguing wild look, and the contrast between their background colour and spots is less defined than in early generations. The temperament of SBTs is similar to a domestic cat, but they still *strongly* retain an *air of nature* about them.

F1s and F2s are ideal pets for *true cat fanatics* who want a *friendly Leopard*, whilst F3s and SBTs are perfect if one simply wants an exotic, spotted cat that’s *a little different*. I love *all* the generations of the Bengal, but I tend to sound biased for the F1s and F2s within my articles, and that’s because my passion has always been for the wilder type cats.

See my article “The Leopard Mimics - F1 & F2 Bengals” for more information on them.

Most Popular Colours of the Bengal Cat

Brown Leopard Spotted Bengals mimic the coat pattern of the Leopard Cat more than any other kind. There is a wide variance of colour intensity in this class, with back ground colours ranging from a silvery pearlescent grey to a sandy buff or a bright gold. Good quality specimens have large rosettes and dark backward arrow shaped spots resembling “thumbprints”, covering their bodies. Their coats should have a lacquered sheen and their chests and bellies should be light coloured.



Brown Marbles derive their name from the “*Marbled Cat*”, and this pattern produces very majestic looking Bengals – their entire bodies should be covered with rosettes, horizontally flowing patterns and streaks of gold, black and pearlescent. They too, should have a glossy sheen and their chests and bellies should be light. This colour can be an “acquired taste” – yet to me, their beauty is enchanting, and they’re one of my favourites. But some feel they look like tabby cats. *They don’t.*

Snow Leopards are a white variety of the Brown Leopard and they should have pearlescent white backgrounds, including their chests and bellies, and their whole bodies should be embellished with dark backward arrow shaped spots and rosettes. And although Snow Leopards tend to be born pure white, they develop their dark markings over time - a process that can continue until they are about 18 months old. There are 3 colours of the Snow Bengal; *Seal Lynx Point, Seal Sepia and Seal Mink.*



Snow Marbles are a white variety of Brown Marbles and they should have pearlescent backgrounds, including their undersides, covered with dark rosettes and swirling patterns. They were the rarest and most sought after breeding cat as they are the only variety that carries all of the main colours of the Bengal. They come in the same 3 colours listed in Snow Leopards.

*Other Bengal colours include **Blue, Silver, Melanistic, Chocolate and Cinnamon.***

Physical Characteristics of the Bengal Cat

F1 Bengals can be smaller than their late generation counterparts, due to their closeness to the tiny Leopard Cat – they are more lean and lithe in appearance. But F2s can *sometimes* be far larger than the other generations, and this is due to the complex genetics of hybridization. SBTs are also substantial animals and have one of the largest of the pedigree feline body types. All generations should have short tails, muscular chests, be sturdy boned and long in the torso. This body frame makes them flexible and provides a lot of leverage when running, rather like a Leopard – both designed for speed, acceleration and power!

The ears of all Bengals should be small with a wide base and rounded tips and pronounced ocelli – these are the white spots that guide the cubs as they follow their Mother in the wild. All Bengals should have high cheekbones and their muzzles should be full and broad, their noses large and wide and their puffed nose leathers should be large. They should also have deep chins, and when their heads are seen in profile, there should be a slight break between the forehead and the nose. And the classic “M” tabby pattern on their foreheads should be apparent. *Most of these are features of the Asian Leopard Cat, and hence have been replicated in varying degrees, into the different Bengal generations.*

All **good quality** Bengals should have soft mink-like *pelts* rather than fur, just as their wild forefathers do. They also inherit the *glitter gene* from one of Jean Mills’s early domestic foundation cats and this makes their coat’s sparkle as if they’ve been sprinkled with gold dust. Such pelts are glorious to stroke, and feel as though one is caressing silk! And quality cats should have a superb contrast between their markings and background colour, although sometimes less so in the Snow varieties.



In contrast, **poor quality** Bengals can have white *ticking* on their hairs, which is believed to originate from Abyssinian outcrosses, and this makes their coat’s feel rough to the touch and blurs the definition of their markings. *The visual and tactile differences between these 2 coat types are astonishing, but naturally there are also other variances of each as well.*

All generations have also inherited the wild cats camouflage coat, more commonly known as the *fuzzies*. These are long guard hairs that develop at about 3 weeks of age and in their natural habitats, they help young cubs to blend into the undergrowth, thus protecting them from predators. As they disguise the markings of Bengals too, one has to pick up and gently twist the kitten - this lifts the guard hairs up, and then from behind, one can see the background colour, the spots and how well defined they are. This gives a clear indication of what the kitten will look like at about 8 months old, when they grow out of this stage.

*When standing or walking, Bengals of any generation angle their bodies in a different way to other domestic cats, making them appear far more “regal”. And even their gait differs, in that it’s more like a **trot** or **gallop** - this is because they have slightly shorter front legs and a raised hump, giving them more of a **stealthy, stalking Leopard poise.***

Personality Characteristics of the Bengal Cat

Forever refusing to conform to normal domestic cat rules, Bengals adore water and readily swim in ponds, pools or even in baths, just as the Leopard Cat does in rivers! Some of ours can even turn taps on! Bengals play in a different way to other cats; they *hunt* their toys or even their siblings, rather than merely playing with them, and they can be very protective over what they “catch”! Even their highly expressive voices are different to the meow of a domestic; it’s more the *cry* of a wild cat, but this is more noticeable in earlier generations.

All Bengal generations have also inherited astounding intelligence from the little wild cats that need to rely on their brains in order to survive in their hostile natural habitat. This allows them to interact with humans on a higher level compared to other domestics, and it makes them more social, more loving, quicker witted and easier to train than other breeds.

As such, if reared correctly, all generations will bond closely to their owners and *none* are vicious to other pets or to children, as our daughter *Kitten Gay* will attest. This, and their friendly natures and quirky characteristics, makes them enchanting and loyal companions.

And due to their inherent cleverness, if taught from kitten-hood, Bengals love to go out for walks on a harness and lead and readily travel in a car with no cat carrier; just give them a nice comfortable lap to sit on, or perhaps even the parcel shelf - anywhere they can get a good view out of the window so that they can see what is happening in the outside world!



Furthermore, young Bengals can be trained to fetch a toy that’s been thrown, and bring it back to their owners – some of ours then pat our faces with their paws until Sarah or I throw it again - a game that can go on for hours, and I confirm that the human is likely to tire far quicker than the Bengal!

And as they re-enact scenes reminiscent of the jungle, the athletic prowess of this breed becomes evident, as they leap from surface to surface with such agility that they rarely knock anything over... and so fleet footed that they appear to barely touch the ground!

They’re very entertaining too; watching our 60+ Bengals at play is much more fun than a TV – many furry bodies tearing from room to room like little spotted thunderbolts, unashamedly using either Sarah or I as platforms to launch themselves from, and then pounce upon their unsuspecting Mother, siblings or anything else that dares move! And then later, they slump their exhausted little bodies onto our laps, our shoulders or chests... *and still purring quietly, finally they sleep!*

*It is the above **physical** and **personality** traits that makes this breed so captivating... from their features to their markings, from their stance to their prowl, from their intelligence to the way they interact with humans... one always see so much of their wild ancestors in the Bengal – more prominent in the filial generations, but still evident in the later ones.*

Breeding from the Bengal Cat

The Bengal is a naturally robust and healthy cat due to the strong genes passed down by their recent wild ancestors. The few problems that exist within the breed have been brought in by out crossing to other domestic pedigrees such as Burmese and Abyssinian. They have introduced *flat chests, patella luxation and cleft palates* as well as more superficial faults such as *ticking*. However, such bad traits are being bred out by selective breeding and by using only cats with known healthy backgrounds – and with no close inbreeding! Breeders must also strive to improve the quality of each generation of kittens that they produce, and this can only be done by using top quality cats with good characters.

When buying our breeding cats in the early 1990s, Sarah and I chose a broad variety of pedigrees for these very reasons. The versatility that such a diverse collection provides, results in healthier kittens with fewer defects - and babies who predominantly carry all of the colours of the Bengal cat. *Due to our varied pedigrees and top lines, we have bred the rarest of the rare, not only generation-wise, but also in colour variety, including the UK's first F2 Brown Marbles, Snow Marbles and Snow Leopards!*

Sarah and I also disagree with rearing any kittens in outside pens - we feel that it is unnecessary, and even though some of our queens and all of our studs live in huge, luxurious outside enclosures on our estate, all of our Bengal kittens live within our family home and are brought up as if they were our children. When a queen is pregnant she is taken to one of our nurseries which are normal bedrooms with typical furniture, but that have all the luxuries that growing kittens thrive on. And when they are 7 weeks old the kittens come downstairs and mix with the rest of our feline family.

Such socialisation is important otherwise the babies will grow up to be nervous and unloving. When we first started breeding, Bengals were so rare that we had to purchase queens who had not been bred in a home environment, and to this day, these same cats remain nervous, although with a lot of love, they have improved. And as far as *pets* are concerned, a cat's personality is more important than perfect looks - a beautiful looking cat with a nasty nature is not going to make as good a pet as a poor quality kitten with a personality that is so loving that he never wants to leave his owners side!! *But in this day and age, one is able to get both in a kitten, if one is willing to seek out good breeders!*

Bringing Awareness to the Breed and Conservation

Sarah and I wanted to give something back and so using the income from our Bengals, we set up a ***“Rescue Sanctuary for Abused Animals”*** and ***“The Sarez Wild Cat Conservation Programme”*** in which we keep breeding pairs of ***African Leopards, Ocelots and Servals.***

It is very rewarding not only to breed and keep some of the most stunning pedigree cats on earth, but also to help the endangered and the less fortunate creatures that inhabit our world.

And the media has brought great publicity to our work; having appeared on 55 TV programmes



*and in 100+ national newspapers and magazines features, our Bengals have become superb ambassadors for the breed. And even though some claim that early generations can be unfriendly, ours are so docile that together with our late generation Bengals, they've been used to advertise **Armani, Versace and Cavalli fashion** in publications such as **Vogue Pelle, Tatler and Country Life**. In turn, this entices **stars and celebrities** to purchase our kittens, ranging from **Lord Jeffrey Archer to Rolf Harris, and many others**.*

The Bengal of today is already a magnificent animal – breeders have improved them exponentially since Sarah and I entered the fancy in the early 1990s. However, the breed is still relatively new compared to most, and so we are all quite far from creating *the perfect specimen* - and that *isn't* an F1 or another high wild blood animal - *it is an SBT that is both friendly, and that embodies all the amazing physical features of the Asian Leopard Cat*.

In certain areas we are close to this goal, for example the coats, the markings and other traits of some Bengals, are truly outstanding. But in others areas such as *exactly* replicating the mesmerising face of the wild cat, we are far from success. And personally, I feel that *only* the continued use of Leopard Cats and filial generations can help us to achieve this.

Bengals are the ultimate investment in art... they are the finest expressions of elegance and refinement - high-class cats that crave human affection, and that happily adapt to their owners way of life. No other pedigree cat has been blessed with the amazing qualities that Bengals possess. Style, beauty and a respect for the astounding creativity of man and nature combined...there is no shortage of reasons for owning one of these cats.

They are truly breathtaking creatures!

C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals

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Dedicated to Baby Gem

Photos from top to bottom; (1) Sarez Leopard Cat, (2) F1 “Baby Gem of Sarez” and F2 kitten, (3) 90% w/b F1 “Sarez Zeus”, (4) F2 Sarez Leopard Spotted, (5) F2 Sarez Brown Marble, (6) F2 Sarez Snow Leopard, (7) F2 “Sarez Eppie” Snow Marble, (8) 2 x 75% w/b Sarez F1s, (9) Kitten Gay and Sarez Leopard Cat, (10) 90% w/b F1 “Sarez Zeus”.

Addition 2008; Due to the extreme stress of our work with the Bengal and wild cat conservation, Sarah and I retired in 2004. We had achieved many of our goals, and so our larger felines went to wildlife parks, and our unique Bengals and Leopard Cats went to Pauline and Frank Turnock of Gayzette Bengals - they now continue with our cats and are expanding the breeding programme that we worked so hard to create.

I am in regular contact with Pauline and Frank and offer them my full support and advice on the Bengal and wild cats. I closely follow their achievements, and behind the scenes, I am there for them and for the beautiful felines I once so proudly owned.

Being so involved with their work lessens my feelings of loss over my beloved cats...

C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals