

The Leopard Mimics - F1 & F2 Bengals

By C. Esmond Gay - Sarez Bengals - 2004

In the 1960s Americans, Jean Mill and Dr Centrewall bred the tiny Asian Leopard Cat with domestics, and created F1 and F2 Bengals; creatures who are the epitome of both species - they harmoniously capture the appearance and characteristics of the wild Leopard, and can also have gentle and enchanting personalities. For many years, Sarah and I have enjoyed the wonders of these, the quintessential generations of the Bengal cat, and this article details much of what we've learnt, and some of the experiences we've enjoyed whilst living with them...

Living with F1 Bengals

Thanks to their mixed heritage, Filial 1 (F1) *hybrids* are the most captivating and intriguing generation of the Bengal cat. Their beauty is legendary, and with elegance that embodies all the grace and poise of a prima ballerina, together with the sophisticated looks of a supermodel, they could easily hold their own on the worlds most prestigious of catwalks!



In the early 1990s when my fiancée Sarah and I, started breeding Bengals, there were only four of these rare first generation crosses in the UK - and realising just how unique and important these cats were to the breed in Britain, we quickly bought three of them.

The inexperienced assume most F1s are

temperamental and unfriendly, *but the contrary is true* – the domestic blood mix combined with lots of handling from kitten-hood, normally ensures they grow up as loving and docile as late generation F4 Bengals and on (*known as “Stud Book Traditions” or “SBTs”*).

F1s are also *very* intelligent due to the heightened natural instincts they inherited from their *Asian Leopard Cat* Father, and this means that they can be more sensitive compared to normal house cats - in the same sort of way that a 4 year old child is. These traits make F1s very much *one family* cats and in most instances, they attach themselves to one person in particular, but happily tolerate the others in that home. The male F1 normally bonds closely to the female human of the house, and the female F1 becomes attached to the male human. This occurs in most wild cat species and we've found such behaviour common in our *Ocelots, Servals and Leopard Cats* – however, it doesn't really happen with domestics.

All our F1s, from our first three “Occie”, “Leopardette” and “Baby Gem”, to the ones we later bred ourselves, are the most wondrous of pets. “Occie” our first male F1, took to Sarah as soon as we bought him and he behaves like an adoring puppy with her! She can do anything with him and only has to call his name and he will come running to her and

follow her around, trying to jump up at her so that he can lick her face and suckle her fingers! The press have always been mesmerized by the relationship between this pretty young lady and a 50% wild cat hybrid, and photos of him affectionately kissing Sarah on the lips, have adorned the pages of many national newspapers.



Likewise, “Baby Gem” and “Leopardette”, the first 2 female

F1s that we purchased, attached themselves to me; I will never forget the first day I brought “Leopardette” home. She was an adult and hadn’t really been handled that much by her original owner, as “Baby Gem” had been his favourite. So I wasn’t expecting much, just a timid, confused animal who would take a long time to settle in - yet when I let her out of the cat carrier, instead of dashing to hide, “Leopardette” ran around and around me, purring loudly... *and then she did the cutest thing – she jumped on my knee, started to knit frenziedly and sucked her own paw at the same time - so endearing.* This went on for hours and by the time I left the room, I was absolutely besotted with her – and vice versa!

And to this day, every time “Leopardette” sees me, she does the same - obviously reliving the comfort she felt when suckling during her kitten-hood. *Such affection from wild cat hybrids to humans really creates deeply loving relationships.* Along with “Ondine”, our tame, female Ocelot, “Leopardette” is my favourite of all our cats, as “Occie” is to Sarah.

“Baby Gem” is the most visually striking of our first three F1s, who again has a wonderful and very individual personality. She too, bonded to me from the outset and will come as soon I call her name. “Baby Gem’s” favourite pastime is to rub around my legs until I’m forced to kneel on the floor to play with her, and she then jumps on my knee holding her tail stiff and vertical in the air as I passionately stroke her. She then goes to the soles of my shoes and knits on them so vigorously, that her claws sometimes get stuck in the rubber!

Even though they probably do not realise that they are all Brothers and Sisters, these three F1s really do stick together, and try to keep away from our other domestic cats. Most likely



it is their wild cat smell that makes early generations bond with one another. And they are also subordinate to our later generation Bengals and can often be bullied by SBT females, even though one would expect the opposite to occur. Some SBT studs also sense their more vulnerable and less feisty characters and will bully

or try to fight the weaker F1 females, even when she's on heat – *but thankfully for the Bengal breed as a whole, other studs are far more gentlemanly and accommodating!*

Well socialised F1s normally adore human companionship, but if they haven't bonded to a person, then they can be reserved and standoffish due to the genes that the Asian Leopard Cat has passed down to them. And if they do not like a person then they will not go to them, and if someone harms them, then they will remember that for life! *One gets no 2nd chances.* However, our F1s will never harm anyone, even if a child were to be rough with them and if this occurs, then instead of scratching the offending human, they simply retreat to a safe hiding place and wait for the roughians to leave. *Our daughter Kitten Gay always plays with any Asian Leopard Cat and F1 kittens that we are rearing; she feeds some and even sleeps with others. This close contact helps to make them far less nervous in later life.*

Breeding F1 Bengal Kittens

F1 babies are immensely difficult to breed due to their Father, the Asian Leopard Cat. These wild cats are very hard to obtain and must be hand reared around domestic cats *only* and *never* with wild cats – something that's made extremely hard due to the strict DWA licensing laws. If one can't obtain or breed such a cat, he simply won't hybridize and if

panicked, a wild Leopard Cat could even kill a Bengal female. And even if a Leopard Cat *is* reared in the correct way, only 1 in 20 will hybridize due to their dislike of the domestic smell. Female Leopard Cats should *not* be used because the resulting F1 offspring have domestic features, due to the genetics of the process – it is *only* the male Leopard Cat who passes down the



wild look that Bengals needs. *And so, with all these factors considered, the odds are greatly stacked against hybridization taking place.*

However once one has reared an Asian Leopard Cat who is happy to mate with domestic cats, the actual birthing process is relatively straightforward as the Mothers of the first generation kittens are normally the easy to handle later generation SBTs - but the babies of F1s must still be handled as much as possible to ensure they are very human orientated and affectionate – if not, they will grow up wild. Due to the hybridization process, the first three generations of male Bengals are almost always *infertile*, and so the F1 boys can be re-homed as pets, leaving the fertile early generation females to take the breed forward.

But F1s are not for everyone – they're quite specialised simply because they're a little different, and so when Sarah and I sell the male F1s we breed, the interview procedure is long and exhaustive; except in extreme circumstances, it is important that any new home is *permanent*, especially after the kitten reaches adulthood, and if we feel that this may not occur, we refuse to sell to them. And our diligence has been effective; despite the high number of F1s we've bred and sold, *none* have ever had to be re-homed a second time.

Breeding F2 Bengal Kittens

Filial 2 (F2) kittens are *two generations removed from the wild*, and breeding them is *as complex* as F1 kittens, *but for different reasons*; the mating is achievable if one is patient and has studs who do not mind the F1 female's wild smell. However, the birth of the resulting F2s is *not* simple because their F1 Mothers have some of the inherent inclinations of a wild animal, and it's during or just after the birth when the F2 kittens could well die.

Thus, once an F1 is pregnant, the owner should normally respect her privacy and keep her on her own in a quiet and secluded place. Even so, in my experience, the F1 Mother finds it difficult to give birth and break the sacks, causing the babies to suffocate. The other fear is that the F1 female may eat the babies if she feels threatened. This sounds cruel, but it frequently occurs in the wild; it is their way of keeping their babies away from predators and also protecting themselves so that they can go on to breed again. Due to the scarcity of F1 females and the risks that F2s face at birth, these second generation kittens are also rare.

However, because all our F1 females are tame, that really does make the birthing process far easier, so much so that "*Leopardette*" will **only** give birth if I am present. So strong is our bond that she actually holds back labour until I am with her, and she frequently gives



birth next to me in our bed – a messy process, but it comforts her. I help her with the delivery and support her with lots of petting and reassurance. And many of our other F1 females also allow me to be present and to help as well. This proves they love and trust me – *but it is still very unusual behaviour as their wild cat instincts should dictate that they seek solitude*. However, Sarah can't be present.

The average F1 will only have 2-3 kittens per litter, perhaps once a year, again mimicking the low birth rate of their wild forbears. But again, Sarah and I are fortunate in the number of F2s our first generation females have; as many as 5 kittens per litter – these are not one off's either. "*Leopardette*" rarely has less than 4 to 5 babies, and in all the various colours.

With our friendly F1 females like "*Leopardette*", I handle the F2s from day one, but if they are with a female who prefers solitude, we go in and handle the kittens at 4 weeks old. The Mother is unlikely to harm them then, and the older the kittens get, the safer they are.

Jean Mill once told me; **"...If an F1 is difficult, take her babies away at 4 weeks old... otherwise she tells them wicked things about people, and makes them behave badly..."** I replied that we **rarely** need to hand rear **any** Bengals due to the characters of our adults!

Because *well reared* F2s grow up tame, in my experience, breeding F3 kittens from them is relatively simple, and is barely more arduous than breeding from late generation Bengals. Our many F2 females such as "*Sarez Satin*", "*Sarez Eppie*" and others, never have problems with birthing and are all perfect Mothers, producing healthy, friendly F3 kittens.

Physical Characteristics of F1 and F2 Bengals

F1s are generally smaller than other generations because of their tiny Leopard Cat Father, and they also share many of his wild features too. On the other hand, F2s *can* be far larger than other generations, and this is due to the quirks of the hybridization process. They too have strikingly wild features, but they are not as prominent as those of the direct hybrids. From 5 days old, one can see that the faces of the F1s and F2s look very different to the SBTs; they have large nose leathers, puffed cheek pads, deep chins, perfectly round eyes and tiny rounded ears. Their *pelts* are as soft as silk and their black spots are well defined.

Once they are a few weeks old the kittens go through *the fuzzies* which is a camouflage coat of guard hairs that in nature, would help hide them from predators – all wild cats go through this from Lions to Ocelots. Those not expert in the Bengal breed can find it hard to see past the guard hair stage and envisage the stunning transformation that good quality kittens go through as they reach maturity. However, if one holds the kitten and gently twists him, then the guard hairs lift up and the definition can be seen from the rear. Filial generations go through a more extreme version of the fuzzies compared to SBTs, as they are closer to the wild. Some confuse this coat with white *ticking* however, there is a huge difference between the two and a ticked kitten will stay that way for life.

The *glitter gene* is the opposite of ticking and stems from one of Jean Mill's early domestic foundation cats called "*Millwood Tory of Delhi*" – and it makes the coats of good quality kittens sparkle like gold!



The most common colour of F2s is Leopard Spotted, but Sarah and I have bred the UK's first F2 Snow Leopards, Snow Marbles and Brown Marbles – very rare cats indeed.

Other Characteristics of F1 and F2 Bengals

F1s and F2s don't just inherit the cosmetic look of the wild cat; they *yowl* rather than *meow*, they *hunt* their toys rather than mere playing, they don't walk but *prowl*, and they *trot* and *gallop* rather than run. Even when standing, their *stance* and *poise* is that of a wild cat – SBTs do share these traits, but they are all more pronounced in early generations.

All Bengals are superb athletes, but F1s and F2s excel at it and can jump incredible distances, sometimes as much as 9ft horizontally and 7ft vertically without a running start! Ours try to gallop around the room, seemingly with feet barely touching the floor!

"Occie's" favourite game is to jump from the dresser up to the top of the kitchen door, and then he leaps across the room onto one of our cat palaces in the dining room. After this, he jumps 7ft onto our other cat palace and from there, he leaps onto the dining room table - so fleet footed that he rarely takes any of our precariously placed ornaments with him!

Finally, "Occie" steadies himself and jumps 7ft vertically up onto the fish tank in the living room... where he sleeps for a while - *then does the whole circuit again!*



Another characteristic that F1 and F2 kittens have copied their wild forefather is that they *gorge* themselves until their stomachs resemble huge barrels, and growl loudly to warn off as many of their litter mates as they can – *so sweet*. This is what the cubs do when their parents had killed prey in the jungles - their natural instinct tells the cubs that this “...*could be their last meal until their parents kill again...*”

All Bengals adore water but F1s and F2s love it more than SBTs. Ours jump in baths with us and will swim in ponds and fish tanks! They drink from running taps and even dunk their food into their water bowls before devouring it, as the wild cat does. And several of our early generation Bengals have learnt how to turn the taps on and then go to *number ones* in the sink - *just as the Asian Leopard Cat does in streams within their natural habitat!* So in our home, the worst offenders are banned from the kitchen and bathrooms!

The increased intelligence and puppy-like temperament of filial generations makes them easier to train for example, ours go for walks on a harness and they travel in our car without a cat carrier – they just sit happily on our knees and look out of the window!

Being the most magnificent variety of this breed, F1s make perfect pets *for true Leopard enthusiasts*, people who want an animal that’s as close to the wild as possible. But F2s follow close behind looks-wise, and as they are more accepting of strangers, are a little less intense and are not quite as highly strung as some F1s, they make a wonderful *compromise* between them and the very domestic natured and less wild looking later generations.

Our Hybridizing Asian Leopard Cats

Sarah and I own *15* of the privately held Asian Leopard Cats in the UK, having either bought them, or bred them ourselves. Licensing rules are strict about keeping wild animals and our adult Leopard Cats are kept in large, luxurious outside enclosures on our estate - but we keep the cubs in our home whilst they are being hand reared. This ensures they grow up with friendlier natures, and they also get used to being around our domestic cats – such an upbringing makes them much more conducive to hybridizing.



In 2000, one of our Asian Leopard Cats, “Sarez Little L”, hybridized, and he bred the first F1 kittens ever to be born in the UK. And then in 2003, a second Leopard Cat, “Sarez Apollo”, followed suite! Both of these very challenging events were huge breakthroughs for the Bengal breed due to the huge influx of valuable new wild blood and strong genes that they introduced via the 14+ fertile F1 females that they’ve bred so far.

*Only a few breeders in the world have succeeded in hybridizing from **one** Leopard Cat - but only one other breeder has ever managed to hybridize from **two** of these creatures – Jean Mill, the founder of the Bengal cat. And so Sarah and I are thrilled that all our hard work paid off – and we are so very proud of our Asian Leopard Cats.*

Our 75% and 90% Wild Blood F1 Bengals

Furthermore, in 2002/3 we mated several of our F1 Bengals back to a Leopard Cat, creating Europe’s first 75% wild blood F1s. Such a feat is also very rare in the Bengal fancy, but we wanted to use that extra wild blood to eventually breed later generation Bengals with far more wild features. *And the other high wild blood F1 females we’ve since bred are indeed breeding striking looking F2s and F3s with more Leopard-like faces.*



In 2003 Sarah and I took this one stage further and bred one of our 75% wild blood F1 back to the Leopard Cat and created “Sarez Zeus”, believed to be *the world’s first 90% wild blood F1*. This ultra wild looking cat was handled intensively from birth and today he remains as tame and as friendly as most domestics are.

Even though a very costly project, breeding “Zeus” was a unique accomplishment; and with a price of £100,000 he became “The World’s Most Expensive Cat” – a title he snatched from “Sarez Cato”, an F2 we had sold in 1998 for £25,000. The media propelled “Zeus” to worldwide fame; he has starred in dozens of TV programmes,

magazine and newspapers, and is still famous today, as one can see on the internet.

We had hoped that we would breed a fertile female, but that was not to be, and due to the extreme complexities of breeding him, it’s unlikely that another will ever be bred again.

What Our Bengals do for us and the Breed

Using the income from our kittens, Sarah and I set up a “**Rescue Sanctuary for Abused Animals**” in which we take everything from Pigs, to Deer and Donkeys, and “**The Sarez Wild Cat Conservation Programme**” in which we keep African Leopards, Ocelots and Servals. And we want to obtain other endangered wild cats and aide their conservation too.

Our cats help other conservationists too. Dr. Andrew Kitchener, Curator of the **National Museums of Scotland** studies our F1s to understand how 2 different species can reproduce - then uses his findings to help very rare species. *This research is important, so much so that there’s even a small part of the Museum dedicated to us and our hybridization work.*

Our Bengals are great ambassadors for the breed as well, appearing on 55 TV programmes and in circa 100+ national newspapers and magazines, including many

front page cover stories. They've also advertised *Armani and Versace* in *Vogue Pelle, Tatler and Country Life* and have even made appearances on fashion catwalks, enticing *many famous stars* to purchase our kittens, *from Lord Jeffrey Archer to Rolf Harris*.

Such media coverage draws the public to the breed and helps to educate others on how trustworthy all the generations of the Bengal are, when they've been well brought up.

Hybridizing is a perilous feat. *It goes against nature - but* in instances such as the creation of the Bengal, their very existence *helps* the wild cat by bringing greater public awareness to the plight that many felids face in their natural habitats. Thus, even though partially man made, the Bengal *could* be viewed as a type of *evolution - or an offshoot of it* - in this case, the *change and adaption* of an animal, in order to help the survival of the original species.

And the results are the astonishing filial Bengals – the building blocks of our pedigree breed. Yet some within the fancy disagree with their use and with hybridizing - but it does not take a genius to realise that breeding from early generations *can only benefit* all Bengals by re-introducing the Leopard Cats inherently superior genes, by preventing inbreeding and by emphasising stronger, wilder features in all later generations. It will be a long time before these traits are so strong in SBTs, that the Leopard Cat is not needed.

I love all cats, but to me, the entrancing F1 and F2 Bengals are special. Ones that have been well bred and socialised encapsulate all the best features of both the Asian Leopard Cat and the domestic cat. They're also majestic and regal creatures - and even though sensitive, they're proud too... they choose to be loyal and to love their owners on their terms, not on anyone else's. And ours have honoured both Sarah and I with just that. And we know that their strong trust and love for us, is indeed the greatest compliment of all...

C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals

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Dedicated to Leopardette – I love you

Photos from top to bottom; (1) F1 “Occie of Sarez”, (2) Esmond Gay and F1 “Leopardette of Sarez”, (3) Kitten Gay and Leopard Cat, (4) Kitten Gay and F1 “Sarez Zeus”, (5) F1 “Leopardette of Sarez”, (6) F2 “Sarez Pharaoh”, (7) F1 “Baby Gem of Sarez”, (8) Sarez Leopard Cat, (9) 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 stay 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 the beautiful felines that 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