

The Asian Leopard Cat – Founder of the Bengal

By C. Esmond Gay – Sarez Bengals – 2004

The Bengal is now one of the most popular pedigree cats in the UK, if not the world. It is a unique breed - what other pedigree cat personifies the magnificent wild Leopards to such a degree? Born from conservation philosophies, Bengals would not exist had it not been for persecution that their forefathers face as they prowl the jungles and rainforests of their natural habitats. The Bengal, and admirers of them, owes everything to the little wild feline who brought them into being – a dainty, shy and reclusive creature – the Asian Leopard Cat...

Description of the Leopard Cat and their Natural Habitat

Like all wild cats, the *Asian Leopard Cat* (*Prionailurus bengalensis*) is one of the wonders of Mother Nature – they are remarkably beautiful animals, but one that's no larger than the domestic cat. Their natural habitat is vast - they range over most of Asia, from rainforest to scrublands in both low and mountainous areas, with some living at heights of up to 3000m.



Due to the vast expanse of the Leopard Cat's territory, there are considerable regional differences between the sub-species: in Indonesia their average size is 18" excluding tail, whilst it is 24" excluding tail in the Amur region. Their shoulder height is 16" and their weight is from 4.5 to 6.8kg.

Their fur is also variable: it is yellow in the southern populations, but silver-grey in the northern ones. Their chests and lower parts of their heads are white and their bodies bear black markings with patterns that vary dependent on the subspecies – from spots and rosettes, to blotches that cover their entire bodies. They have black ears with one large white spot (ocelli) on the back of each.

Leopard Cats live close to watercourses and are not afraid to swim or fish and they even use the water as a toilet as it removes their scent – traits that can still linger in the early generations of their pedigree descendants. They are adept climbers and spend some of their time in trees where it's safer for such small animals. They're also nocturnal and during the day they'll live in dens such as hollow trees, root cavities, or caves, although they do venture out whilst it is light, in areas where there are no humans. In the wild, Leopard Cats

have a varied diet of rodents, rabbits, birds, reptiles, fish, and sometimes domestic poultry, and in captivity they should be fed on similar, complete with all the bone and fur etc.

Leopard Cats are solitary creatures, except during breeding season. There is no fixed breeding period in the southern part of their range; but in the colder northern parts they tend to breed around March or April, when the weather is nice enough to support newborn cubs. The oestrus period lasts for 5 to 9 days and after a gestation period of 9 to 10 weeks, two to three cubs are born in a den, and there they will remain until they are a month old. They open their eyes at ten days old, and start to eat solid food at 23 days. And if the cubs are killed, the mother can come into heat again and have another litter that year.

The Leopard Cat in Captivity and their Hybridization

Generally, Asian Leopard Cats do *not* make good pets, and they should not be kept by those who have no experience with small wild cats. However, this is *not* because they are vicious or temperamental animals, as some believe – it is because that even when hand reared, they can have timid and delicate natures, especially around strangers. They do not cope well with *any* stress in their environments; one of our hand reared Leopard Cats went into shock simply because an experienced, specialist wild cat vet tried to vaccinate him, and another did similar when we merely moved him from one enclosure to another – both cats knew us well and they recovered, but the way they reacted shows that members of this species are very different to say, *Servals or Ocelots* who are normally very outgoing, confident and self assured when hand reared.

My fiancée Sarah and I have owned and bred around 15 of these intelligent little cats since 1993, and because we want them to hybridize, socialization has always been very important. So we hand rear all the cubs we breed, and encourage our young daughter *Kitten Gay*, to play with

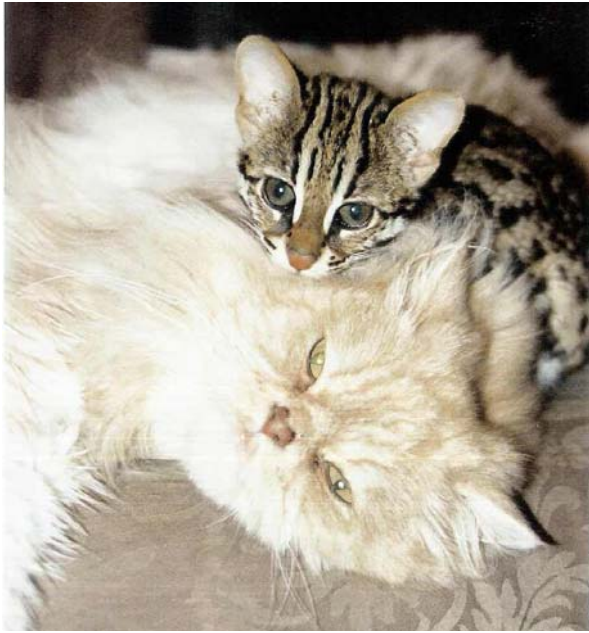


them - they sleep with her, and she even helps us to bottle feed them – all this human contact makes them much more relaxed, more docile and less flighty when they get older.

As our Leopard Cats mature, we put each into their own luxury enclosure on our estate, together with the handful of Bengal females who they grew up with, and who are dedicated to only them. This encourages them to stay used to the domestic smell and it also maintains their familiarity and trust with these same gentle females. They pose almost no danger to domestic females when brought up with them, *however*, a wild Leopard Cat from a zoo for example, and who's not used to domestic cats, can be a severe and deadly danger to them.

Due to the Leopard Cat's timid characters, the complex genetics, the differences between their anatomies and because nature did not intend them to create offspring with domestics, hybridizing is very difficult and to date just 2 have ever bred with domestics in the UK – and both Leopard Cats, “Sarez Little L” and “Sarez Apollo”, are owned by Sarah and I.

All the subspecies can hybridize *but not all are suitable for it!* Some types are scarce and should *never* be taken away from conservation programmes. And others like the *Amur*,



have coarse, ticked coats and when used for hybridizing, the resulting Filial 1 (F1) Bengals have the same – and together with the pale brown spots that they also inherit, using this subspecies brings no benefit to the appearance of the Bengal cat. Sarah and I use various subspecies, but we're always careful to ensure that they're from healthy populations, so that our work does not pose any threat to the rarer types. Ours are also some of the most beautiful varieties, having pale backgrounds and stunning, well defined spots and rosettes.

Female Leopard Cats have been used to hybridize in the early days of the foundation of the Bengal cat, *but this is not advisable!* It creates the exact opposite of what the Bengal breed needs; due to the

genetics of the process, F1s born of a *female* Leopard Cat and late generation SBT stud, have *very* domestic physical characteristics and so *do not* carry the traits that we want and need in the breed. *And so, only the male Leopard Cat should be used to hybridize.*

Due to their sensitive natures, keepers of *parent reared* adult Asian Leopard Cats should try to provide a permanent home where possible - and ideally a *hand reared adult* should never be re-homed, and if a situation arises where one must, then the new owners cannot expect that cat to remain friendly. *He won't!* The Leopard Cat only ever bonds and trusts those who actually hand reared them, especially preferring the human who's the opposite sex. So in our case, our male Leopard Cats always bond most closely with Sarah, whilst the females bond to me. *The same thing also occurs with our F1 Bengals, although even the smallest amount of domestic blood in these hybrids, makes them more sociable with other humans, and a lot more confident compared to their wild Father.*

Asian Leopard Cats must be kept *licensed* in proper, approved accommodation. It doesn't have to be the size of a tennis court, but the enclosure must have everything that a small wild cat needs. In the UK our Dangerous Wild Animal laws are strict and so one's council will not give a license to those who cannot fulfill the necessary requirements. When planning our enclosures, Sarah and I asked zoo experts and specialist wild cat vets for help in their design and construction; this ensured our council was content, that little time was wasted on re-building if they disapproved, and that the cats had facilities which were suited to their needs.





Leopard Cat Conservation

All subspecies of Leopard Cat were killed for their skin *and this is why Jean Mill created the Bengal – to help bring public awareness to the plight that all wild cats face*. Her philosophy was that few ladies would wear a fur coat that resembled a pet cat. They were also poached for the pet trade as their size gives the impression that they're more manageable than other wild cats. Asian Leopard Cats are still persecuted, but *all* subspecies are now protected under CITES, and some such as *P.b. bengalensis* and *P.b. iriomotensis* are categorised as “endangered”.

Leopard Cat Subspecies

- 1) *Prionailurus bengalensis alleni* – Hainan Island
- 2) *Prionailurus bengalensis bengalensis* – India, Bangladesh, SE Asia Inc Yunnan.
- 3) *Prionailurus bengalensis borneoensis* - Borneo
- 4) *Prionailurus bengalensis chinensis* – China, Taiwan, Philippines
- 5) *Prionailurus bengalensis euptailurus (Amur)* – Eastern Siberia, Mongolia, Manchuria
- 6) *Prionailurus bengalensis heaneyi* - Philippine island of Palawan
- 7) *Prionailurus bengalensis horsfieldi* - Himalaya
- 8) *Prionailurus bengalensis javanensis* - Java
- 9) *Prionailurus bengalensis rabori* - Philippine islands of Negros
- 10) *Prionailurus bengalensis sumatranus* - Sumatra
- 11) *Prionailurus bengalensis trevelyani* - Eastern Pakistan
- 12) *Prionailurus bengalensis iriomotensis* - Island of Iriomote, Japanese archipelago

Just 100 of the *Tsushima Cat* from Tsushima Island, exist and they were believed to belong to the Chinese Leopard Cat subspecies, but are now considered to be an isolated population of the Amur variety. And there is ongoing debate over the equally rare *Iriomote Cat*, which most categorize as a subspecies of the Leopard Cat, but others state are a separate species.

Sarah and I have found the Leopard Cat to be a charming species to keep and breed. Ours are loyal and loving - but we are experienced with such animals. And within their pedigree descendants, these beautiful cats have enabled us all to have a little bit of the wild running around our living rooms – but without the difficulties associated in keeping the real thing!

C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals

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Dedicated to all our Asian Leopard Cats

Photos from top to bottom: (1) Sarez Leopard Cat, (2) Leopard Cat “Sarez Little L”. (3) Sarez Leopard Cat brought up around domestics, including “Chippie” our Persian, (4) 2 Sarez Leopard Cat cubs, (5) Pair of Sarez Amur Leopard Cats in conservation programme.

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 I 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