

The Sarez Wild Cat *Conservation Programme*

By C. Esmond Gay – Sarez Bengals – 2004

Sarah and I love Bengals with a passion – they are mesmerizing, captivating and charming cats. We chose to breed them for those very reasons – and also because at that time, they were the closest that we could feasibly get to the creatures that have always been my lifelong obsession - wild felids. But now our devotion to our pedigrees has turned our lives full circle, as we share our home with, and strive to conserve the breathtaking wild ancestors of our domestic household pets.

The Bengal is a *hybrid* of the *Asian Leopard Cat* and the domestic cat, and was first created in the 1960s by an American named *Jean Mill*, and a geneticist called *Dr. Centerwall*. They wanted to stop the wild cat pet trade, and the senseless slaughter of all these animals for their magnificent pelts. They hoped that the general public would become outraged at those wearing or selling fur coats – garments that looked exactly like their own pets - and in part they succeeded; wild cat poaching survives, *but* in the UK at least, fur coat wearers are demonised and are considered to be social outcasts - *the thieves of beauty*.



The Bengal cat, the product of these conservation philosophies, is an animal that is both stunning and unique – one that not only duplicates the Leopard’s inherent beauty and intelligence, but also many other characteristics, including their soft pelts, their lean, athletic bodies, their adoration for water, and even their stealthy gait.

I’ve always adored *all* types of cats, but from childhood, owning *true* wild cats has been my ultimate fantasy. However, I grew up believing that an ordinary person such as I, would never be able to keep these majestic creatures - and so for years, my dream animals remained just that. And then in the early 1990s, my fiancée Sarah and I saw the Bengal and realised that sharing our lives them was far more attainable – and so we gave our hearts and home to them.

We started in a small way, but soon became drawn to the astonishingly beautiful early generation Bengals - cats with a *real* air of nature! We were fascinated with them, enthralled – and we researched their exotic parents, and the plight they face in their natural habitats. Soon we were no longer content to be *mere* Bengal breeders - *we wanted to do something more constructive... we wanted to help wild cats... to give something back to the creatures that gave life to our Bengals. And so we expanded our goals and branched out...*

In the late 1990s Sarah and I set up ***“The Sarez Wild Cat Conservation Programme”***. It was never intended to be a huge project – we just wanted to do what we could to help a few threatened species of wild felines. To date we have ***Ocelots, Asian Leopard Cats, Servals and African Leopards***, but we hope to do much more in the future.



We decided to fund it all ourselves on our estate, as charity status can strip away control and force one to deviate from one’s initial goals.

And so everything we do for wild cats is paid for through the sale of our pedigree Bengal kittens - *without them, we could not afford to do this expensive work*. And nothing about it is cheap; many big cats like Leopards, Tigers and Lions are offered to us with death sentences on their heads, because even though they are becoming scarce in the wild, they are quite common in captivity - but only a few can afford to spend circa £60,000 each, on housing them - *and other regular expenses like food and vets bills, are equally terrifying!*

Due to these costs, we’ve only rescued two African Leopards so far; our female came from the circus world, and our male came from a run down zoo, whose dire treatment of their animals forced its closure, after it was exposed by an undercover TV documentary – *both cats would probably have been shot had we not intervened, but now they live in luxury.*

Ocelots have always been my favourite wild cat species; as a boy I’d see them in zoos and stare at them, praying *“please, one day...”* So intense is my adoration for them, that when Sarah and I bought our first *hybrid Filial 1 (F1) Bengal male*, we named him *“Ocelot”*, because at that time we believed he was as close as we would ever get to owning one...

But soon after we had to change his name to “Occie” - to avoid confusion when my dream came true, and we acquired real Ocelots; “Quinton” a male and two females. “Ondine”,



one of our hand reared females, is one of my favourite of all our cats – she’s so affectionate and possessive of me, and has such funny idiosyncrasies; one being that she purrs as soon as she sees me, but it isn’t a normal purr – as she gets more excited, her noises get louder and louder, and end up sounding like a car engine! Another endearing trait is that she climbs on me and then spends hours sucking my fingers and she won’t stop until both are soaking! A more painful habit is that she licks my scalp so hard with her sand paper tongue, that I feel very sore after!

It wasn't just their aesthetic beauty that drove us to acquire these Ocelots. This species is *critically endangered*, and for a long time I would become very distressed whilst stroking "Ondine", knowing that millions of others have been shot for the fur trade. *Heartbreaking*. When we retire, I'd like us to live amongst these creatures in their habitat in S. America, and dedicate our lives to them – something far more hands on than is possible in the UK.

We also have Servals and various subspecies of Leopard Cats, and although their plight is not as dire as the Ocelots, some are becoming threatened as their territories are destroyed.

Since the early 1990s Sarah and I have cultivated good relationships with many of Britain's top zoos and conversationalists, and they help us tremendously. *It is rare for any pedigree cat breeder to be accepted into such circles, but they are aware that good intentions motivate us. Terry Moore from the "Cat Survival Trust" has supported us from the outset of our Bengal breeding careers, and has been a vocal advocate of ours.*



Other wild cat conservation centres also help us exponentially including, *Douglas Richardson*, ex-curator of *London Zoo* and *Peter James* of the "*Santago Rare Leopard Project*" – one day we hope to own some of his *Clouded Leopard* and *Snow Leopard cubs* – so few of them survive in the wild.

Likewise, our Bengals also help other wild cat

conservationists. *Dr. Andrew Kitchener*, Curator of the *National Museums of Scotland* studies our F1s, to find out how 2 species can reproduce when there are many anatomical and genetic differences between them – he hopes to use his findings to enlarge and diversify the gene pools of felid species facing imminent extinction. *This research is important to science, so much so that there's even a small section in the Museum about "Sarez" and our hybridization work.*

I feel proud when I reflect upon how our lives have metamorphosed since our first Bengal – and of the irony of it all; Sarah and I have been so inspired by a pedigree cat that we use the income from the sale of their kittens, to help their own threatened wild forefathers...

And that's how life should be – one species helping the survival of another...

C. Esmond Gay

Sarez Bengals

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Dedicated to Ondine – my dream and inspiration

Photos from top to bottom; (1) "Ondine", our Ocelot female, (2) Our Serval male, (3) Esmond Gay and "Ondine", our Ocelot female, (4) Clouded Leopard.

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 for the beautiful felines I once so proudly owned.

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

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