

The Leopard Cat - **Founder of the Bengal Breed**

By C. Esmond Gay - Sarez Bengals - 2004

The Bengal is now one of the most popular pedigree cats in the world. It's a unique breed - what other pedigree cat personifies the magnificent wild leopards to such a degree? However, the breed was born out of conservation philosophies and would not exist had it not been for persecution that their forefathers face as they prowl the jungles and rainforests in their natural habitats. The Bengal, and admirers of them, owes everything to the little wild feline that brought them into being - a dainty, shy and reclusive creature - the leopard cat.

Description of the Leopard Cat and Their Natural Habitat

Like all wild cats, the leopard cat 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 huge, ranging 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 differences between the subspecies: in Indonesia their average body size is 18", whilst in the Amur region it is 24". Their shoulder height is 16" and their weight is from 4.5 to 6.8kg.



One of Our Female Leopard Cats - Summer of 1997

Their fur is also variable, being 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 (there's more information in *subspecies* section). 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



Spot (Female Leopard Cat) - Circa Spring 1997

generations of their pedigree descendants. Leopard cats 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 in daylight 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 bones and fur.

Leopard cats are solitary creatures, except during the 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 1 month old. They open their eyes at 10 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 Hybridisation

Generally, 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 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, but the way they reacted shows that members of this species are very different to say, ***African leopards, ocelots and servals*** etc. that, in our experience, are normally very outgoing, confident and self assured when hand-reared (ours certainly are).

My fiancée, Sarah, and I own and have bred around 15 of these intelligent little cats, and because part of our aim is to hybridise from them, socialisation has always been very important. So we hand-rear many of



Jack (Front) & Two Other Leopard Cats (Behind) + Bobby Dazzler (Right - Bengal Stud) - Circa February 1998



Sarez Little L. (Leopard Cat Stud) - September 2001

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. This human contact makes them much more relaxed, 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 the leopard cats 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, that's not used to domestic cats, can be a severe and deadly danger to them.

*Due to the leopard cat's timid character, the differences between their anatomies and genes, and because nature did not intend them to create offspring with domestics, hybridising is **very** difficult. To date, only a few people in the world have succeeded at it, and in Britain, just two leopard cats have ever bred with domestics - and both of them, Sarez Little L. and Sarez Apollo, are owned by Sarah and I.*

All the leopard cat subspecies can hybridise, but not all are suitable for it. Some are scarce and should *never* be taken away from conservation programmes. And others like the Amur, have coarse, ticked coats with pale markings and when used for hybridising, the resulting Filial 1 (F1) Bengals have the same, so using this subspecies hinders the beauty of the Bengal cat. Sarah and I use exceptionally pretty subspecies which have pale backgrounds and well defined spots and rosettes, but we ensure they're from the common subspecies, and our endangered ones go into in our **Sarez Wild cat Conservation Programme**.

Female leopard cats have been used to hybridise, but this is *not* advisable! The first leopard cat who hybridised for Jean Mill in 1963, was a female named *Malaysia*, but this early

Bengal pioneer (and other people) soon found that using this gender creates the exact opposite of what the Bengal breed needs. Due to the genetics of the process, the resulting F1s have **very** domestic physical characteristics and do *not* carry the wild features that



Sarez Apollo (Leopard Cat Stud) - Circa June 2003



Jack (Right) & His Sister (Leopard Cats) - Circa August 1997

we want and need in the breed. *Male leopard cats create the opposite, breeding wild looking F1s, and so only they should be used to hybridise.*

Due to their sensitive natures, keepers of parent-reared adult leopard cats should try to provide a permanent home, and ideally hand-reared adults should never be re-homed,

and if a situation arises where one must, then the new family cannot expect the cats to remain friendly. *They won't!* Leopard cats almost always only ever bond and trust those who actually hand-reared them, especially preferring the human who's the opposite sex. So in our case, our male leopard cats bond most closely with Sarah, whilst the females bond to me. The same thing occurs with our F1 Bengals, although even the smallest amount of domestic blood in these hybrids makes them more tolerant of other humans in the household, and a lot more confident compared to their wild father.

Leopard cats must be kept licensed in approved accommodation. In Britain, our Dangerous Wild Animal laws are strict and so one's council will not give a license to those who cannot fulfil the requirements. When planning our enclosures, Sarah and I asked zoo experts and specialist wild cat vets for help in their design and construction, and we also took time to contemplate what leopard cats have and like the most in their natural habitats. The enclosures don't have to be as big as a tennis court, but they must be a reasonable size. And catering to the leopard cat's love of heights, ours feature log walkways suspended 7 foot high and that go all the way around the enclosure, and similarly made wood climbing frames in the centre. Double safety doors are imperative, plus a heated and insulated house/den is also essential (we provide two so that our leopard cats can get some peace from our Bengal females and vice versa). We use normal cat hooded cat litters, some with water in and others with compressed sawdust. And everything in the enclosure has to be easy to clean and keep hygienic.



Sonny (Bengal Stud) & Spot (Leopard Cat) - Late 1997 to Early 1998

Leopard Cat Conservation

All subspecies of leopard cat were killed for their skin and this is what drove Jean Mill to play such a pivotal part in the creation of the breed - 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. These cats were also poached for the pet trade as their size gives the impression that they're more manageable than other wild cats. Leopard cats are still persecuted, but *all* subspecies are now protected under CITES, and some such as *P.b. bengalensis* are listed as *endangered* whilst *P.b. iriomotensis* and *P.b. tsushimansis* are categorised as *critically endangered*.

Leopard Cat Classification and Subspecies

Kingdom - *Animalia*.

Phylum - *Chordata*.

Class - *Mammalia*.

Order - *Carnivora*.

Family - *Felidae*.

Subfamily - *Felinae*.

Genus - *Prionailurus*.

Species - *Bengalensis*.

Common name - *Leopard cat* (**not** "Asian leopard cat" as they are frequently called).



Spot (Left) & Another Female Leopard Cat - Circa August 1997

The leopard cat's relationship to other members of the *Prionailurus* genus such as the flat-headed cat (*P. planiceps*), rusty-spotted cat (*P. rubiginosus*) and fishing cat (*P. viverrinus*) is closer than it is to the *Felis* genus, hence its classification in 1993 by Wozencraft. And there has been much confusion over leopard cat subspecies and over the years, many cats that were previously thought to be varieties of the leopard cat were later found to be otherwise. Conversely, cats thought to be of the *Felis* genus etc. have since been found (or suspected) to be subspecies of the leopard cat. The taxonomic debates continue and there are still many uncertainties and conflicting views over accepted subspecies. At the time of writing, the following are acknowledged (there are notes by the debated ones):

- 1) *Prionailurus bengalensis alleni* - Hainan Island.
- 2) *Prionailurus bengalensis bengalensis* - India, Bangladesh, S.E. Asia inc. Yunnan. They have a golden coat with markings that are more elongated than rosetted.
- 3) *Prionailurus bengalensis borneoensis* - Borneo. They are quite rufous in colour.
- 4) *Prionailurus bengalensis trevelyani* - Eastern Pakistan. They are quite grey in colour.
- 5) *Prionailurus bengalensis euptailura (Amur)* - Eastern Siberia, Mongolia, Manchuria. They are largest subspecies and can reach 20 pounds. They live the farthest north and so have a thicker coat. They are rosetted, but more faintly than other subspecies.
- 6) *Prionailurus bengalensis heaneyi* - Philippine island of Palawan. They are dull grey in colour and like the other Philippines' leopard cat, have small oval spots and no rosettes, and are the smallest of the subspecies (adults are 1.4 to 1.9 kg).
- 7) *Prionailurus bengalensis rabori (Visayan)* - Philippine islands of Negros, Cebu, Panay. They are light tan in colour and like the other Philippines' leopard cat, have small oval spots and no rosettes, and are the smallest of the subspecies (adults are 1.4 to 1.9 kg).
- 8) *Prionailurus bengalensis horsfieldi* - Himalaya.
- 9) *Prionailurus bengalensis javanensis* - Java. They have dull brown coloration.
- 10) *Prionailurus bengalensis sumatranus* - Sumatra. They have fewer and smaller markings than other subspecies.
- 11) *Prionailurus bengalensis scripta* - North Yunnan, West Sichuan, East Tibet, Southern Gansu. NB. In 1996 it was argued that they are a valid subspecies, but this is controversial.
- 12) *Prionailurus bengalensis manchurica* - Manchuria, Northeast China.
- 13) *Prionailurus bengalensis tingia* - Singapore, Malaysia.
- 14) *Prionailurus bengalensis chinensis* - China, Taiwan, Philippines. Thought to be the most beautiful of all the subspecies, they have light golden coats and striking two-tone paw-print rosettes. The Chinese call them "money cats" as their spots look like coins.
- 15) *Prionailurus bengalensis wagati* - Southeast India. NB. Some say this is the *Felis* genus and is not a subspecies of leopard cat.
- 16) *Prionailurus bengalensis iriomotensis* - Island of Iriomote, Japanese archipelago. The rare Iriomote cat was discovered in 1965 by Yukio Togawa and was originally described as a distinct species based on morphology. However, after genetic analysis, it is now considered to be a subspecies of leopard cat.
- 17) *Prionailurus bengalensis tsushimansis* - Tsushima Island, Japan. Listed as a National Treasure, just 100 of these cats exist, and it is believed that they arrived on the island about 100,000 years ago from



One of Our Female Leopard Cats - Circa Early 1998

the Asian continent. They are smaller and darker than other leopard cat subspecies and biologists only recognised and gave them species status in 1988, and recent genetic testing has proven they are a variety of the leopard cat. Some believe the Tsushima cat to be part of the Siberian subspecies (*P. b. euptailura*) whilst others have said they belong to the subspecies *P. b. manchurica*. However, they are listed as a separate and distinct subspecies of their own.

Sarah and I have found the leopard cat to be charming to keep and breed. Many of ours are loyal and loving, but they do require specialist care and handling, and so for their sake, they should be kept by experienced keepers only. However, these beautiful little cats have enabled everyone to have a little part of the wild running around their living rooms, in the form of their pedigree descendants. And Bengals come with none of the difficulties of keeping the real thing!

C. Esmond Gay

Sarex Bengals

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Dedicated to all our leopard cats

Retirement Addition (2008)

Sarah and I achieved a phenomenal amount during the 11 years that we bred Bengals and many of our accomplishments are still unsurpassed. We obsessively chased every one of our goals and ambitions and didn't stop until we had succeeded. And everything we did was meticulous and done to perfectionist standards.

However, this entailed working up to 18 hours a day, 7 days a week, and with few breaks or holidays. In hindsight, we did too much too fast because the enormous stress that we put ourselves under, plus looking after hundreds of animals almost single-handedly, took its toll on us mentally, emotionally and physically. By 2004, Sarah and I were suffering from severe exhaustion and so reluctantly, we retired. We hoped to lead a quieter life in Latin America, living and working with their endangered cats.

Our larger wild felines went to wildlife parks, our rescued animals went to sanctuaries and private homes, whilst many of our Bengals and leopard cats went to Pauline and Frank Turnock of Gayzette Bengals - they look after and nurture 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 support and advice on the Bengal and wild cats. I follow their achievements, and behind the scenes, I am there for them and for the beautiful cats that we once so proudly owned.

To Sarah and me, our cats were more than just pets or breeding animals - they were our family. And within the articles I wrote, my deeply emotional descriptions of them and how they influenced our lives, portrays just how powerfully I love them; and so naturally, I feel terrible loss and miss them tremendously. However, I am grateful for the 11 wonderful years that they graced our home, and for the honour and privilege of being able to share part of my life with them... *and for the amazing memories that they've left me with.*

C. Esmond Gay