

The Sarez Wild Cat

Conservation Programme

By C. Esmond Gay - Sarez Bengals - 2004

Sarah and I love Bengals with a passion... they're mesmerising, 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 cats. But now our devotion to our pedigree felines 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 wild leopard cat and the domestic cat, the first of which are believed to have been bred in 1963, by an American named Jean Mill. She helped found the breed in order to stop the wild cat pet trade, and their senseless slaughter for their magnificent pelts. This lady hoped that the general public would become outraged at those wearing or selling fur coats... garments that looked exactly like their own pet Bengals - and in part she succeeded; wild cat poaching survives, *but* in Britain at least, fur coat wearers are demonised and are considered to be social outcasts - *the thieves of beauty*.



Ondine (Female Ocelot) - Circa December 1995

Because of their recent wild forebears, the Bengal cat 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 fur, 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. Then in 1993, my fiancée, Sarah, and I saw the Bengal cat and realised that sharing our lives with, and even breeding them was far more attainable, and so we gave our hearts and home to them.

We started off with the very domesticated, late generation Bengals, but soon became drawn to the astonishingly beautiful Filial 1 (F1) hybrids; cats with a *real* air of nature! They fascinated and enthralled us - and so we researched their exotic parents and the plight that they face in their natural habitats. Soon we were no longer content to be just pedigree cat breeders - we wanted to do something more constructive; *we wanted to help wild cats... we wanted to give something back to the creatures that gave life to our Bengals...*



One of Our Servals - Circa January 2003

And so in 1995, Sarah and I set up the ***Sarez Wild Cat Conservation***

Programme, but being private people, we didn't want it to become a huge organisation - our aim was to simply do what we could to help a few threatened species of wild felines. To date, we have some endangered subspecies of ***leopard cat, African leopards, ocelots and servals***, and we'd like to keep and help more species in the future.

We decided to fund it all ourselves on our estate, because we felt that charity status would strip away control and perhaps even force us to deviate from our original 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 work*. And nothing about it is cheap; many big cats such as 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. However, only a few people can afford to spend around £60,000 housing them (each), and other regular expenses like food and vets bills, are equally terrifying!



Raj (Male African Leopard) - 2000 to 2004

Due to these costs, we've only been able to take in 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*.

Out of all the wild cat species, ocelots have always been my favourite; they're small, cute and outrageously beautiful. As a boy I'd see them in zoos and would stare at them, praying "*please, one day...*" So intense is my adoration for them, that when Sarah and I bought our first F1 Bengal, we named him *Ocelot*, because at the time we believed he was as close as we would ever get to owning one. *But two years later we had to change his name to Occie to avoid confusion when my dream finally came true and we acquired **real** ocelots; a male called Quinton, and two females.*

Ondine, one of our hand-reared females, is one of my most beloved of all our cats - so strong are my emotions for her that a warm rush floods over me whenever I see her, or even think about her. She came to us in late 1995 and I'll never forget opening the crate that she came in; I was so excited, but I expected her to hiss and spit as we hadn't hand-reared her. However, instead, her huge round eyes looked up at me from her straw bed, she started purring, and then she let me to pick her up and cuddle her. *And it's been bliss ever since!* She's so affectionate and possessive of me, so much so that Sarah can't really get close to me when *Ondine* is on me or else she is liable to get nipped or at least, growled at!

It's only when one lives with these wild animals that one sees their funny idiosyncrasies; *Ondine* is very communicative and she purrs as soon as she sees me - but it isn't a normal purr... as she gets more excited, her rumblings get louder and louder, and in the end she sounds like a car engine, altering in pitch as she walks around! Another endearing trait is that she climbs on me and then spends hours sucking my fingers and she won't stop until they're soaking! A more painful habit of hers is that she licks my scalp so hard and for so long with her pin-cushion tongue, that I feel as if my head's being rubbed with sandpaper!

When Sarah and I moved house in 1998, *Ondine* proved that her love for me is special. We needed time to build a new enclosure for her and our other ocelots at our new home, but we realised this would take several months as it had to be approved and licensed by our council and their vets. And so we asked a friend of ours to look after our ocelots as he had a private wildlife park. I was deeply distressed to lose *Ondine* for so long and I couldn't visit her because this gentleman lived so far away and we couldn't leave our other animals.

The enclosure took far longer to build than we had expected; we wanted it to be even more spectacular and far larger than their previous enclosure, and that took 7 months. I was so



Esmond Gay & Ondine (Female Ocelot) - 30th April 1996



Ondine (Female Ocelot) - Circa March 1996

worried that *Ondine* would have forgotten me because she was adult, plus she had two others of her own kind with her, including her mate. And to make matters worse, the gentleman looking after them had warned me that all three ocelots had reverted to the wild and that neither he nor his staff could get near them - he told me not to expect too much.

The drive to pick them up was nerve-racking and I trembled with

anticipation all the way there. After some pleasantries, we went to the enclosure and as I stood outside, I saw *Ondine* lying next to *Quinton* in the straw about 20 feet away; she stared at me for about a minute... I looked back, then called out to her, and as her ears pricked up, I started screaming at the gentleman to unlock the pen door. And as soon as he did, a scene unfolded that was reminiscent of a Mills & Boon novel - I ran to her and as I crouched down, she flew into my arms... and we hugged. *And I cried like a baby...*

It's an honour being loved so powerfully by one of nature's most magnificent creations, by a cat whose innate wild instincts should tell her to avoid humans; yet *Ondine's* love for me overrides them. It's almost a "forbidden love"... *and that type is always the strongest.*

Even though I had always dreamt of living with ocelots, it wasn't just their aesthetic beauty that drove us to acquire them. We wanted to help them, too. They are CITES *critically endangered*, and for a long time after we obtained *Ondine*, I would become very distressed whilst stroking her, knowing that millions of her kind have been killed for their pelts. The visions I'd have were horrific and broke me into pieces. I think that a similar thing occurs when one has children and then sees other, unrelated kids suffering; a parents' reaction can be very intense because they can put their own children in that position and then imagine the pain - that makes it more vivid and real.



Quinton (Male Ocelot) - Circa June 2001



Ondine (Female Ocelot) - Circa July 2001

And I felt that trauma because I love *Ondine* as if she were my child. When Sarah and I retire, I'd like us to live amongst these creatures in their habitat in Latin America, and dedicate our lives to them - something far more hands on than is possible in Great Britain.

We also have servals and various subspecies of leopard cat in our conservation programme, and although their plight is not as dire as the ocelots, some are becoming threatened as their territories are destroyed.

Over the years, 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.* Douglas Richardson, former curator of **London Zoo**, has been a great source of advice for us, whilst Terry Moore from the **Cat Survival Trust** has supported us from the outset of our breeding careers, and has been a vocal advocate of ours. His charity rescues Britain's unwanted wild cats, giving them a good home for life, and he conserves various species, most notably the fishing cat (no other organisation has bred more). Peter James from the **Santago Rare Leopard Project** also helps and guides us; he is a great inspiration due to his work with the astonishingly rare clouded leopards, snow leopards and Amur leopards.

And we try to help these charities, too; as many people fall in love with our Bengals because of their connection to the wild, we encourage all our clients to become members of these organisations, we arrange excursions to their premises and hold huge fund raising events for their benefit. And whenever we can, we use the publicity that the Bengal cat brings us, to publicise the good work that these charities do.



Raj (Male African Leopard) - September 2001

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 two species can interbreed when there are many anatomical and genetic differences between them, and he hopes to use his findings to enlarge and diversify the gene pools of felid species that are facing imminent extinction. This work is important to science and conservation, so much so that there's even a small section in the museum about *Sarex* and our hybridisation work.

I feel proud when I reflect upon how our lives have metamorphosed since our first Bengal cats entered our lives and changed it so drastically - 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 others...

C. Esmond Gay

Sarex Bengals

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Dedicated to Ondine - my dream and inspiration

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