

Leopardcats Hot N Spicy (IW SGC Spice Basil x DGC Leopardcats Xtreme's Masterpiece) has a beautiful white tummy.

Photo credit: Sabine Wamper



BREEDING TOWARDS THE WILD LOOK



by Boris Ehret and Sabine Wamper

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Breeding is far more than just mating a queen with a sire and waiting for the kittens to be born. Every reputable breeder invests his time, experience and passion to reach his goals and to improve the Bengal breed.

How to find the right breeding stock

The Bengal breed evolves rapidly, much faster than older breeds such as Persians, Orientals, or British shorthairs. In the 1990s, for example, a Bengal with a couple of rosettes on each side was an absolute sensation. Nowadays rosettes have become relatively common and in a show ring almost all Bengals have spectacular rosettes. Year after year the best Bengals become closer to the standard, and this development is still ongoing. Due to this rapid process, it is almost impossible for a five-year-old Bengal to compete against a younger cat.

Since a breeding cat should help to develop the breed, it should not lag behind the development of the breed. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to buy one of the few top breeding cats, especially if you are still new to the breed. It may be useful to show a nice Bengal alter for one or two years in order to familiarize yourself both with the scene and with the standard.

As a beginner you should first visit as many breeders as possible and build a bond of trust with them. Afterwards you can ask to be mentored by an experienced breeder. In this long-term relationship, the mentor is there to answer your questions and give advice and practical help. He can help to select the right Bengal girl to start your breeding program and, later, to find the best possible sire to breed her to.

If you are looking for an addition to your cattery, you should choose only after considering very carefully the strengths and the weaker points of your breeding program and what you want to improve. The breeding cat shouldn't endanger the strengths of a program and, at the same time, it should improve individual points. If, for example, your girls have small ears but little contrast, it makes no sense to buy a highly contrasted stud with big ears. The risk of losing the good ear size is much too high. The key words for successful breeding are: anticipate, weigh and evaluate.

Look into the future

Even for an experienced breeder it is very difficult to predict exactly how a kitten will develop. It is a common game among breeders to sit together and look at a litter. Everyone chooses his favorite kitten (the pick kitten). Of course, the winner of the game can be detected only months later when you can see how the babies have evolved and which one became a show winner.

Selecting for pattern is easy. Generally, you can detect a nice pattern soon after birth. Large spots will usually become rosettes. The final ground color can be recognized early on the fur behind the ears. Many kittens have a whited tummy, but we all know that only very few will keep it in adulthood.

It is far more difficult and it takes much more time to recognize good type in a young kitten. You can, for example, guess the final shape of the ears in the first few days. Then for a long time you will be unable to predict anything about the ears, because compared to the rest



of the head, they grow faster. This is the reason why, at a certain age, all kittens seem to have huge ears.

We know that the bridge of the nose tends to become straighter after the first weeks because the nose stretches outward and the face becomes longer. On the other hand, if a kitten's chin is already weak, it is likely to become even weaker in adulthood. At the age of about twelve weeks you can finally estimate how muscular and heavy-boned your Bengal will become.

Wild look—an ambitious breeding goal

According to the breed standard, Bengals must be clearly distinct from all other breeds and from domestic cats. But what exactly characterizes the desired wild look?

The pattern reminds us of wildcats, because in no other breed does one find rosettes or a horizontal flow. Also, the whited belly is unique. Such attributes bring a touch of the rain forest into our home environment.

However, the wild expression is not simply limited to the pattern. Often, it is said that a Bengal should be recognizable as such even if he had only black fur, just like the black panther, which we recognize as a leopard even though he shows no pattern.

But what exactly are the physical features distinctive to the small forest-dwelling wildcats (for example an Asian Leopard Cat)? In this section we will try to find answers to this apparently simple question and try to understand the mystery of the wild look in the Bengal breed.

Photos at left show how a Bengal could look in the future. Starting from the head of an SBT (IW SGC Spice Basil), we gradually changed the picture with Photoshop in order to make him look more like an ALC (last picture). The eyes were made bigger, the ears became smaller and rounder, the chin became stronger and the nose wider and more dominant. We also added a lot of white color on the cheeks and around the eyes. Finally the Tabby M on the forehead disappeared and was replaced by two almost straight lines. (Photo-manipulation by Jacqueline Gloor)



Profile: Curve of the forehead should flow into the bridge of the nose with no break. This ALC shows perfectly what we are looking for. Photo credit: Boris Ehret

The body

The bodies of wildcats are extremely muscular and the legs are very sturdy and strong. Somehow they remind us of sportsmen and Olympic athletes. An ALC certainly doesn't have the build of an endurance or long-distance runner (aerobic in nature), but rather that of a fast sprinter (anaerobic in nature). Because muscle fibers weigh considerably more than fat tissue, wildcats and good Bengals surprise us by their high weight. You can feel the hard and compact muscles under the skin. This applies particularly to the area of the legs and neck. The latter is particularly broad and strong.

The body of an ALC is longer than that of our Bengal, which can be explained by an additional vertebra in the spine. Visually, this length is accentuated by the horizontal pattern and the color gradation to the whited belly. Almost all Bengals have vertical elements in their pattern.

For this reason the bodies of our Bengals will never appear as long as those of the ALC.

The ALC tail is much thicker and does not, as in most domestic cats, end in a pointed tip. In addition he carries his tail always low. This powerful tail helps both the ALC and the Bengal to climb and to keep their balance during jumps. Although the breed standard doesn't say anything specific, most breeders prefer Bengals with relatively short, thick tails because this is how the tail of an ALC looks. In addition, the tails of many Bengals are not only ringed, but also have spots or rosettes. Breeders try to integrate these characteristics of the ALC in the Bengal gene pool.

Movement and posture

In most pictures we see the ALC in a stretched and ducked posture. However, this also has to



RW SGC Spice Sedano shows a beautiful profile.

do with the fact that these very shy wildcats are usually stressed in the vicinity of people, and therefore we hardly ever get to observe them in a relaxed posture. As soon as a Bengal or any other domestic cat feels threatened, it moves in a very similar way. For the present article, we consciously selected only ALC and F1 pictures which show relatively calm animals. It seems that in this case the posture of an ALC does not differ substantially from that of a Bengal.

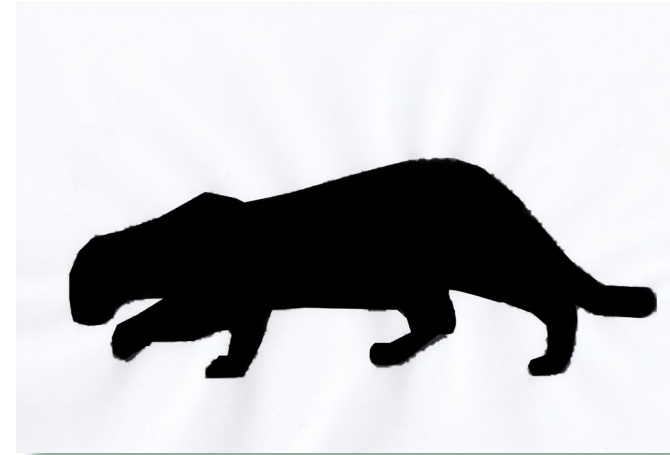
The head

The head contributes significantly to the wild appearance. We have to pay particular attention to the shape of the skull, the profile, the nose, the eyes and the ears. The diameter of

the neck is about as large as that of the skull. The head, on the other hand, looks small and delicate in relation to the body. Most of the wild felines have a significantly smaller head than domestic cats in proportion to the body. Therefore, a Bengal with a relatively small head looks always wilder.

The skull of an ALC is somewhat bent from the neck over his eyes and flows, without visible transition, into a nearly straight nose bridge. The forehead is about twice as long as the nose. The pattern on the forehead consists of straight lines and not, as seen in most Bengals, in a tabby-M. As a result, the forehead appears even longer.

It is still a major challenge for every breeder to achieve the right profile (from the tip of nose to behind the ears). Although, according to the



Everybody can easily recognize that this drawing shows a feral cat. (Drawing: Claudia Cereghetti)

TICA standard, a slightly concave curve is tolerated (the line of the bridge extends to the nose tip, making a very slight, to nearly straight, concave curve), most judges prefer Bengals with a straight nose bridge. However, there are still far too many cats with a very flat forehead and a clear break above the eyes. It is to be expected that in the next few years the breed as a whole will develop past this, because more and more judges have already begun to pay attention to the whole profile and no longer look only at the bridge of the nose.

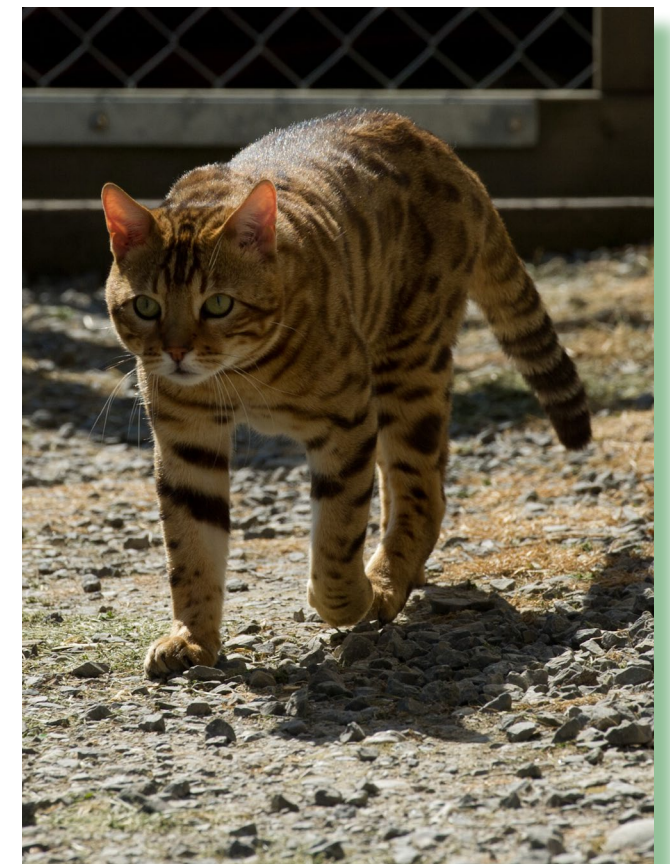
The nose of an ALC is very dominant. The nasal bridge is high and equally wide from the root of the nose to the muzzle. The nose of most domestic cats, however, tapers towards the tip. Only very few Bengals have an ALC-like nose. OS RW SGC Stonehenge Wurththawate of Snopride was especially striking because of his large and wide nose and his slightly puffed nose leather. Fortunately he passed these traits on to his countless offspring.

The chin of an ALC is very strong and very white. The eyes are strikingly large and dominate the entire face. In general, the eyes of our Bengals should be larger and more expressive. It is not so much a question of the eye shape: there are ALCs with perfectly round eyes and others with more almond-shaped eyes. According to the standard the eye color should be intense. All wild cats have copper-colored to brown eyes. Compared to the green eye color of most of our Bengals, the copper eye color looks considerably wilder.

The ears of the ALC are of moderate size, broad at the base and very rounded at the top. The ears of most Bengals are still totally unsatisfactory: too big, too pointy and too high on the head. But in a breeding program there is hardly anything as difficult to improve or correct as the ear size and the ear set.

An ALC has a lot of white expression in his face, and this accentuates even more his wild appearance and remains completely unmatched in our breed. Compared to a Bengal cat, an ALC looks like a professionally made-up woman with cosmetics emphasizing her eyes and facial features. The white-rimmed eyes appear even bigger, the bridge of the nose wider and the white cheeks look slender. The intense white expression in the face and on the belly is often already lost at the F1 or F2 stage.

All of this gives us an idea of how difficult it will be to breed Bengals with these properties one day.



IW SGC Spice Basil (now living in Texas with Mystre Bengals) shows the powerful and athletic body we want to see in the Bengals. Photo Credit: Hans-Joachim Rudolph

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