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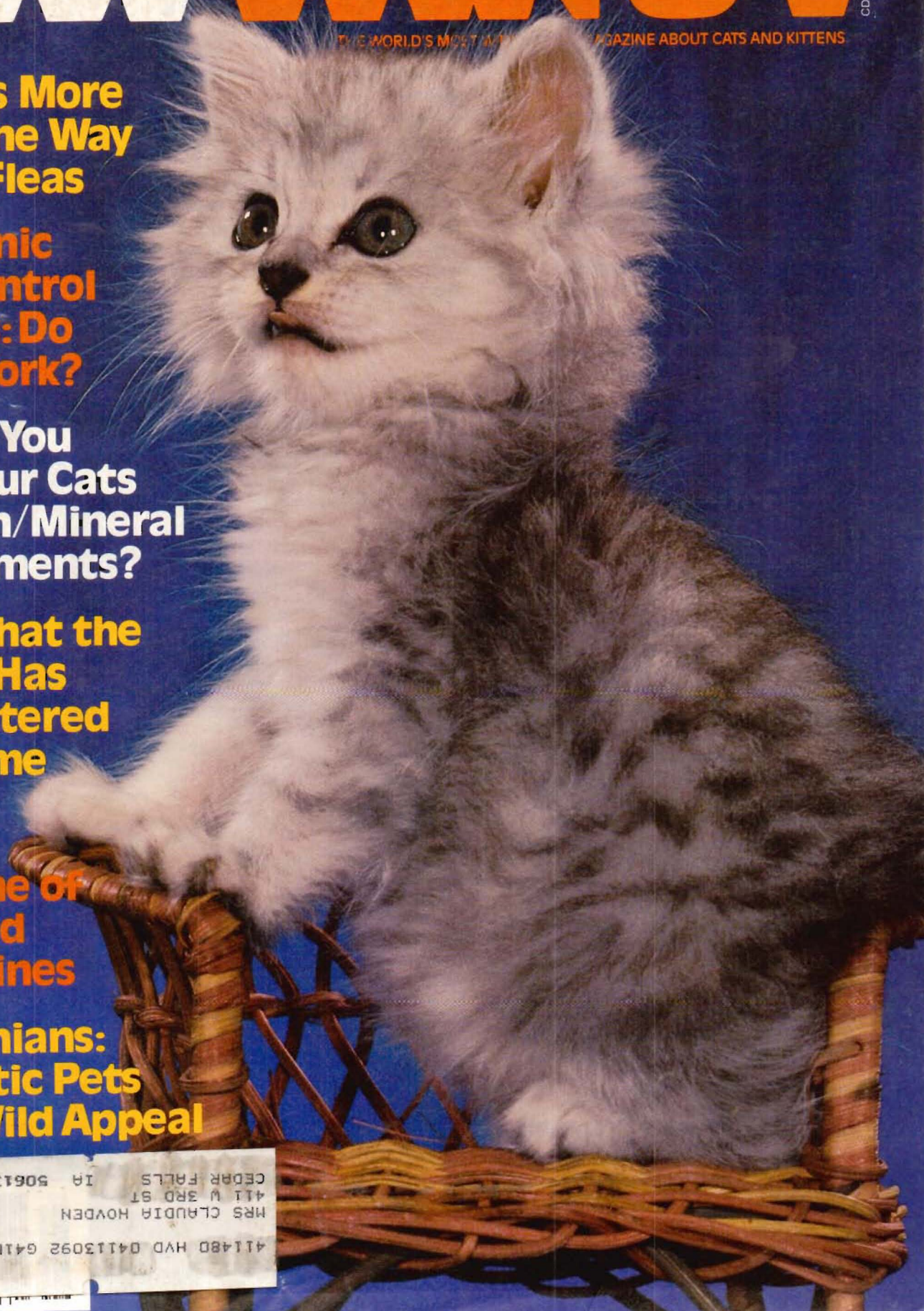
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Abyssinians: Domestic Pets With Wild Appeal



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All About the Abby

The Abyssinian combines the look of the wildcat and the loving ways of a very domestic pet.

by Arthur Nelson
and Linda W. Lewis

ALTHOUGH THERE is a distinct resemblance between the cats in ancient Egyptian statues and drawings and today's Abyssinian, there is no real evidence that the two are actually related. Nevertheless, the Abyssinian is thought to be one of the oldest cat breeds. The first record of the breed appeared in a book by Gordon Stables, *Cats and Their Points, Etc.*, which was published in England about 1874. This book contains a color plate of a cat named Zula, the property of Mrs. Captain Barrett-Lennard. According to Stables, Zula was brought to England from Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) at the end of the Abyssinian War (about 1868). Thus the cat became known as an Abyssinian after the country from which it was imported, but cats that looked like Zula were rare in that country, so it is unlikely that the breed actually originated there.

Whether it originated in Egypt or Abyssinia, however, it thrived in England. In 1889, only 15 years later, Harrison Weir in his book, *Our Cats and All About Them*, wrote that the Abyssinian had "been shown under a variety of names, such as Russian, Spanish, Hare Cat, Rabbit Cat." Although the Aby, like most other purebreds, suffered during the lean years of World War I, it recovered and became quite popular between the Wars.

It was during this period, in the late 1930s, that America received the Foundation stock for the Aby breed in this country. Actually, two Abys were imported to the U.S. as early as 1907 by Miss Jane Cathcart. Although these cats were shown by their owner in Boston in 1909, it was not until 1934 that a breeding program for Abys was begun in the U.S. Mrs. Martin Metcalf and Miss Mary Hantzmon were two of the breeders that helped establish the breed in this

country. It was not until 1935, however, that the first American Aby, Addis Ababa, was born. Today, the breed is one of America's most popular shorthaired cats, ranking 4th according to registrations in the Cat Fancier's Association. In the last 40 years, American Aby breeders have been so successful that now instead of importing the cats they are exporting them to other breeders all over the world.

American breeders have perfected the physical appearance of this appealing shorthair, without sacrificing the special personality of the cat. And it is these two factors that make the Abyssinian so popular.

The Abyssinian of the '80s comes in four colors—ruddy, red, blue and lilac. Although the ruddy is the most popular, all four colors have a growing following; however, only the ruddy and red varieties have been accepted for championship status by the CFA. The blue Aby has a strong

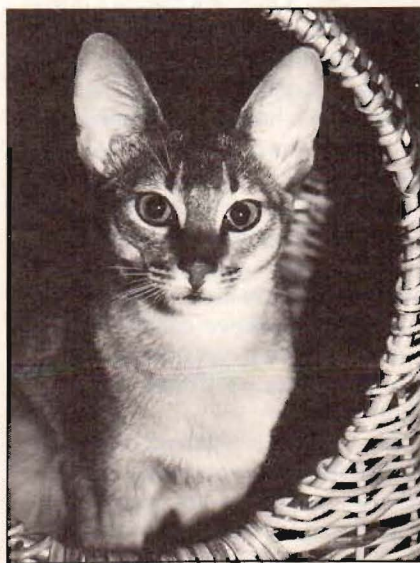


Photo: Dorothy Holby

Abys hate being caged. Of all cat breeds, this one is most insistent on his freedom to explore his surroundings and interact with his human and animal family members.

group of supporters that have already managed to gain championship status for this color variety in The International Cat Association, and they are working hard for acceptance in the CFA and other major cat associations, as well. (These associations already register blues as AOV Abys; TICA, ACFA and CFF will also register lilacs, but not the CFA.)

Although it would appear that blue kittens have been found in Aby litters almost as long as the breed has existed, some breeders are resisting acceptance of this color because they feel that the "cold" blue color is not compatible with the warmth and depth of color found in the ruddies and reds. According to Eva Engvall in "The Abyssinian Cat" (July/August, 1981): "... the color of the blue cat is not and should not be cold, especially not the undercoat. There is no reason to believe that blues can't produce ruddies and reds of good color. . . . Blue, which is a dilution of black, is a recessive characteristic, i.e., to show up in a kitten, both parents have to be carriers of the blue gene."

No matter what color, all Abys must show the ticked coat—in which each hair has at least two and preferably three dark bands—that is unique to the breed. Ruddies are a rich golden brown, ticked with dark brown or black, and the base hair is a rusty orange; reds are a lustrous copper red, ticked with chocolate, and the base hair is apricot; blues are a soft, warm blue-gray, ticked with a deeper steel blue, and the base hair is warm beige or oatmeal; lilacs are a rich cream with lilac ticking.

The Aby coat is soft and silky, but dense and resilient, as well, with a lustrous sheen. The hair should be just long enough to accommodate the two or three bands of ticking required. All colors of Abys must strive for clarity—clearness of all leg bars, belly mottling and necklaces. White,

except on the face and neck, is faulted. Aby breeders today breed to keep the white area under the chin from extending below the upper throat. American breeders have come a long way toward solving the problems of bars and white spotting that have plagued this breed since its beginning.

The Abyssinian is classified as a "foreign shorthair" in type. It is a medium to large cat, which is lithe, hard and muscular. The legs and feet should be proportionately slim and fine-boned. The Aby "stands well off the ground giving the impression of being on tiptoe." The overall impression should be of a well-proportioned, athletic animal that is alert and interested in its surroundings.

The head should be a modified, slightly rounded wedge with no flat planes. The muzzle should not be sharply pointed or square and the chin should neither recede nor protrude. The ears should be large, moderately pointed, cupped at the base and set as though the cat is listening intently. The hair on the ears is very short and tipped with dark hairs the color of the ticking.

Aby eyes are almond shaped, but large, brilliant and expressive—not round or oriental looking. The eye color is gold to green, and the eyes are accentuated by dark lidskins encircled by light colored areas.

One of the most important parts of the breed standard is the requirement that the cat have a good temperament and be gentle and amenable to handling. It is perhaps this emphasis on temperament that makes the Aby such a good pet. These cats are known for their intelligent, playful, affectionate natures. It is easy to teach them games and they will talk to you in their soft bell-like voices. (Abys are quiet even when in heat!) They seem to sense their owners' moods and provide sympathy and support when needed.

Since Abys love water, it is quite amusing to watch them play with a drippy faucet or try to join you in the shower or bath. Of course, a fish tank or child's pool is a wonderful place to fish. They use their paws much like hands, touching everything, including your face, and picking up objects such as pieces of paper, ribbons, etc.

Abys adapt well to apartment living and fit well into either urban or suburban lifestyles. But more than any

other breed, this cat loves his freedom. He will visibly wilt if put in a small cage and denied human companionship. The Aby needs room to stretch, run, jump and play. To be happy he needs to explore, to use his intelligence to investigate his surroundings.

Abys make good mothers that are fierce in their defense of their offspring. Although early breeding programs were somewhat hampered by the Aby's tendency to produce more male than female offspring, that no longer seems to be a problem.

Being able to find the right Aby kitten shouldn't be too difficult, although you may have to be patient in some cases if you want one of the rarer colors (reds, blues or lilacs). In any case, you should not be in a hurry when buying a kitten. We suggest you shop around, check out several breeders before making your selection and be sure you receive a written health guarantee. This is most important. It is not recommended that you buy from a pet shop and it is our sincere hope that most breeders love their cats enough not to use pet shops as a way of placing their kittens—especially in view of what we all know about the Aby's aversion to being caged.

There is no such thing as a bargain kitten; you get what you pay for. We recommend purchasing an Aby kitten 12 weeks of age or older. We have found they prefer to stay with mom until they are at least 10 weeks of age; then, after the usual series of immunizations, they are ready to be placed. Be sure to have your new kitten checked by a veterinarian within 48 hours after purchase. Whether you buy a pet-quality kitten for \$200 or a show cat for \$1000, you are entitled to a healthy, clean kitten. Buy from a breeder that tests for feline leukemia and guarantees that your kitten is free of this disease, since Abys seem to have little resistance to FeLV. Have your vet check your kitten for worms, ear mites, fleas and fungus, and to see that the eyes are clear and the kitten's stools are normal.

Whether your Abyssinian is for show or is simply a pet, you will need to provide a complete and balanced diet, grooming, expert medical care, plenty of exercise and as much love and attention as you can give. Your Aby will make it very clear that he wants to be an important part of your life. Try to groom him every day with

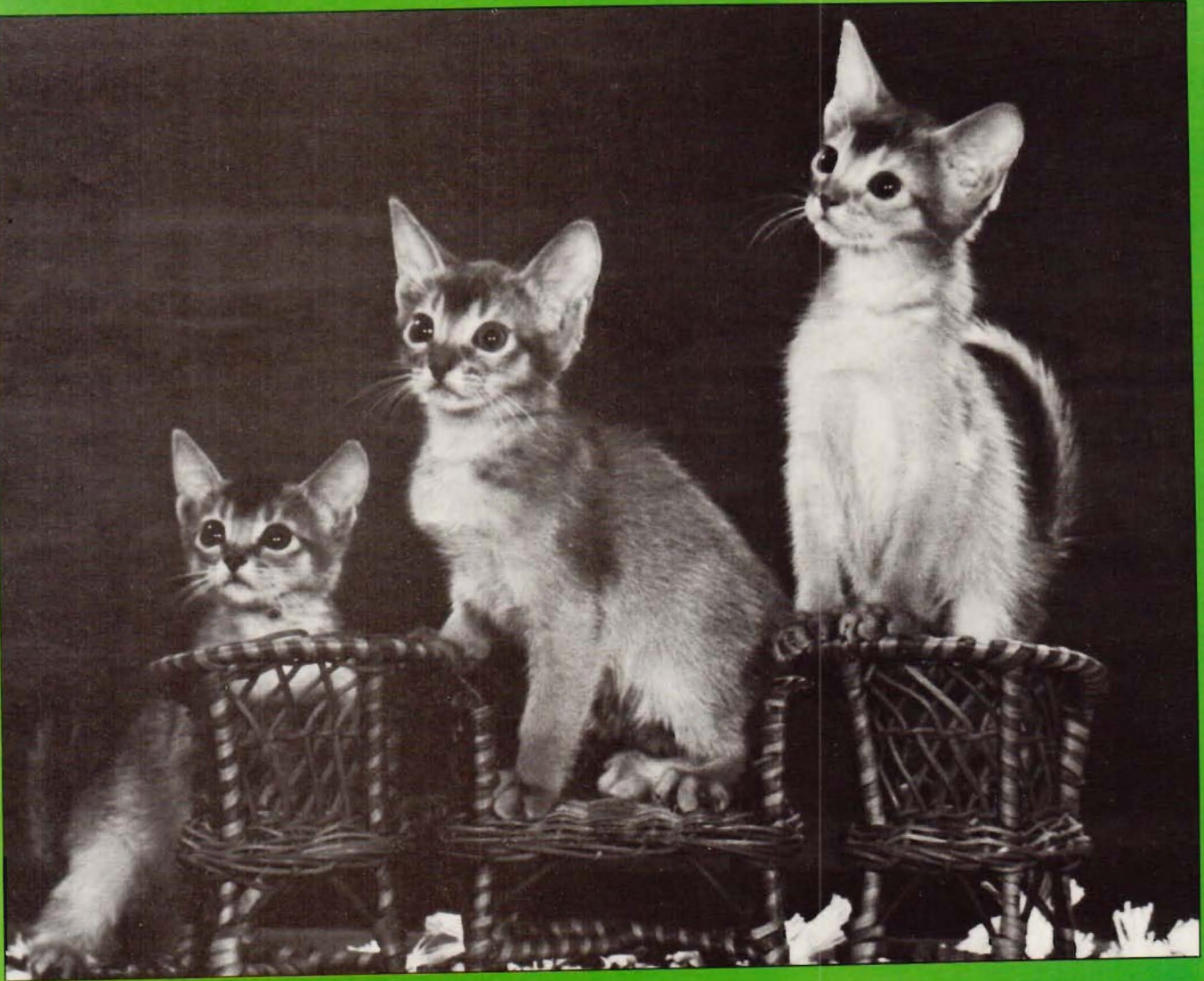
Photo: Alice Su



In Canada and Britain, red Abys, like Grand Champion Abydos Phoenix, are described as sorrel to clarify that the brownish red color of the Aby is not produced by the same gene as the red in other cats.

a fine comb, such as a baby comb or flea comb, and your damp hands. There is no doubt your Aby will love every minute of it, and you will not have the problem of hair all over the furniture, nor will your pet be bothered with hair balls. Clean his ears with a cotton swab about once a week; your vet or breeder can show you how. Claws should be trimmed about every 10 days. Bathing your Aby is necessary only when he has gotten into something he should not have—unless you have a show cat. Show cats must be bathed more often, but it will be necessary to get to know your cat's coat especially well because too much bathing will deplete the natural oils and possibly dry out and damage the coat.

Aby owners who give their cats good care, ample opportunity to exercise and lots of loving attention will be rewarded with years of lively companionship from that very special domestic cat that is sometimes called "the miniature cougar." 🐾



A tabby origin for the Abyssinian has been suggested as the reason for the rings and bars that sometimes show up on Aby kittens. A broken necklace of darker hair is still tolerated in the breed, but an unbroken necklace is considered a disqualifying fault in the show ring.

Ruddy kittens are sometimes quite dark at birth. It can take several months for these cats to develop the beautifully ticked coats they will have as adults.

ON OVERLEAF: This magnificent ruddy Abyssinian is Grand Champion Fleetwood Mack, owned by Connie Roberts and Dee Johnson of Roseville, California.

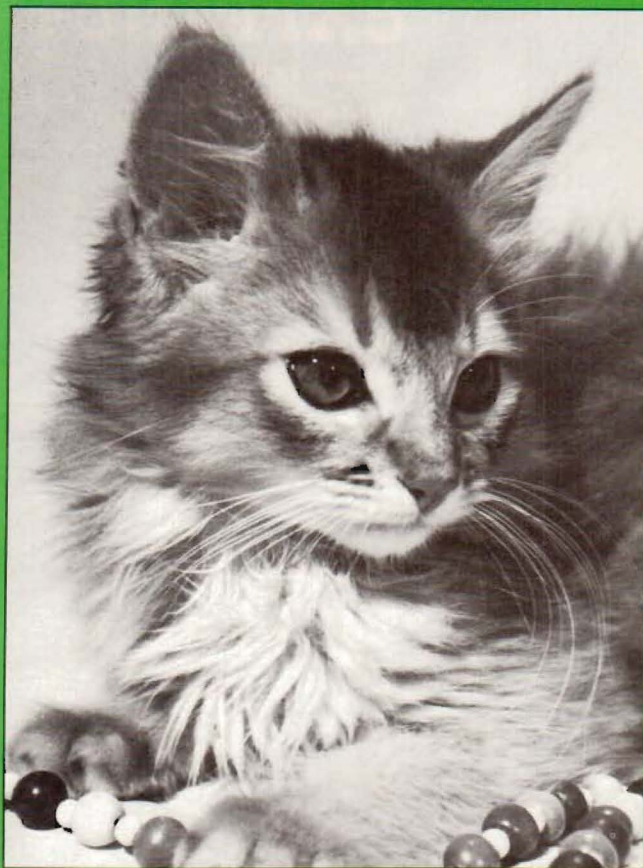


Photo: Louise Hughes

The Somali is the longhaired version of the Abyssinian. Instead of only two or three bands of ticking on each hair, the Somali can have as many as a dozen on the longer hairs.

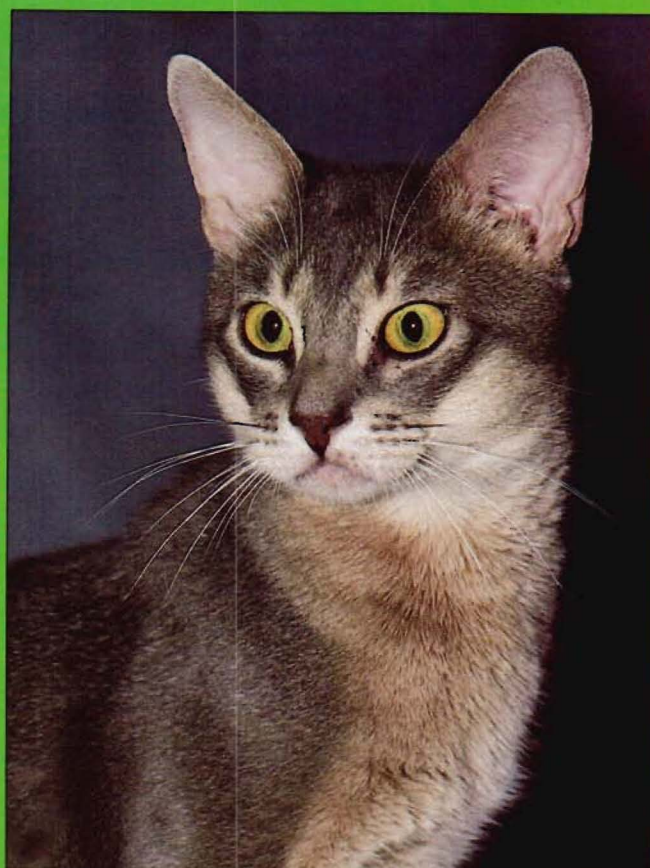


Photo: Dorothy Holby

Blue Abys, like Jaanus Starbuck, owned and bred by Arthur Nelson and Joan Arnoldi, fit the standard for reds and ruddies exactly, except for the blue coloring.

Although the most popular variety of Abyssinians is the ruddy, the newer colors of red, blue and lilac have also been well accepted by the public—perhaps because no matter what the color these cats remain playful and affectionate all their lives.

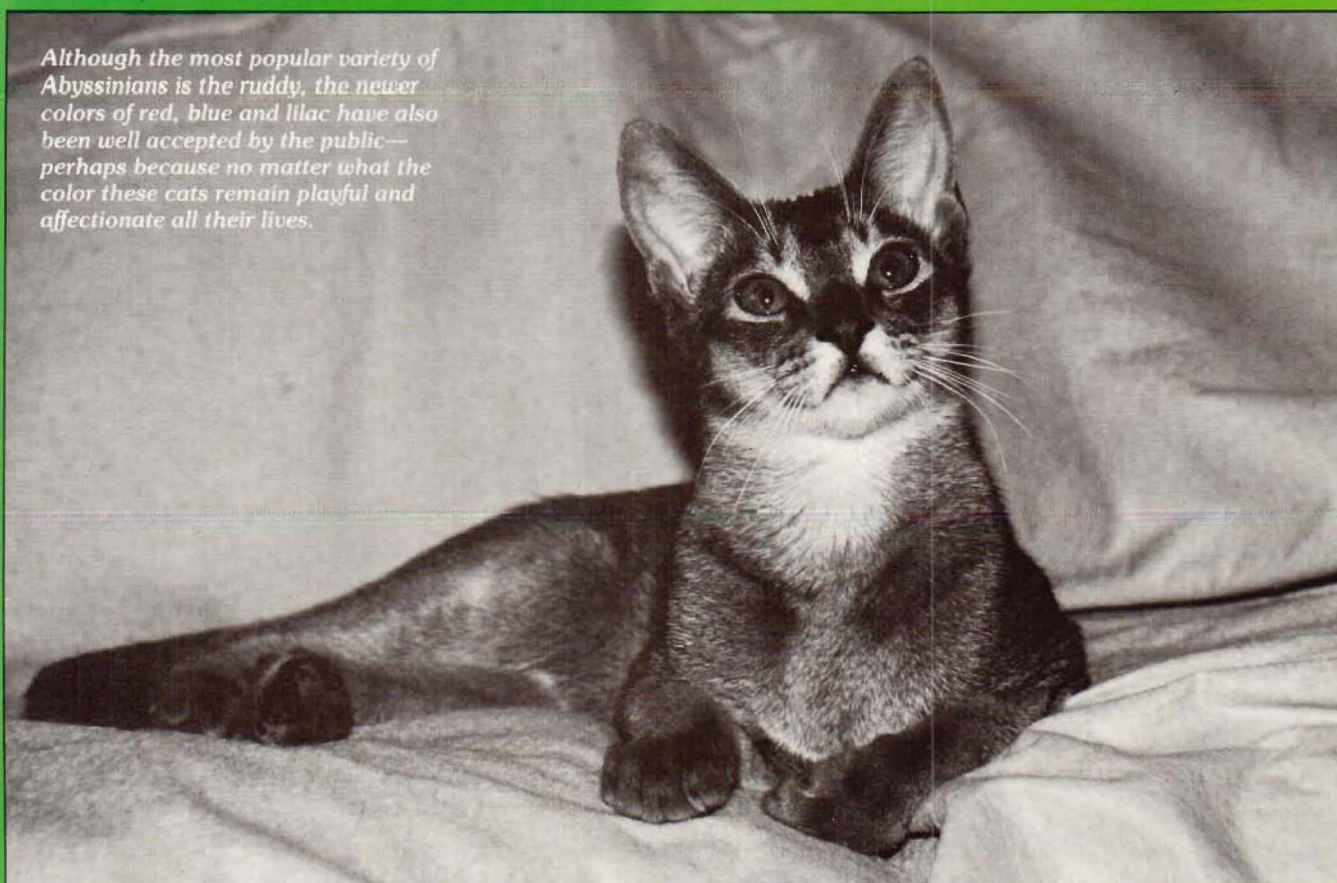


Photo: Dorothy Holby