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Breeding Abys “Down Under”

Tour this award-winning Australian cattery.

by Dorothy Holby

ALTHOUGH George Kennedy of Sydney, Australia, is a very serious breeder of Abyssinian cats, you have to laugh when you hear him describe his Abys.

George readily admits that not only are his cats affectionate, very curious and unusually intelligent, but they are also “honest thieves.” “They steal from our plates without waiting for our backs to be turned,” he explains. “And some of them give the distinct impression of having a sense of humor.”

Abys were somewhat rare in Australia in 1973 when George and his wife, Julie, were introduced to this breed at a cat show. It was love at first sight and shortly thereafter they purchased a 3-year-old ruddy female. Over the past several years, through breeding good local stock to imports from England and the U.S., their “international” cattery has produced many outstanding cats. Incidentally, not only did the Kennedys import the

first ruddy American Aby into Australia but also the first blue Aby.

Currently the Kennedys keep 12 adult Abys along with one or two litters of kittens. Four adult cats, which are rotated every two to three months, plus the kittens reside in the house.

There are four large general runs, two of which have long internal corridors accessible to the cats. The studs have two 9½ foot by 4 foot runs under the house (the Kennedy home is built on a slope) with 3½ foot square outside annexes. All of the runs have large fiberglass and timber sleeping quarters, shelves, climbing ledges, scratching posts and chairs, as well as ample space for sunning. Though the climate is similar to that of Los Angeles, all the cats enjoy the warmth of electric blankets about five months of the year.

The Kennedys live on a quiet street in West Pymble, a suburb of Sydney. Their home is situated on a 60 by 180 foot lot and is bordered by a tall fence. Trees and bushes are abundant; there’s even a small “jungle” plus a spacious area under the house where the cats can explore and hide from the weather.

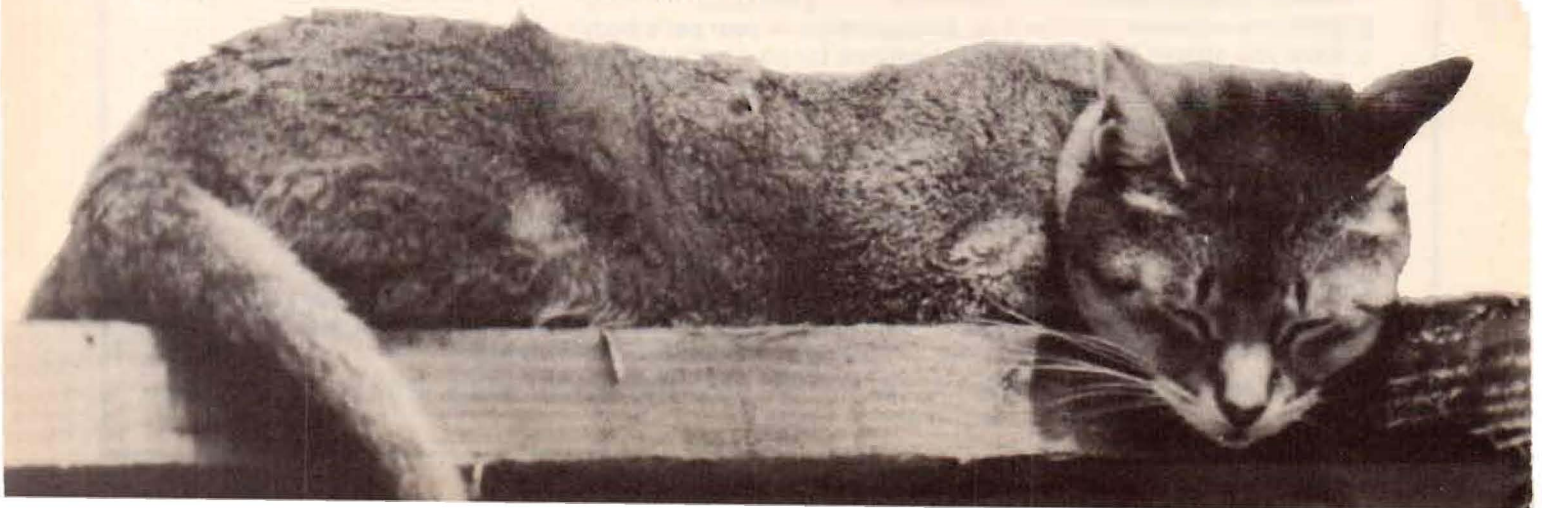
When either of the Kennedys is

home, which is most of the time, the three neutered males and the females currently on the “pill” (Ovarid) are allowed out in the garden during the day. The two studs are also permitted to go outdoors occasionally, but separately and under very strict supervision.

The only cats who don’t go into the house at all are the two studs and dual grand champion (entire) and grand champion (neuter) Optima Suleyman, who sired nearly 150 kittens before being neutered at age 7. It was hoped that Suleyman would stop spraying and could become a house pet. Unfortunately, such was not the case. According to George, “To say that Suleyman still sprays a bit would be like saying that Attila the Hun was a bit bloodthirsty!”

The Kennedys have a total of four grand champions plus a number of champions, including a ruddy American stud, Lakme Negusa Nagasht, who, on his way to Australia, became the first foreign-born Aby champion in England. Other grand champions are (neuter) Nile Blue Riband and Lohrengel Barrow Bambi III (imported from the U.S.), both blues. Grand Champion Nile Carmina Burana, who “represents a carefully planned

Champion Optima Amber Lotis enjoys catnapping on the back fence. Lottie was Kennedy’s second brood queen but has been a spay for many years and is now 11 years old.



intermingling of the best of American, English and Australian lines," is a red Aby. George confesses that ruddy is his favorite color "by a whisker." He hastens to add, "I mean blue isn't far behind, and neither is red," indicating that he is completely under the spell of the particular Aby he is talking about at the moment.

Australian Shows

A cat is awarded the title of champion and then grand champion in Australia through gaining points by winning "Challenges." A Challenge is awarded to the best cat of a given breed, color and sex, provided it meets the standard according to the judge. Because it is compulsory to enter every adult cat in the appropriate open class, competition with the top cats cannot be avoided. In New South Wales, the Australian state where the Kennedys reside, all cat shows are single ring. Since four to seven Challenges are required for a cat to become a champion, depending on the number of opponents beaten, the rank of champion is highly prized.

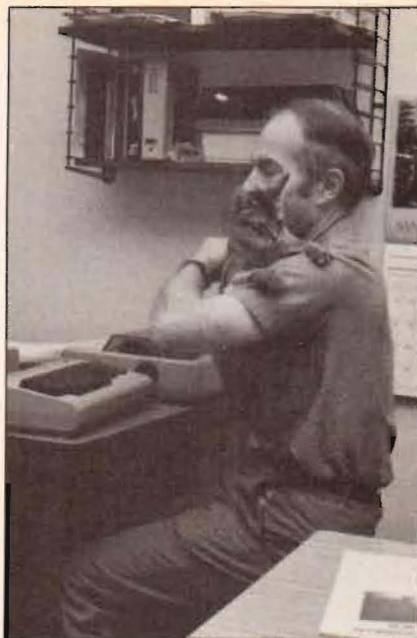
It is not easy to accumulate points. As George Kennedy puts it, "To get its paws on the first rung of the ladder leading to championship, a novice cat must beat all other cats of its breed, color and sex present at the shows, including grand champions." George points out that this practice can have serious consequences.

"When Suleyman was at the peak of his career, he and a cousin belonging to a good friend won such a high percentage of Challenges between them that no other ruddy male became even a champion in New South Wales for two and a half years!"

Once a cat is a champion, it must gain 70 points if male, or 60 if female or desexed, to become a grand champion. A Challenge is worth 11 points plus 1 point for each cat beaten, with a maximum of 20 points. Five to seven Challenges are needed for a cat to become a grand champion.

I asked George how many times he shows his cats annually.

"I attend an average of about 18 shows per year, which is just about the maximum a Sydney exhibitor could attend. We have a rule preventing any cat or kitten from being shown more frequently than two weeks apart. Our shows are consequently held at two-week intervals, with a long break in the summer. I actually went to 20 shows in 1984,



When George Kennedy and his wife Julie first set eyes on an Aby at a 1973 cat show, it was love at first sight. Pictured are George and Grand Champion Lohrengel Barrow Bambi III.



The Kennedys have a total of four grand champions. Grand Champion Nile Blue Riband, a 2-year-old blue neutered male, is shown here in the garden where he spends his days. At night, he stays in one of the runs.

but that meant going interstate for three of them. Because our kitten prices are much lower than in the States, while air fares are higher and distances are great, showing interstate is infrequent. I normally take three to five cats and kittens to a show."

Cattery Operation

"My wife and I divide the cattery work between us," George explained. "And since she is bound to read this, I had better admit that she does the greater share. She does most of the cleaning and medicating, half the feeding, all the buying of cat food and taking cats to the vet for daytime emergencies. I take them to the vet for vaccinations and tests, give them their evening meal and late night cuddles.

"I do the majority of the construction work that's required, all of the paper work including registrations and show entries, all of the weighing of the cats and kittens and most of the grooming. I am also the masochist who takes them to shows," continued George.

All the cats are handled, groomed, petted and checked over every day. They are all vaccinated for rhinotracheitis, calici, and feline infectious enteritis once a year and are tested for FeLV annually. The Kennedys were the first Australian Aby breeders to test cats regularly and have never had a positive FeLV result.

The breeding cats are tested for PRA once when they are over the age of 2 years. The results have always been negative. PRA, progressive retinal atrophy, was first encountered in Sweden and then Finland in the late 1970s. Progressive blindness begins at the age of 2, which is also the age it becomes detectable with tests. Researchers in Sweden state that it is genetically transmitted through a recessive gene so that any offspring of a cat afflicted by PRA is also a carrier of it. Although there is no record of any breed having it in Australia, all of the Kennedy's cats are tested since they export to Scandinavia.

George is not aware of any Australian Aby with FIP; therefore, no testing is done to determine the presence of feline infectious peritonitis.

The kittens are handled from birth in the nursery but are kept strictly separate from show cats. They are gradually introduced to the other cats after they are 3 to 4 weeks old, if the mother doesn't mind. Longer visits to the rest of the house are permitted from about 7 weeks. At 10 weeks of age they are allowed to sleep anywhere they like in the house. George goes on to say:

"We'll let the kittens sleep in our bed if the current 'bed cat' doesn't mind and if they behave themselves. This they seldom do. If there is one →

CATTERY PROFILE

continued

characteristic common to nearly all the kittens we've bred, it is that, until they are properly trained, they are the world's worst destroyers of toes moving about under the blanket. They are generally heaved out of our bedroom around midnight.

"All cats are fed twice per day, except kittens and pregnant/nursing queens who are fed on demand; there is always food left for them. We also give extra meals to cats who look a bit thin and any who con us into feeding them more by looking woebegone and pointing an accusing paw at an empty dish. Some of them are superb thieves, and one learned how to open the fridge! We sold her."

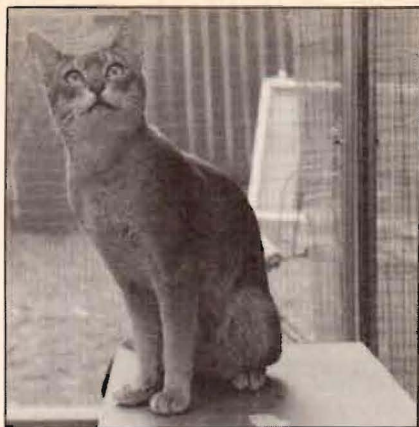
Raw meat and canned foods in equal proportions is the general diet, with calcium carbonate and a vitamin/mineral preparation called SA37 added.

"None of our cats drink milk because it isn't offered. Most of them like the grated cheese that we buy in large bags. Several like ice cream (chocolate is preferred to strawberry) and, of course, anything that happens to be on our plates—steak, ham, Chinese food, pizza. We get an excellent selection of commercial canned foods too, which gives the cats the opportunity to turn up their noses at a wide range of dishes rather than just one or two."

According to George, it is common in Australia to feed cats chopped or minced kangaroo. The cats seem to prefer it to beef and lamb. It is also cheap, plentiful, nutritious and believed to be parasite-free, which beef may not be. Apparently the kangaroo population often reaches pest proportions and presents a problem to farmers in the "outback." As a result, the kangaroos are slaughtered and the meat is utilized.

Pet quality kittens are sold for \$75 to \$105. Show/breeding quality kittens go for \$170 to \$260, although George says a kitten would have to be really special to justify charging \$260.

Instinct and experience determine the decision to let a kitten go to a brand new cat owner. The potential buyer is asked many questions, and children in the family are invited to come along so that the Kennedys can observe how they handle the kittens. After the kitten is settled in the new home, George and Julie like to



The outdoor stud runs lead to a spacious enclosed area under the house.



The Kennedys imported the first blue Aby in Australia. Champion Nile Heavenly One, a blue female, is shown here with a daughter, Nile Turquoise, also a blue female.

visit at least once, if the kitten lives within a reasonable distance. New owners are always informed that should they ever need to get rid of the cat, whether it's next week or several years later, the Kennedys will take it back.

There are no sales contracts. New pet owners receive a receipt, weight chart, pedigree and samples of the food, vitamins and calcium that the kitten is used to. The registration certificate is sent with veterinary proof of neutering. Individuals buying a kitten for breeding may receive an 8-generation pedigree.

"We've sent cats to every mainland state in Australia (all right, so we have only five mainland states!), 10 to New Zealand, 2 to Norway and 1 to Sweden. The majority of them have been ruddy, but there's been a fair sprinkling of reds and blues.

"Surely you jest!" answered George when I asked if his cattery business showed a profit.

"If we depended on breeding Abys-

sinians for our livelihood, starvation would have claimed us many moons ago. Indeed, if I hadn't written a successful textbook published and used in the U.S., we'd have to scale down our 'business' because even my good salary wouldn't be able to cope with our financial 'success.' The expenses are all disguised so as not to frighten us. Cat food is figured in as part of our general food bill and I deliberately don't keep track of show entry costs or general expenses. We pay vet bills on the spot by credit card and I have trained myself not to identify them when checking the monthly bill."

With his fulltime position as supervising engineer with the government-owned corporation responsible for all of Australia's electronic international communications, you would think George Kennedy would have enough to do. In spite of his busy professional life, however, George somehow manages to find a spare hour here and there to manage his cattery, assist in organizing national cat shows, exhibit his Abys, and in 1983, co-edit *The Abyssinian Breeder*, a magazine established to promote a continuing flow of information among Australian cat clubs. Breeding Abys isn't just an idle hobby, either. George has definite goals for his breeding program.

"Our original stock consisted of local or English cats with head type and color ranging from above average to excellent, splendid ticking, lovely natures, too much white under the chin and quite inadequate clarity. We subsequently acquired American Abys with splendid color (including under the chin) and ticking, good natures, total clarity, but heads too short and round, and ears too short by our standards. We are still trying to marry their best qualities.

"Abys in Australia are now considerably better than even just a few years ago. I believe that our best are equal to the best anywhere. Abys did superbly in Australia in 1984, taking record numbers of Best In Show Awards. Interestingly enough, a large proportion of the Abys doing so well are half-American and they do much better than their parents did, whether they were local or imported. I am delighted to say that the trend to import from the U.S., which I started, has continued. Some excellent cats have recently come here from California. The result of this continuing importation and interbreeding with local stock has already increased the proportion of truly outstanding cats." 🐾