

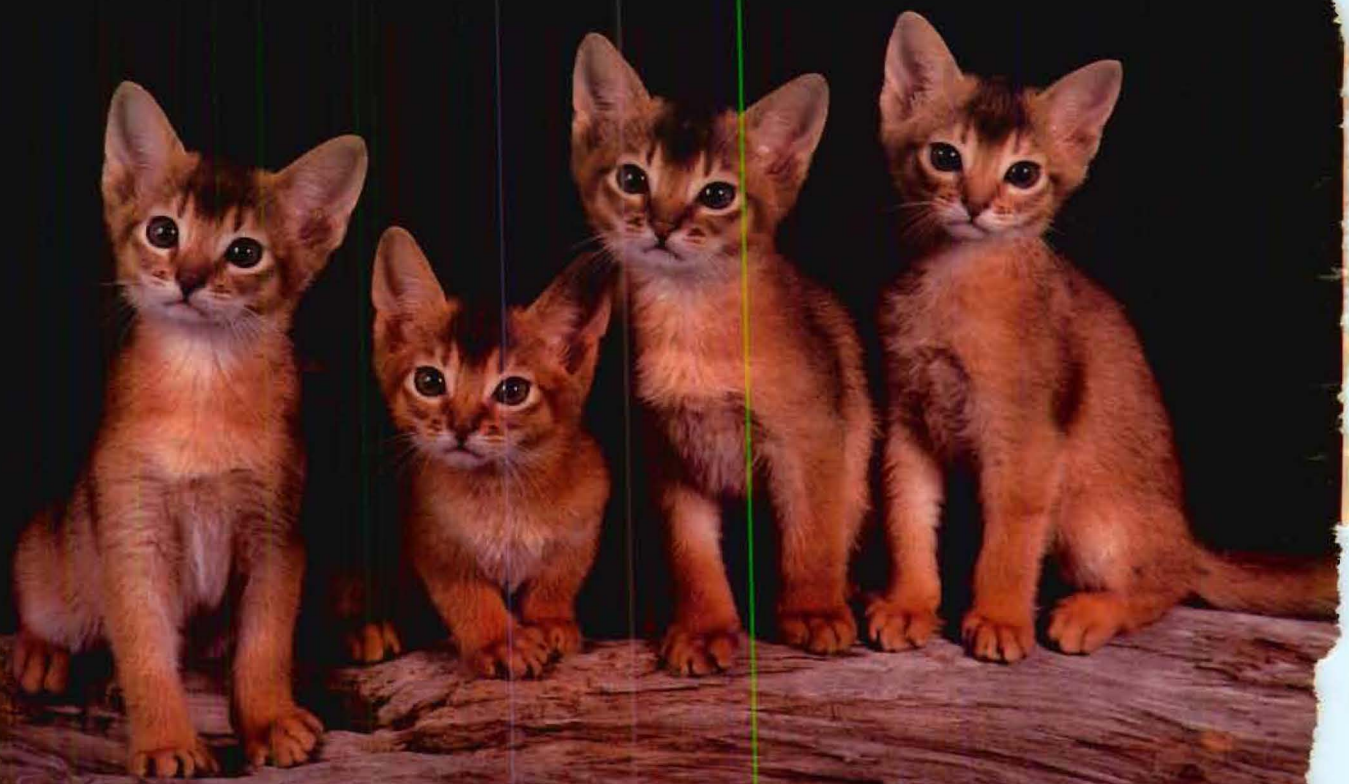
Cats

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Aby kittens bred and photographed
by Donna Coss (Sundance Cattery) of
Marengo/Illinois.

THE ABYSSINIAN

Among shorthair breeds the Abyssinian is part bridesmaid and part bride. For while the Abyssinian still trails the ubiquitous Siamese in total number of cats registered each year, the Aby has surpassed its rival—in one association at least—in the number of cats present and competing at shows: by a margin of twenty cats in the 1985-'86 show season (2,453 to 2,433) and thirty cats the year before (2,695 to 2,665). Six years ago Siamese outnumbered Abys by more than a thousand cats in the show ring.

The Aby road has been ever widening for a number of reasons: elegant conformation, resplendent color, bright-as-polished-brass intelligence, and an active, endearing personality. Indeed, it could be said that the Abyssinian motor has but two speeds—fast and off.

"An Aby is either alert or asleep," says Maureen Nottingham (Nile cattery). "You rarely see them in a relaxed position when they're awake because when they are awake, they're constantly on the go."

In addition, says Nottingham, "Abys love affection. They always want to be around you. They don't have much voice to speak of, so they're very demonstrative. If you pass by one, he'll gently let you know that he's there."

The Abyssinian is believed by many of its advocates to be the descendant of cats that were worshipped in Egypt more than four thousand years ago. And there is no disclaiming a resemblance between today's Abyssinian and the cats in early Egyptian painting and sculpture. Other Abyssinian boosters trace their cats' origins to the jungles of North Africa, where a wild cat with a coat that was said to resemble a rabbit's once roamed. Still other Aby fanciers—perhaps more inclined to leave old enough alone—believe that the Aby is descended from nothing more remote or exotic than mid-nineteenth-century British domestic tabbies.

"In truth," wrote Dr. Rosemonde S. Peltz nearly fifteen years ago, "the history of the Abyssinian could begin wherever a red tabby walks because similar cats exist in all countries. What is important, Dr. Peltz contended, is not where the Abyssinian may have originated, but "what the British did to and for the breed, for there is no doubt that the Abyssinian was made in England."

That fine distinction between raw material and finished product having been observed, we should note that even though Dr. Peltz insisted "there is no record of an Abyssinian cat imported to England," other writers mention that an Aby named Zula was said to have come to the British Isles near the end of the Abyssinian War in 1868. Yet if Zula did exist, says *The Book of the Cat*, "this and possibly other imports were bred with similarly marked cats of unknown origin."

Historical speculation about the origins of any breed, no matter how breathless that speculation might be, must ultimately-like all analogies—limp. And Dr. Peltz's following comment about Abyssinians can be applied to other breeds as well: "The intricate succession of legends thrown up like clouds of smoke are difficult to get through without clouding the vision."

What we do know is that the Abyssinian was initially listed as a separate breed—and referred to by the name Abyssinian for the first time—in 1882. The Stud Book of the National Cat Club in England indicates that the first Abys were registered in 1896. The stud book for 1900-1905 lists twelve Abyssinians. Every one of those cats had at least one parent of non-Abyssinian (or unknown) ancestry.

The Abyssinian came to this country early in the 1900s. A male named Aluminum II and a female named Salt were exhibited at a show in Boston in 1909. But there is no record of any other Abyssinians being imported until the mid-thirties and the first recorded Aby birth in this country took place in 1935.

The Abyssinian was just beginning to recover from the deprivations of the first World War when it was subjected to the whims of the second. The breed was especially hard hit in England, where scarcely more than a dozen Abys remained after the fighting and the bombing had stopped. Thus in four decades the Abyssinian has gone from near extinction to near supremacy among shorthair cats.

There are certain breeds which can be rank ordered on the basis of a single, defining characteristic. In Persians it's nose length. In Scottish Folds, it's the tightness of the ears and in Manx, the absence of a tail. In Abyssinians the essential ingredient is color.

"That's what catches your eye," says Maureen Nottingham. "The unusual color. If an Aby doesn't have outstanding color, there's nothing there as far as appearance is concerned."

Dr. Peltz contends that *ticked*, *ruddy*, and *resilient* best describe the Abyssinian coat. "All other words," she says, "are elaboration."

The ticking that distinguishes the Aby from other cats is the result of bands of dark color on the individual hairs in the coat. The more bands per hair the merrier: two to three are required, four to five (or more) are preferred. Not only are these bands the Abyssinian's distinguishing external characteristic; but—says *The Book of the Cat*—the Aby is without parallel in the world of pedigreed cats because it "is based on a single mutant coat pattern gene" not found in any other breed. Thus "no other breed is so exclusive in terms of colour genetics."

Although the Abyssinian comes in four flavors—ruddy, red, blue, and sorrel (or fawn)—the most frequently ordered is the ruddy, which outnumbers all the other colors combined by roughly three to one. Interestingly, the blue (or silver) Aby, a recent addition to the show bench, may have been the most dominant color in the early days of the breed. How else do you account for names like Aluminum, Quick Silver, Silver Memelik, Silver Fairy?

The names of Abyssinians also comprise a commentary on the theories of the breed's origin, with blue collar handles like Bottle, Peaty, Woggs, Chipsie, and Pepper giving way to the gilded Kasir, Ras Seyum, and Ras Dashan as theories of the Aby's royal antecedents gained converts. But as the Bard himself once observed: A ruddy by any other name would look as neat.

by Phil Maggitti