

Round, spread-apart eyes

Large, wide-based ears

Smooth, medium-wedge head with a blunt muzzle

Lithe, firm, muscular body

Even, bright blue color

Short, dense, plush coat

Long, tapered tail

Long, fine-boned legs

Tsar Blu's Zarin
Grand Champion
National Third Best Cat, CFA 1988-89
Donna Fuller, Connie Stewart & Linda Swope

PHOTOS BY CHANAN

Rhapsody in Blue

The Russian Blue

A breed of extraordinary beauty, elegance and charm, the Russian Blue has earned its well-deserved reputation in the U.S. cat fancy. Currently the 12th most popular shorthair according to Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) breed registration totals, this cat is definitely well loved. The Russian Blue has maintained a steady following in the 1990s—one that shows no signs of diminishing. While numbers are still relatively small, breeders report waiting lists of fanciers looking to become rookie RB fanatics.

"As companions, they are loving and intelligent with a very forgiving nature," says Alison Colby of the Russian Blue Tarydan Cattery in Illinois. Their temperament is very aristocratic. The mature Russian Blue is an elegant, self-assured cat. This can hardly be surprising, since today's Russian Blue is reputed to have descended from the Royal Cat of the Russian Czars and was a favorite pet of Queen Victoria. This breed's most distinctive feature, besides its personality, is its beautiful double coat—so beautiful, in fact, that rumor has it the Russian Blue used to be trapped for its fur. Fortunately, today's fanciers prefer their Russian Blue fur with a cat firmly attached. The fur is short, but so dense and plush that it stands away from the body. You can draw pictures in the fur with your fingers and the patterns remain until your feline friend gets bored and walks off. Since the coat is dense and possesses a thick undercoat, the RB does require some grooming to look its best.

The Russian Blue comes in one color only, as one might expect—blue. In cat

fancy terms, the color blue is actually gray. The guard hairs bear silver tipping that reflects light, giving the coat a silver sheen. Combined with the vivid green eyes and a lithe body type, the Russian Blue is a strikingly beautiful creature.

The Blue's Origins

In the late 1800s, the Russian Blue was well known in Britain, but had existed much earlier than that. Exactly how many years is not known since the Blue's origins are largely based on conjecture. In the past, the breed was called the "Archangel Blue" because of the story that it developed in northwest Rus-

FAST FACTS

Origin: Russia

Date of Birth: unknown

Hair Length: shorthair

Standard Weight: adult males, 8 to 12 pounds; adult females, 6 to 8 pounds

Colors and Patterns: solid blue only; vivid green eyes

sia, then in the 1860s was transported to Great Britain from the White Sea port town of Archangel (Arkhangelsk to the natives). No direct evidence confirms this—but there is no evidence to disprove it either. According to Richard Gebhardt's *A Standard Guide to Cat Breeds*, very similar cats can be found in the colder regions of Russia today. The Russian Blue's dense, plush coat would certainly be an advantage in an area like Archangel which is only 150 miles south of the Arctic Circle. However, the cats most likely did not originate in

Archangel itself but were probably transported from other parts of Russia and Scandinavian countries.

The documented history of the breed began during the late 1800s in Britain. In 1875, a Russian Blue was first shown at the Crystal Palace in London under the name Archangel Cat. Writers of the time described RBs as shorthaired, solid blue cats with long, slender bodies, small triangular heads and exceptionally beautiful, light silver-blue coats. In those days the coat was thick, dense and glossy—very similar to today's Blue.

Unfortunately for the Russian Blue, the British cat fancy grouped all shorthaired blue cats into one category, despite obvious differences in coat, body and head type. Since Harrison Weir, the founder of the British cat fancy, favored the sturdy British Blues, they invariably won while the RBs—as beautiful and elegant as they were—lost out to their stockier competitors. Naturally, cat fanciers liked to win when they stepped into the show halls, so they gravitated toward showing the British Blue. But even Weir admitted that the Russian Blues were of a deeper, purer color than the English cats. In the 1800s, the RB had deep orange-colored eyes instead of the vivid green of today.

Because they were shown in the same category, breeders crossbred the British and the Russian Blue and by the beginning of the 20th century the two varieties "showed comparatively small differences in type," according to *A Complete Cat Encyclopedia*.

Finally in 1912, the Governing Council of the Cat Fancy (GCCF) in Britain recognized the Russian Blue as

INSIDER TIPS:

Litters tend to be small; three kittens per litter are average. It's always best to see the cattery, the kittens and the parents before agreeing to buy, but, because the breed is so rare, this is not always possible. Some Russian Blue breeders will ship kittens nationally and internationally; others will ship only within the United States; still others prefer to place their kittens locally. If you are not able to see the specific kitten that you are looking to buy, then ask for pictures and references and find out about the breeder from the breeder's cat association. Ask for the name and number of the breeder's veterinarian and ask the doctor's opinion of the cattery.

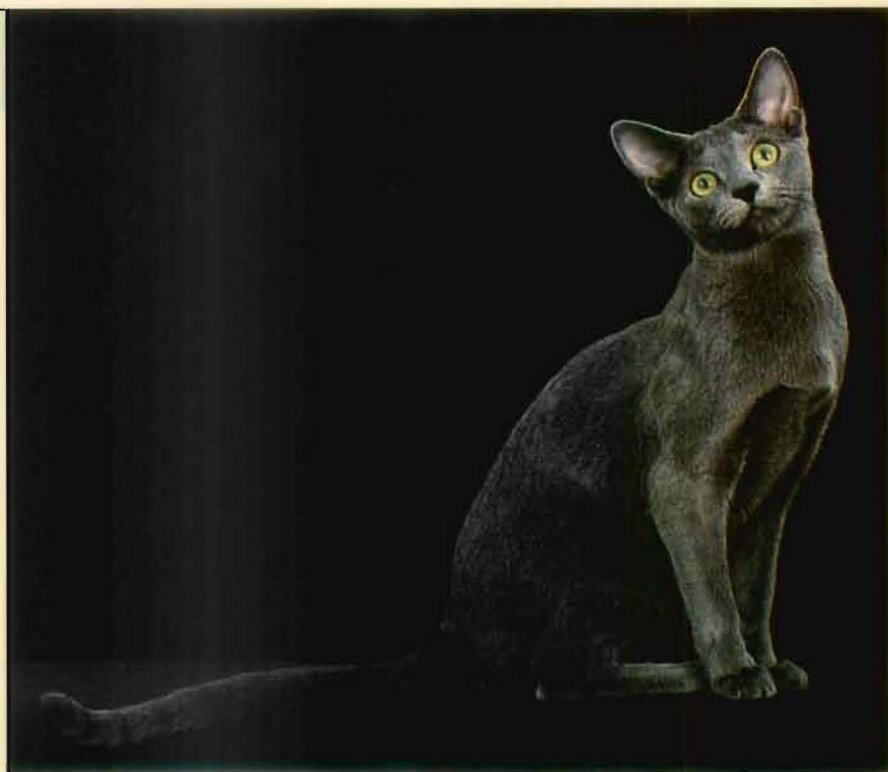
Pet-quality Russian Blue kittens cost \$400 to \$650. Most breeders do not differentiate between breeder and show quality. "If it's good enough to breed," says Annette Wilson of the Winterwynd Cattery in Baltimore, Maryland, "it should be good enough to show." Show-quality kittens sell for \$800 to \$2,000, depending upon location, bloodlines, breeder and show prospects.

The breed is relatively rare, and breeders often maintain lists of prospective owners waiting for litters to be born. Male kittens are usually easier to acquire than females, because females are often kept for breeding.

Sometimes, adult Russian Blues are retired from a breeding or show career and placed with good homes. Retirees, usually two to five years old, sell for \$100 to \$250, although, again, the price varies according to location, breeder and cat.

When choosing a kitten, keep in mind that Russian Blues can be reserved around strangers. If a kitten is shy or standoffish, that doesn't mean he or she won't make a great companion once you establish a relationship. Take your time when meeting the kittens. Sit quietly near them and observe them, rather than picking them up immediately. Tempt them with a toy and be patient. Soon the kittens' natural curiosity will overwhelm them and they'll venture nearer.

Be sure to question the breeder about the amount of handling and attention each kitten receives.



Grand Champion Pavlova Mo' Betta Etta

a breed in its own right and granted it a class of its own. The class was divided into "Blue British-type" and "Blue Foreign-type," to the delight of the Russian Blue fanciers. Interest in the breed was rekindled and the RB made good progress until World War II, when it nearly ceased to exist, as did many breeds. In those turbulent times, few British fanciers had the leisure to think about preserving the breed. But after the war, independent groups of breeders in Britain and Scandinavia worked to bring the Blue back from the brink of extinction. Since so few pure Russian Blues remained, they accomplished this by crossbreeding with other breeds. In Britain, the Russian Blue was crossed with blue point Siamese and British Blues. In the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Finland and Denmark, breeders crossed blue cats from Finland with Siamese in an attempt to recreate the breed. Because of this, the coat, body and head type varied greatly depending upon the location and the breeders involved.

The first Russian Blue arrived in America in the early 1900s, but it wasn't until after World War I that U.S. cat fanciers noticed the breed. Russian Blues were imported into the United States in

larger numbers during the early 1940s, but the breed didn't really catch on until the 1960s because of the lack of consistency in the breeding stock. Some breeders were working with the stocky Scandinavian lines, while others were working with the svelte British stock—neither of which met the ideal show standard. By that time, the Korat and the blue British Shorthair were developing as breeds in the United States and fanciers that loved blue cats gravitated toward these breeds instead of the Russian Blue. However, in 1964 the first Russian Blue achieved CFA Grand Champion status but even then, the Russian Blue lines varied greatly in appearance.

In the late 1960s breeders began working to combine the existing bloodlines to achieve a more uniform look. The best qualities of the Scandinavian and the British lines were combined to produce a cat that looks very much like it did when it first sailed out of Archangel. The Scandinavian cats provided the brilliant green eyes and the British cats graciously donated the plush coat. Twenty years of selective breeding later, Russian Blue breeders have achieved the beauty and consistency the breed enjoys today.

Success in the show ring followed the conformation changes, and even

DID YOU KNOW? This elite blue-blooded breed has been known variously as Archangel Cat, Spanish Blue, Foreign Blue and Maltese Blue.

though numbers are still quite small (619 were registered with the CFA in 1998), the breed has a strong following and does well in national and regional shows. The relatively small group of American Russian Blue breeders is close-knit and possessive of their breed. "Most reputable



Champion Tsar Blu's Vladimir of Hono Hono

breeders do not over-breed in order to safeguard health as well as temperament," says Annette Wilson of the Wysterwynd Cattery in Baltimore, Maryland.

Charming Personality

Of course, it's not only the Russian Blue's beauty that has fanciers singing their praises. Intelligent and devoted with sweet, quiet voices, the Russian Blue is a gentle cat that wears a perpetual Mona Lisa smile. Russian Blues are not as clingy as some other breeds—if you want a cat that's always glued to your leg, choose another breed.

It takes some time to develop a relationship with a Russian Blue. Blues don't immediately give you their trust. But once a Russian Blue bonds with you and accepts you as part of its family, you'll

have an ever-faithful, unobtrusive but ever-present companion for life, one that will give you 200 percent of its devotion and love. "They are doting with their immediate family," says Alison Colby, "but do tend to be shy with strangers. I like to keep a few pictures to show off, since visitors tend to see only a blue streak!"

Fanciers say this reservation around strangers is a sign of Blues' extreme intelligence; they know better than to talk to strangers. Around friends they are playful, self-assured and loads of fun to watch. Moderately active, Russian Blues love interactive toys best, but will happily entertain themselves by pouncing on catnip toys—or merely gazing out a window—if you aren't available to join in the fun. They are athletic too, and can usually be found perched on the highest point in the room. "Their athletic ability is wonderful," says Colby, "They absolutely love high places and are definite shoulder babies. One of my females leaps three feet in the air and she can land on my shoulder with barely a scratch."

Russian Blues dislike changes in their usual routine more than most cats, and will complain about the service when dinner isn't on time. They are also particular about the cleanliness of their litter boxes and will turn up their noses if the box isn't kept up to their standards.

Russian Blues are intelligent and, as cats go, relatively easy to train. They understand the word no and if you treat them with love and consistency they are usually accommodating to your wishes. With their elusive smile, devoted personality and their elegance and beauty, Russian Blues are the cat's meow. 🐱

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*An officer of CFA was consulted for this article.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

I found a shelter cat that looks just like a Russian Blue. Can I show it as a purebred?

Without the paper trail of the cat's genetic heritage, the cat can only be shown in the household pet category. It's not only color that makes a Russian Blue a purebred. The cat also must have a documented family history of Blue to Blue breeding, and must conform to a specific head, body and coat type, as defined in the breed standard. While a random-bred domestic cat may look like a Russian Blue, the uncertain mix of genes means that the domestic likely will not breed true—which is not to say that a mixed-breed cat won't make as worthy a mate as the finest grand champion. "The color blue is an uncommonly occurring color, which makes it seem rare, but it does happen in random-bred cats," says Wilson. A purebred Russian Blue, with its established bloodline and background of selective breeding, will consistently produce the unusually colored offspring.

What's the difference between the Russian Blue, the Chartreux, the British Blue and the Korat?

While all of these are solid blue cats each has its own distinct history, conformation and personality. Each originated in a different part of the world, and the Russian Blue is apparently not related to Thailand's Korat, France's Chartreux and Britain's British Blue (now called the British Shorthair). However, all four of these breeds have been around for so long that their ancestries are shrouded in legend so a common origin is certainly possible.

Even the color of solid blue is different for each breed. For example, in the Russian Blue lighter shades of blue are preferred, and the guard hairs are silver tipped giving the cat a silvery sheen. The Chartreux, on the other hand, allows any shade of blue-gray from ash to slate. Body style is very different for each breed. The Russian Blue is fine-boned and lithe, the British Shorthair is compact, the Chartreux is robust, and the Korat's body type falls somewhere in between.