

The Abyssinian Cat

by Vicky Hakin Smith

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"Moderation" is the hall-mark of the Abyssinian. Medium in size and build, graceful, with a lithe, muscular body; as natural a cat as you can get. The typical aby has the look of a jungle cat with bright, expressive eyes and large "listening" ears, alert and interested in everything. Abys are very intelligent, independent animals who like exercise and will spend long periods outdoors if allowed freedom. They are extremely affectionate, and one of their most endearing traits is their habit of head-butting their owners. They are also renowned for their characteristic trill of greeting, quite unlike the normal miaow. For most people, the usual aby with its feral look, like a miniature puma or lynx, is still the most striking, though it is now possible to get an aby in almost any colour. The most important feature, whatever the colour, must be the ticking, for without the ticking it isn't an aby. There is however much more to the aby than its ticking, as any of its devotees can testify.



The Abyssinian has been known in Britain for well over 100 years, making it one of our oldest established breeds. We may never know exactly where it came from. The early breeders were not meticulous in recording details of their cats, nor was there a formal registration system. Mr H. C. Brooke, in his booklet published for the then newly formed Abyssinian Cat Club in 1929, lamented the fact that despite many pleadings he had been unable to accumulate any evidence as to the origins of the breed.

Many Aby owners like to think their cats are descended from the sacred cats of ancient Egypt. They certainly look like the cats depicted in ancient papyri and tomb paintings. There is anecdotal evidence that Mrs Barrett-Lennard, wife of an army captain, brought a cat named Zula into Britain from Abyssinia in 1868. Cats with ticked coats similar to the Abyssinian pattern may be found native in North Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Frances Simpson in "The Book of the Cat" published in 1903 said that "the Abyssinian cat bore a striking resemblance to the Caffre cat". There are Jungle Cats in captivity here who look remarkably like large abyssinians, with warm brown coats showing black ticking, and even a black tail tip, spine line and ear tufts. We know cats were brought into this country by sailors returning home, and it is possible that some of them could have been bred from.

Harrison Weir published the first Standard of Points in 1889 in his book "Our Cats and all about them", in which he described the abyssinian as being "deep brown in colour ticked with black, somewhat resembling the back of a wild (only not so grey) rabbit". At this time they were known by various names, such as Bunny cats, Hare cats, or Ticks.

At the turn of the century, breeders such as Mrs Carew-Cox, Sir Claude Alexander, Major Sam Woodiweiss and his son Sydney, were prominent. Research into old pedigrees, with their exotic and romantic names, has unearthed some fascinating details. Ch. Southampton Red Rust, an exceptional show cat of his day owned by Mr Claude Alexander, was apparently mated to an "Imported African Wild Cat", to produce a cat (registered as an aby) with the name of Goldtick. She in turn was mated to a red self called Ras Brouke, giving us Tim the Harvester. With this mix of recessive genes it is not surprising that oddly coloured kittens popped out several generations later. Progeny with no ticking at all must have been quite common, but were not usually registered or kept for breeding. One notable exception appears to be Woodrooffe Nigra, the dam of Croham Adowa (born in 1933), who appears behind all of today's abyssinians through her son Croham Menelik. She is described in the records as a black Abyssinian - presumably she was a black self. Her parents, Ras Isis and Empress Zaudit, (both abys), must both have carried the non-agouti (self-coloured) gene. The genes responsible for the Abyssinian coat pattern are dominant to most other genes, hiding recessives such as non-agouti, long-hair, other colours and other tabby patterns. Undoubtedly all our early abyssinians were really just good-looking moggies, with their distinctive ticked coats hiding a multitude of recessive genes. It is only within the last 30 years or so that all British-born pedigree cats need to have known antecedents. Before this, a cat could be literally taken off the street and registered according to what it looked like. Small wonder then, that it has taken so long for us to eliminate all unwanted recessive genes from our abys, and hence our strict registration policy, allowing matings between abyssinians only, and no other breed.

For a long time after the war dedicated breeders including Miss Bone (Nigella), Mrs Menezes (Taishun) and Miss Wiseman (Contented) struggled to rebuild the breed from about two dozen cats. Usuals were the only colour recognised for showing, and although other colours (and indeed long-haired cats) must have appeared from time to time in litters, no one mentioned them. Mrs Winsor and others decided to develop the reds after breeding some from a cat obtained from Mrs Menezes, and they were granted recognition in 1963. They were renamed sorrel in 1979 after it was shown that the gene responsible for the colour was a variation of chocolate & not the sex-linked "Orange" gene which gives us true red cats such as the British Red Tabby or Red Persian.

Blues were also being bred from this time, and were given championship status in 1984. Combining the sorrel and dilute genes results in yet another colour, now known as fawn. These too must have been seen for many years before somebody thought they were attractive enough to develop as a breed. Despite setbacks resulting from the colour being misnamed twice - first cream, then lilac - they were granted Provisional status in 1995 and progressed to Championship status effective from June 2000.

Chocolate abyssinians and their dilute (lilac) are also being bred, the gene being introduced from an outcross to a chocolate-point siamese in the 1970's, and several breeders are also working to develop the sex-linked series. These colours currently have Preliminary status, and in open classes are assessed against the standard of points only, and not against each other.

Silver abyssinians were apparently quite popular at the turn of the century. Mr Brooke didn't like them, saying that crossing the usuals with silvers had ruined the colour, resulting in dull, greyish-coloured usuals which had lost the warm ruddy tones in the coat. Perhaps because of this, they do not appear to have been bred since the 1920's and died out here, although Mrs Carew-Cox exported at least two silver abyssinians to America in the early 1900's to found the breed there. In the 1960's the silver gene was reintroduced here by outcrossing to a British Silver Spotted Tabby called Culverden Mercury, and all the silver abyssinians (and somalis) bred in Britain today are descended from this cross. In the silver aby, the rich apricot in the undercoat is replaced by silver, giving an overall cold, sparkling appearance of black ticking on a silver background. It is possible to breed silvers with every colour of ticking, and some of the paler varieties promise to be very pretty. A silver with lilac ticking could well be the nearest we will ever get to seeing a pink cat! It is proving very difficult to eliminate unwanted tarnishing from the coats of silvers, and very few of today's abys have the required clarity of colour seen in breeds such as the British Silver Tabby. The gene responsible for the silver colouration is a dominant one (so it is possible to breed non-silvers from a silver cat); however it appears that cats homozygous for the silver gene have a better clarity of colour. Unfortunately it is virtually impossible to breed silver to silver for more than two generations without also incurring an unacceptably high degree of inbreeding, or sacrificing type for colour. Hopefully the advancement to championship status (effective from June 1998) may encourage renewed interest in this attractive colour.

Abyssinians as a breed suffered a major setback in the 1970's, with many lines falling victim to FeLV. It must be stressed that abyssinians are NOT more susceptible to FeLV than other breeds, just that we noticed that FeLV was a problem long before other breed clubs did. Possibly we were unlucky in that it spread very quickly within a numerically small breed that had only a few (consequently well-used) males at stud. Certainly by about 1978 we had less than a dozen studs available. We overcame the threat of extinction because both Aby clubs worked together, with advice from Prof. O. Jarrett & Dr T. Gruffydd-Jones, to recommend a policy of testing & isolation. This was so successful that almost everyone with abys was testing for FeLV within a few years, thus eliminating the disease while there were still enough abys left to breed from.

Although abyssinians have never been prolific breeders, with litters averaging three or four kittens, within a few years we had built up the numbers without needing to outcross to other breeds. The first Grand Champion Abyssinians achieved their titles in the early 1980's, and during this period several cats were imported from America and Europe to help widen our gene-pool. The aby has changed very little in shape over the years compared to other breeds, although there has been a great improvement in the richness of colour of today's show cats, and of course we now recognise a far wider range of coat colours. Careful selection of breeding stock has eliminated much of the heavy barring and white patches so often seen in earlier specimens. It remains to be seen whether we can retain its unique combination of striking good looks, independence and gentleness, in such a lovely animal.

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