Shelter Sense™

For the people who care about community animal control

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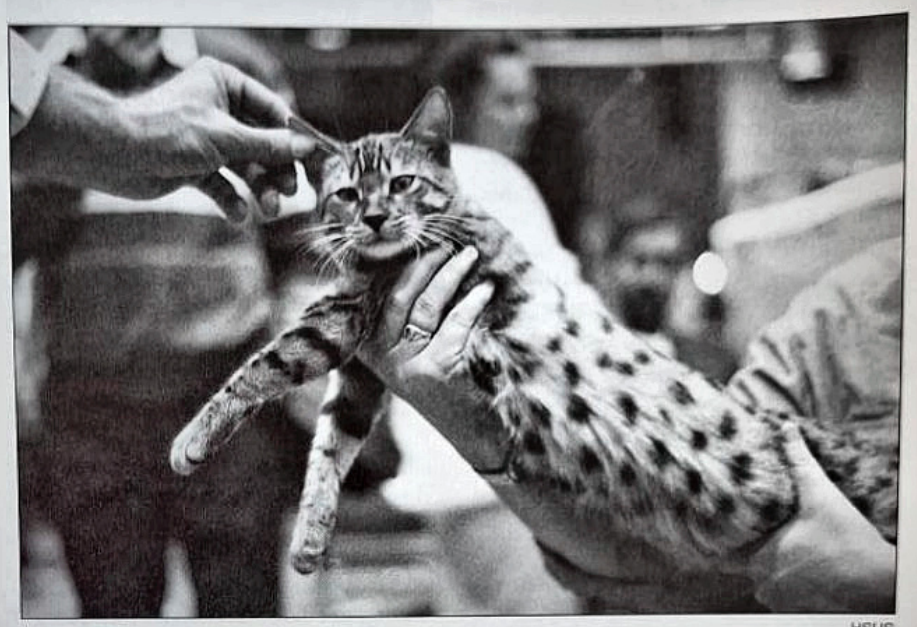
FELINE HYBRIDS: THE LATEST EXOTIC PET TO SHOW UP IN SHELTERS

By Janet A. Hornreich, HSUS Associate for Companion Animal Care

For several months, exotic animal rehabilitators Dixie Lopsinger and Mary Hunt tried to socialize two feline hybrids—offspring of wild cats crossed with domestic cats—who had been confiscated by a local animal shelter. When their attempts to rehabilitate these aggressive animals failed, they decided to euthanize the cats. Ironically, it was at this time that the disturbing feline-hybrid trend started taking off.

Joining pot-bellied pigs and wolf-hybrids, feline-hybrids are the latest exotic pet to affect shelters. The new trend brings with it many of the usual concerns—ethics, risks to public health, inadequate vaccine protocols, and the burdening of animal shelters already overwhelmed by millions of dogs and cats.

Unlike pot-bellied pigs and wolf hybrids, however, feline hybrids may go unnoticed by shelters. That's because staff unfamiliar with these animals may mistake them for the domestic cats shelters take in every day. So how do shelters protect their organizations, the public, and the animals in their care from the impact of feline hybrids? The first step is getting to know these new felines *before* they come through the shelter's doors.



HSUS

The breeding and ownership of feline hybrids raise a host of ethical and safety concerns, from genetic manipulation to increased rabies risks.

A Dangerous Obsession

Many ignorant pet owners, lured into the novelty of owning an exotic feline, learned the hard way that wild cats are drastically different from domestic cats. After observing the problems experienced by owners of wild cats such as ocelots and lynx, some cat breeders experimented with hybridizing wild and domestic cats. They hoped to eliminate all the problems while keeping the positive attributes; they failed. Still, they stepped up efforts to develop smaller versions of exotic cats, hoping to create a desirable "new" species that would spark a demand.

Today, as with purebred cats, most feline hybrids are being bred and raised in catteries by both professional and backyard breeders. Because the cat associations that register feline hybrids state they do not keep count, the exact number of feline hybrids in the United States is impossible to determine.

The High Stakes of Experimentation

Feline hybrids vary substantially in breed make-up and proportion of wild genes. However, unlike wolf hybrids, which are normally wolf/malamute or wolf/husky mixes or descendants of such mixes, feline hybrids are crosses of many different combinations of wild and domestic cats.

The wild cats most often used in hybridized breeding are the Asian leopard cat, the Geoffroy's cat, and the Bobcat. After the initial hybridization, female cats are usually bred to similar hybrids, although most males from the initial crosses are born sterile. The most popular of feline hybrids is the Bengal, which is a cross between an Asian leopard cat and a domestic cat.

Some breeders of hybrids claim that they do not work with wild cats, and that their litters have a relatively low percentage of wild genes. Other breeders, however, openly experiment: "Everyone is just doing his own thing," said one breeder of feline hybrids.

These breeders often experiment with different crosses to obtain unusual coat variations. African wild cats called servals, for example, have been crossed with both Siamese cats and

Turkish Angora cats. Bobcat hybrids have been crossed with Abyssinians, Maine Coon cats, and Persians. Some breeders experiment further; for example, they may breed the Asian Leopard cat to the Maine Coon cat, and then breed that offspring (a Bengal) to a Bobcat.

Many breeders claim that by breeding wild cats to domestic cats, they are preserving the diminishing wild cat bloodline. In fact, far from protecting exotic felines, hybridization actually *encourages* the capture of exotic cats. This is because many wild cats used for initial hybridizations have been captured overseas and then shipped to the United States.

Health and Temperament Problems

According to veterinary experts, including Michael Fox, DVM, HSUS vice president for Bioethics and Farm Animals, feline hybrids may be prone to a variety of genetic complications that are commonplace when different species are hybridized—including sterility, birth defects, spontaneous abortion, and poor viability. Furthermore, genetic tests performed on certain feline hybrids have shown mismatched chromosomes and abnormal chromosome counts.

While these genetic health problems are no doubt devastating for the cat and unsuspecting owner, their genetic *temperament* problems can endanger the entire community. In fact, although The International Cat Association (TICA) and other cat registries allow hybrids to be shown in experimental categories, the largest cat registry prohibits their registration. "If a judge is handling one of those cats and the cat is startled," says Thomas Dent, executive director of the Cat Fanciers' Association, "he or she could be in a serious situation."

Hunt remembers the behavior of two male Bengal cats who had been relinquished by a cattery and brought to her for rehabilitation. "While one was quite timid, the other one was so vicious you couldn't handle him at all," she says. "And if we couldn't turn them around, nobody could."



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This marbled Bengal kitten, among the most popular and populous of feline hybrids, will weigh up to 25 pounds when full grown.

State and Local Restrictions

Massachusetts and Connecticut are among the handful of states that prohibit the ownership or sale of feline hybrids as pets, and other states and localities severely restrict feline-hybrid ownership. But some attempts to prohibit ownership have been successfully derailed by feline-hybrid breeders. Nina Kelley, legislative aide to New Jersey Assemblywoman Charlotte Vandervalk, recalls a 1992 bill that would have regulated ownership of both wolf *and* feline hybrids. According to Kelley, feline-hybrid fanciers put so much pressure on state lawmakers that the bill was amended to exclude feline hybrids to ensure that the wolf-hybrid portion would pass. "They were very organized," says Kelley.

Even states with laws in place have a tough time enforcing them. Massachusetts, for instance, considers a hybridized cat to be domestic if the animal is at least three generations removed from wild blood. Tracing any particular cat back three generations is often difficult because with each succeeding generation it is increasingly possible to mistake the hybrid for an unusually large or aggressive cat.

"We do have a permitting statute for individuals who own certain potentially dangerous wildlife," says Andrew Sansom, executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. "However, it would be difficult to enforce such a law on hybrid animals because there is no easy way to prove in court that the animal is indeed a hybrid." Although blood tests can determine whether a cat has wild genes, these genetic tests are complex and expensive. Nevertheless, the availability of such a test contradicts breeders' contentions that feline hybrids are just like domestic cats.

Some breeders are reportedly hybridizing cats to circumvent state laws on ownership of 100-percent wild animals. "There is present interest in crossing [wild cats] with domestics to allow people to own them in states where exotic felines are illegal, or next to impossible to obtain the proper permits," wrote Gail Fox in *Animal Finder's Guide*, a publication tailored to those who breed, buy, sell, and swap exotics.

The Rabies Threat

Like wolf hybrids, feline hybrids lack an approved rabies vaccine. That's the primary concern of Mark Case, a supervisor for the Bureau of Special Services of the Combined Health District of Montgomery County in Dayton, Ohio. "We talked to a breeder about the breeding and selling of her Bengal cats," he says. "We explained to her that no one is going to want to buy a cat for $2,000, have the cat bite someone, and then have to euthanize the cat to test for rabies."

Animal experts nationwide share Case's concern. "Without administering a licensed rabies vaccine that is proven to be effective," says Arthur Tennyson, DVM, of the American Veterinary Medical Association

(AVMA), "the risks of exposure to the animal, family, and neighbors is of concern to the AVMA."

According to Case, his office notifies county residents about the hazards of purchasing crosses of wild and domestic cats. "We have advised people looking to buy hybrids that the animals are not acceptable for purchase or harboring in Montgomery County," he said. Montgomery County residents are warned that any feline hybrid injuring a citizen will be impounded immediately. "If we become aware of the ownership of one of these animals through a referral such as a bite case, we will do whatever is necessary to see that the animal is tested," said Case.

Richard Schumacher, DVM, executive director of the California Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA), concurs with Case. "It's a public and occupational health concern because the incidence of rabies in cats is higher than in dogs and there's no approved vaccine for these [hybrid] cats," Schumacher said. "Not having feline hybrids as pets is the best solution."

Tampering with Lives

The human health and safety risks posed by these animals concern veterinary experts, shelters, responsible pet owners, and legislators alike. The ethical concerns, although less likely to win the legislative battle, deserve equal weight. From exploiting endangered species and engaging in genetic manipulation to merchandizing animals and contributing to companion animal overpopulation, the feline-hybrid trend runs counter to animal protection efforts.

"Every day in the United States, 70,000 dogs and cats are born that we can't find homes for," says Stephanie Smith, director of the Montgomery County Animal Shelter in Dayton, Ohio. "Why start a new species?"

WHAT SHELTERS CAN DO

The relative newness and complexity of the feline-hybrid trend hits shelters with many dilemmas but few immediate solutions. Still, shelters can take some steps to alert staff and volunteers about feline hybrids, educate their communities about the danger of feline-hybrid ownership, and lobby for legislation restricting breeding and ownership of these hybrids *before* their popularity grows to the levels attained by such exotics as wolf hybrids and pot-bellied pigs.

Identifying Feline Hybrids

Identifying feline hybrids is a rather indefinite science, making them a particularly troublesome exotic animal for shelters to deal with. That's because, from the outside, feline hybrids can appear only marginally different from large domestic cats. But shelter staff should look for three characteristics that, taken together, usually indicate a feline hybrid: size, markings, and temperament. For example, a 10-pound adult spotted cat is almost certainly domestic, while a 17-pound spotted cat may either be a Bengal or an overfed domestic cat.

- **Size.** While most domestic cats weigh between 10–14 pounds, adult hybrids can weigh anywhere between 15–35 pounds; they also have well-defined musculature.
- **Markings.** Breeders attempt to create hybrids with unusual, "exotic" markings. The most popular Bengal cat, for example, is the Leopard Bengal, which has dark spots on a golden-orange background coat called "glitter."
- **Temperament.** Because of their wild ancestry, feline hybrids may have an unpredictable temperament, especially aggression, which comes from their fear of being handled by humans.

Developing Internal Policies

Because of their special physical, emotional, and veterinary requirements and their frequently unpredictable and unstable natures, feline hybrids should either be euthanized or placed with wildlife sanctuaries adequately equipped to care for these animals. Because some wildlife sanctuaries actually breed the wild animals they care for, shelters must sterilize all animals and carefully evaluate any sanctuary before releasing an animal to it.

Shelters should also work with their general counsel to make sure policies and procedures are in place to prevent the adoption of any potentially dangerous animal. Because of feline hybrids' aggressive tendencies and the lack of an approved rabies vaccine, shelters may face liability risks should they adopt out any cat known to be a feline hybrid, regardless of state law.

Educating the Community

Limiting the numbers of feline-hybrids in your community depends on educating two overlapping groups: the general public and legislators. Both need to be made aware of the ethical concerns and safety risks feline-hybrid breeding and ownership bring to the community. Focus on:

- **Ethical concerns.** Feline-hybrid breeding not only embraces genetic manipulation and turns wild animals into commodities, but it also compounds pet overpopulation.
- **Health and temperament.** Feline hybrids are predisposed to genetic health problems and have potentially dangerous aggressive tendencies.
- **Rabies.** There is no approved rabies vaccine for feline hybrids; this potentially jeopardizes the health of the public.

Information about feline hybrids should also be directed to legislators, with particular focus on the human health and safety risks these animals pose to citizens. Humane agencies should lobby for local and state legislation that bans feline-hybrid breeding and ownership. For a fact sheet that addresses the problems of keeping exotic animals as pets, write to The HSUS's Government Affairs section, 2100 L St., NW, Washington, DC 20037.