

Are wild/domestic cross-breeds a good idea?

A



feline named Trouble still holds the Guinness World Record for World's Tallest Domestic Cat. Measuring 19 inches from shoulder to toe, he was the grandson of a serval, a captive wild cat native to sub-Saharan Africa. This made him an F2 generation cat of an ever-growing breed called a Savannah.

The hybrid was first documented in 1986, when Bengal (another exotic hybrid) cat breeder Judee Frank mated her Siamese to a male serval.

Joyce Sroufe and Patrick Kelley further developed the breed and wrote the Savannah breed standard for The International Cat Association (TICA). Savannahs were accepted for registration in 2001, and for championship status in 2012.

Savannahs closely resemble their serval ancestors. TICA recognizes a spotted coat; long and lean torso, neck, and legs; and large ears high on the head. Breed committee chair Pamela Flachs says adults can weigh up to 25 pounds.

First-generation breeding of a serval with a domestic, or F1, Savannah produces an animal with a genetic makeup of 50-75 percent serval. An F2 is the offspring of an F1 female and can be as much as 25-37.5 percent serval. An F3 has a serval great-grandparent.

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Martin Engster and his family-owned cattery, A1 Savannahs, breed their own F1 stock, producing generations down to F6. He acknowledges that generations more removed from the wild are better companions.

“They make for more easy-going pets,” he says. “They do well with other pets, small children, and active families.”

Behaviors that help servals survive in the wild make some F1 and F2 Savannahs less acceptable as house kitties. Their behavior is adventurous to the nth degree; and their leaping abilities alone are stuff of legend, jumping on top of doors and refrigerators from standing positions.

Engster admits that breeding to create F1 and F2 generations is a very difficult task. “I always make the comparison to trying to breed a Chihuahua to a Rottweiler,” he explains. “A serval is a full-blooded wild cat. It’s hard to find a suitable match for mating to take place.”

“If someone owns a serval that they’re using to breed Savannah cats,” says Robert Klepper of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, “they’d need a Florida license to possess the serval. If someone is breeding two hybrids together to produce more hybrids, they won’t need a permit.

“But if the hybrid isn’t distinguishable from the wild parent,” he adds, “then it’s regulated as wildlife at the same level as the wild parent -- and a Class II Captive Wildlife Permit is needed for possession.”

Serval numbers in the wild have dwindled, and one subspecies is even considered endangered. Some breeders argue that by crossing servals with domestics, they’re helping to ensure species’ survival.

However, according to Ron Magill, Zoo Miami’s goodwill ambassador and communications director, “Zoo Miami does not support crossbreeding any wild animal with a domestic one.”

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Nor does he agree with claims that breeding wild animals to domestic species ensures the survival of endangered species. "In fact," he notes, "the crossbreeding in itself has already created a hybridized animal that's no longer the endangered species we're trying to protect. By continuing to do so, we dilute the integrity of the species."

Magill also stresses that hybrids don't make good pets. "There's an old saying," he explains, "that you can take the animal out of the wild, but you can't take the wild out of the animal. It takes many generations to breed out the 'wild' gene."

Susan Bass, PR head of Big Cat Rescue in Tampa agrees. "We believe it's cruel and unnatural," she states, "and the only reason these cats even exist is for making money."

Bass adds that hybrids suffer genetic defects that cause digestive issues -- plus, their owners often give them up because of biting, copious spraying, and the loud night howling particular to hybrids.

"Some people abandon their hybrids to the wild, causing damage to the ecosystem," she continues. "Add to that the likelihood of breeding with feral populations, and you end up with larger cats, capable of killing bigger native wildlife."

Big Cat Rescue has also learned that cat hybrids are contracting domestic dog diseases and diseases carried by raccoons. Their compound has taken in Savannahs that were former pets and has had to turn away many more.

According to Carole Baskin, the organization's founder and CEO, "I get hate mail from hybrid breeders every time I say anything about the fact that many times domestic cats are killed by wild cats in the mating process."

Stances like "hybrids make terrible pets" and that "breeding hybrids creates more neurotic offspring" make sparks fly. Baskin expects the blowback. "It's just the price," she says, "of

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speaking the truth for the cats.”

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