

AAFP Position Statement

Hybrid cats

This Position Statement by the AAFP supersedes the AAFP's earlier 'Hybrid cats' Position Statement, dated January 2010.

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) strongly opposes the breeding of non-domestic cats to domestic cats and discourages ownership of early generation hybrid cats, due to concerns for public safety and animal welfare issues.

Unnatural breeding

The AAFP strongly opposes the unnatural breeding of non-domestic to domestic cats. This includes both natural breeding and artificial insemination.

The AAFP opposes the unlicensed ownership of non-domestic cats (see AAFP's 'Ownership of non-domestic felids' statement at catvets.com). The AAFP recognizes that the offspring of cats bred between domestic cats and non-domestic (wild) cats are gaining in popularity due to their novelty and beauty.

There are two commonly seen hybrid cats. The Bengal (Figure 1), with its spotted coat, is perhaps the most popular hybrid, having its origins in the 1960s. The Bengal is a cross between the domestic cat and the Asian Leopard Cat. The large-sized Savannah was developed from a cross between the domestic cat and the Serval.

The wild nature of non-domestic cats makes it difficult to safely breed them. They would not generally co-exist with domestic cats in nature. The non-domestic cat may view the intended mate as food, or simply the size differences



Figure 1 The Bengal. ©canstockphoto.com/velvetocean

between intended mates can make breeding difficult.

Domestic cats have 38 chromosomes, and most commonly bred non-domestic cats have 36 chromosomes. This chromosomal discrepancy leads to difficulties in producing live births. Gestation periods often differ, so those kittens may be born premature and undersized, if they even survive. A domestic cat foster mother is sometimes required to rear hybrid kittens because wild females may reject premature or undersized kittens. Early generation males are usually sterile, as are some females. The first generation (F1) female offspring of a domestic cat bred to a wild cat must then be mated back to a domestic male (producing F2), and so on, until fertility is restored, which is usually at the fourth generation (F4).

Temperament concerns of hybrid cats

The AAFP discourages ownership of early generation (F1, F2, F3) hybrid cats due to their unpredictable nature.

No studies exist that compare the behavior of early generation hybrids with later generation hybrids. However, early generation cats are generally accepted as being difficult for many individuals to handle as they retain their wild-type behaviors including urine spraying and unpredictable biting or scratching. They may be territorial, failing to integrate with other animals in the household. Those difficult qualities contribute to abandonment by unprepared owners. Animal shelters are hesitant to adopt out these problematic hybrid cats and are concerned about the uncertainty of their rabies vaccination liability (see later).

Examples of hybrid cats

- ❖ Bengal = Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*) + domestic cat (*Felis catus*)
- ❖ Bristol = Margay* (*Leopardus wiedii*) + domestic cat
- ❖ Cheetoh (Figure 2) = Bengal + Ocicat
- ❖ Chausie = Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*) + domestic cat (often Abyssinian)
- ❖ Caracat = Caracal (*Caracal caracal*) + domestic cat
- ❖ Jaguarundi Curl = Jaguarundi (*Puma yagouaroundi*) + domestic cat
- ❖ Jambi/Machbagral/Viverral = Fishing Cat* (*Prionailurus viverrinus*) + domestic cat
- ❖ Marlot† = Ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) + Margay* (*Leopardus wiedii*)
- ❖ Punjabi = Indian Desert Cat (*Felis silvestris ornata*) + domestic cat
- ❖ Safari cat = Geoffroy's cat (*Leopardus geoffroyi*) + domestic cat
- ❖ Savannah = Serval (*Leptailurus serval*) + domestic cat

*near-threatened or vulnerable species

†hybrid of two non-domestic species

The non-domestic genetic component is less than 15% at the fourth generation (F4). Past the fourth generation, a quality breeding program would select for the traits that are desired: coat quality, body shape or temperament. Yet even at the fourth generation and beyond, these distant relative hybrids are often less predictable than domestic cats, as many are known to be more temperamental or skittish.

The public should be aware of behavioral challenges, even in distant hybrid generations. Veterinary staff willing to treat hybrid cats and the public interested in owning these hybrids, particularly early generations, must be prepared to properly handle their unpredictable and sometimes dangerous behavior.

Safety and legal issues

The AAFP strongly opposes the breeding of non-domestic to domestic cats due to concerns for public safety and interest.

There are no rabies vaccinations approved by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for use in wild or hybrid cats. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has cited this as a sufficient reason to conclude that hybrid cats should not be kept as pets.

Because the period of rabies virus shedding in wild animal hybrids is unknown, the CDC recommends that any hybrid that bites a human should be euthanized and tested, rather than confined and observed.

Hybrid animals should still be vaccinated. However, depending on the local laws, even a vaccinated hybrid animal that bites a human may be required to be euthanized in order for brain tissue to be evaluated for rabies virus.

The public should be aware when considering purchasing an expensive animal that hybridization cannot be determined by a visual exam. Only specific testing that involves chromosome numbers can differentiate a true hybrid from a false hybrid (or 'imitation') because species of cats have differing chromosomal numbers.¹ A DNA-verified pedigree extending back to the exotic cat foundation would be necessary to determine the authenticity of the hybrid.

People seeking ownership of non-domestic cats may or may not be required by individual states to hold licensing permits, which would allow for inspection

of their containment facilities. Without inspection requirements, owners of non-domestic cats and their offspring may be placing the general public at risk and compromise the welfare of those cats. Only facilities that breed and sell their animals to pet stores, brokers or research facilities are covered under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA). The AWA governs the humane handling, care, treatment and transportation of animals. Those facility operators are required to obtain a license from the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), but unlicensed individuals are not required to comply.

Australia and New Zealand have complete bans on hybrid cat importation, with the exception of hybrids at least five generations removed from a wild ancestor. The United Kingdom requires permits for any hybrid cat with a wild parent. Norway and Sweden prohibit any hybrid cat less than five generations removed from a wild ancestor.

Within the United States, the laws regarding ownership of hybrid cats vary widely by state and even by county. Hybrid cats may be legal with a permit or after a specific generation. Some hybrid breeds may be legal while others are outlawed. Nebraska, Georgia, Hawaii and Rhode Island have the most restrictive hybrid laws. Veterinarians and pet owners should be diligent in researching both their state and local ordinances.



Welfare concerns

The AAFP opposes the breeding of non-domestic to domestic cats due to welfare issues for both the non-domestic cat and domestic cat.

There is no evidence that non-domestic breeding animals or their early generations are guaranteed their five freedoms (see AAFP's 'General principles of feline welfare' statement). Non-domestic and domestic cats are generally not natural breeding partners and must be raised together to encourage breeding. Domestic cats are often attacked and sometimes killed by the wild cats during the breeding process.

Production of hybrid cats promotes illegal trade and removal of exotic cats from their natural habitats for breeding purposes. The development of hybrid cats does not enhance the welfare of either species, but serves only the whim of man.

References

- 1 Oliveira R, Randi E, Mattucci F, et al. Toward a genome-wide approach for detecting hybrids: informative SNPs to detect introgression between domestic cats and European wildcats (*Felis silvestris*). *Heredity* 2015; 115: 195–205.



Figure 2 The Cheetoh. ©Stockphoto.com/lealeaG

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