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Exotic

Market Review

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African Serval Nairobi

Photo Courtesy of Carole & Don Lewis, Wildlife on Easy Street



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How To Choose An Exotic Cat

By Carole Stairs Lewis

My husband, Don and I founded *WildLife On Easy Street, Inc.*, a non profit big cat sanctuary that is home to 120 wild cats representing 20 breeds. We have 15 years of feline husbandry and have provided a refuge for exotic cats since 1991. We have bottle raised and nursed back to health hundreds of exotic cats and have produced two videos and a book on the subject. This article can only "scratch" the surface and you should do much more research before bringing home a new cat. Unlike most of the people we have met in this field, we believe that the last chance for survival in the smaller cat species is in the private "pet" home. Our primary goal is species survival but all of our animals, tame or not, are pets to us. The small cats aren't big crowd pleasers and don't breed well in zoo surroundings. As a result, they are disappearing both in captivity and in the wild because of poaching and habitat loss. If a person has never seen an *Oncilla*, what will inspire them to preserve habitat?

Practical experience for dealing with endangered felines can be had by raising and caring for the less threatened cats. These cats, when raised in the home, become ambassadors for their rarer cousins. There is an enormous need for dedicated individuals who are willing to change their lives forever to help these magnificent creatures creep back from the edge of extinction. Exotic cat ownership is a lifelong commitment and should be embraced only by those who can and will make a difference for the betterment of the breed.

We don't encourage people to keep Cougars, Leopards, Lions or Tigers as pets. As much as we love ours, we have met very few people qualified to provide long term care for these great cats. Unless you can afford to properly fence in a half acre per cat, with trees and swimming holes, you are probably not doing these cats a favor. If you are on a rescue mission and are prepared to provide for these big cats we have the following generalizations to be true:

Lions are the easiest. They are a so-

cial animal and want to be a part of a pride, whether it be human or feline. They respect authority and will do all they can to stay in your good graces. By the time they are a year old they will be much stronger than you and two of your friends and can seriously hurt you just hugging you to death.

Tigers are like a 500 pound Bob Cat. Always full of fun and mischief and always testing their limits with you. At a year they can easily reach 450-500 pounds and will take every opportunity to jump you from behind. They are just playing, as they would with each other, but just that one play bite to the back of your neck and you are dead.

Leopards are the smartest and most cunning of the cats we've raised. They too are looking for the chance to ambush you, but usually they are dropping out of a tree. Even in play they have nearly killed my husband and there is no doubt that they did not mean any harm. They can leap 24 feet, which means no matter where you are, you could be a target in their games.

Cougars are the cats most people dispose of as pets when they reach a year. They are cheap, easy to find and they all purr, which is the most misleading sound. You expect when a cat is purring that it could not possibly hurt you and that just isn't true. They don't mean to be killing you, they are just having fun, but you are no match for them.

The smaller cats still need lots of room inside and out. Almost all exotic cats, males and females, spray and

urinate to mark their territory. Altering doesn't always curb this habit and no one will want your problem cat if it has been neutered. You cannot teach them not to spray, so you will have to change your life to accommodate this.

Food will usually be one to three pounds of fresh raw meat per day for the species we will cover. You will need to learn about your chosen one's dietary needs and medical requirements and be prepared to provide accordingly. The following is written based upon the assumption that you are ready to provide a wonderful life for an animal and that you are ready to change your life for the right cat. The question now is.. "What cat would I be willing to do the most for?"

Bob Cats are what we suggest to first time owners. We have 26 of them and 10 are living in the house. Everything you'll need to know about wild cat stewardship can be learned from a Bob Cat. Their temperament reaches to both ends of the feline spectrum and can travel that distance in a fraction of a second. They are adoringly affectionate, intent on sharing your pillow, help-



South American Cougar,
Hallelujah

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ing you brush your teeth, inspecting everything you eat, drink, read or write and they insist on helping you dress. How do they feel about sharing your bath tub? They are easily trained to use a toilet or litter box. Mentally they are always kittens and everything has the potential of being a toy or amusement to a Bob Cat.

The flipside of their great disposition is that when they get mad, they don't care who you are and it doesn't take much to tick them off. I handle adult Lions, Tigers and Leopards but my only scars are from my tamest Bob Cats. They are also escape artists and require considerably more ingenuity in cage design to keep them at home.

Siberian Lynx are about the same size of a German Shepherd and need a large outdoor area to run off all that long legged energy. Your house will have to be furnished so as to endure some incredibly beautiful, if not always graceful ballet. Our cats spend much of their play time up on their back legs which makes them almost as big as a person. Imagine a 10 year old child

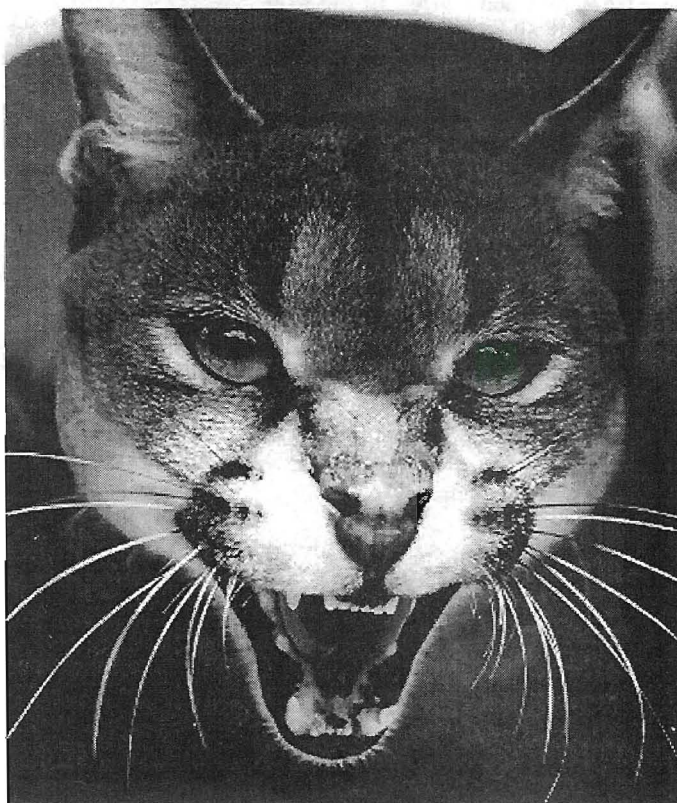
running, leaping and spinning with complete and total abandon and you've got a good picture of a Siberian Lynx in the house. What makes them tolerable is that they are always happy, they love everybody, go anywhere on a leash, are good about the litter box and are not affected by noise and commotion. They are so dog like in their size and behavior that we have had many people ask what kind of dogs they were.

The down side is that they play with their food and will often try to eat your other pets.

Canadian Lynx are like the middle ground between Bob Cats and Siberian Lynx. They are typically easy going, playful but more careful, have excellent litter box manners and are affectionate. They are good climbers and will always be in the highest spot they can find. Their bad moods don't even come close to the tantrum a Bob Cat can throw, but their human devotion is not as overpowering either. They are good with strangers but not as thrilled at going out for joyrides or walks in the park as are the Siberian Lynx.

The hard part of living with a Canadian Lynx is dealing with the shedding and matting of their luxuriant fur. Even with the short coats that they keep in Florida we still have some who mat and they all shed like crazy. They can climb any tree or fence, with or without claws so the upper sides of your enclosures must be Lynx proof and the trees should be far from the walls and roof to prevent escape.

Servals and Caracals embrace the identical mindset in two distinctively different body styles. The typical house raised Serval or Caracal will be well



Caracal, Hunter

mannered, aloof, quiet and tolerant of other pets. They require plenty of room and encouragement to exercise or they quickly become overweight couch potatoes. They aren't much on climbing and are easy to confine. My husband prefers these cats above all others because of their good qualities.

The problem I have with them is their hissing. They hiss at everything and everyone, whether they mean it or not. I am certain that they can hiss and purr at the same time. I've come to recognize and appreciate a wide range of feline greetings but I have a hard time being hissed at by an animal that I sacrificed so much for.

Ocelots are the cats most people tell us they want and we know immediately that they haven't done much research yet. We have seven Ocelots and they are most precious to me, but they don't make good pets. All of ours are tame and handleable. We raised three of them in the house and anyone can pet them, but no one would want to live with them. As soon as they could toddle they were spraying everything in sight. I haven't met one who could comprehend "NO" or "Don't Bite!". They're not

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African Serval, Nairobi

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deaf; they just don't care. In the wild, Ocelots will often eat their prey, fur first. This fiber preference will cost you all of your underwear, socks and lingerie and could cost your precious pet his life. Some people complain that Ocelots have a pungent odor and your home and their yard will soon smell just like the cat. Even declawed they can run, upside down, across the tops of their chain link enclosures and thus require very secure, fully enclosed pens. Another reason not to consider these as pets is that they are endangered and require nearly impossible to get permits to transfer them across state lines and they are so hard to find that we have turned down as much as \$15,000.00 for each of ours.

Margays, Leopard Cats, Clouded Leopards, Geoffrey Cats and Jungle Cats are not recommended as pets for the novice because they are all endangered, except for the Jungle Cats which cannot be far behind. They are

very nervous creatures and have a lot of anxiety related problems such as poor digestion and self destructive behavior. These and the Ocelots are the ones that will soon disappear from our planet and are the ones who most need a quiet family setting in order to successfully reproduce. They are so rare and so fragile that only an experienced wild cat veteran should attempt raising them. To lose even one is such a huge loss to the surviving few. These cats need lots of privacy, completely enclosed pens to prevent not only escape but to protect them from predators entering their pens and in some cases require special dietary supplements just to help them digest their food. Their nervousness often is compensated for by assertive aggression towards humans, especially once they are sexually mature.

All of these species generalizations are based on our own observance of the breeds and in every case there is more than one exception to the rule. We have

both a Serval and a Caracal who don't hiss. We have Bob Cats, Siberian Lynx and Canadian Lynx who were raised on fur farms and hate people. We have a docile Margay and an easy going Jungle Cat, but these have been the odd ones. These have just been our experience and our opinions. Before you make a final decision, ask around and visit with the type of cat you are considering. We often call ourselves the "try it before you buy it" store. We would prefer that you buy somewhere else because our cats don't need a home as much as others do, but we sincerely encourage people to come stay with us a few days and spend time with the cat of their choice before making a life long commitment. We offer a two hour day tour for \$10.00 per person or you can spend the night with the cat you are considering for \$75.00 per night. I realize this sounds like an advertisement, but it could be the most important step in your decision making process.

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