

Savannahs Do Make Great Pets, Don't believe BCR's Hype.

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I've been a cat breeder for a few years now. I breed Savannah cats, an exciting new domestic breed of cat accepted by the International Cat Association (TICA) and one of their fastest growing new breeds. Not only do I spend my days promoting this highly exciting new cat breed, but I also head up the breed Rescue for Savannah cats along with my colleague Kristine Alessio.

Big Cat Rescue is responsible for a great deal of misinformation about domestic hybrid cat breeds such as Bengals, Chausies and Savannahs. As I deal mainly with Savannahs, although I have fostered Chausies and Bengals in the past. Most of my comments below are taken from my experience with that particular domestic cat breed.

Big Cat Rescue, BCR, is wrong about many things. The error they are making that I currently object to is that they are labeling the Savannah as an "exotic"; so right in the same grouping as lions and tigers is a domestic cat breed recognized by the largest registry of DOMESTIC cats, (TICA, the International Cat Association). According to BCR, you should put a domestic Savannah cat in a cage instead of your home.

USDA defines the Savannah as domestic* because it always has a domestic parent even at the first generation. Savannahs are a domestic pet: they eat domestic cat food, they use litter boxes, play with cat toys and sleep on your bed. They are bred to look "wild" and sometimes people assume if they look wild then they must behave wild too. It seems that BCR has never learned that "appearances are deceiving", or else they are not great at interpreting animal behavior.

There are no documented cases of Savannahs ravaging small children, no reported cases of them leaping to bringing down little old ladies on the street to gnaw on their legs. They don't eat the other domestic cats and dogs in the house, nor do they wait until you fall asleep before they try to eat you. They

ARE a high energy breed, and if you are looking for a cuddly kitty to snuggle on your lap while watching the television, then you might want to consider getting a Ragdoll or a Persian kitten instead. Savannahs are closer to the Abyssinian and Oriental breeds of cat that love to interact with their owners, especially playing with wand toys and fetching repeatedly. When they hear tales of Savannah antics, most owners of Abys or Meezers can share similar stories with a smile. Much as they look “wild” with their long legs and big black spots, the Savannah in reality behaves just like any other high-energy interactive domestic cat.

BCR points to the few states in the US that restrict or ban the ownership of hybrid domestic cat breeds. I guess they’ve never read those circulating emails of the stupidest laws in effect in certain states. In most of the cases of states or counties banning Savannahs it is not at all specific; it does not name this domestic cat breed at all. What the laws do ban are exotics “and hybrids thereof”, that last phrase often added because of exotic to exotic hybrids such as ligers and tigons that are created by crossing a tiger and a lion, because some people figured that even if tigers and lions were banned, a hybrid of them wasn’t. In cases where certain generations of hybrid breeds are restricted it is usually due to misconceptions of what a hybrid cat is like, and the legislators certainly didn’t do research like going to a cat show and physically meeting one of these hybrid domestic cats. They relied on reports from biased sources, such as BCR.

BCR presented a video clip on YouTube showing their F1 Savannah cat that was “rescued” from a wildlife sanctuary that didn’t know what to do with it. According to them, because this cat is happy living in an enclosure eating raw meat (I believe a whole rat was used in the clip) then that proves that the cat is wild and should be treated as an exotic. Have they not heard of the raw diet revolution, where large numbers of domestic cat and dog owners have come to the understanding that their companion animals enjoy and flourish on a raw meat diet, properly balanced and supplemented of course. Add to that, most domestic cat owners either know their kitties love to get outside, or they understand the importance of a nice outdoor enclosure where their cats can go and sit in the sun and fresh air and watch the insects and birds safely. Outside enclosures leading off doors and windows of the house are more common to date in places like Australia, where the threat to native wildlife by domestic cats is more of an issue than here in the US.

BCR also calls the domestic hybrid breeds such as Savannahs, Bengals and Chausies “unnatural”, that they don’t occur in the wild therefore shouldn’t occur at all. I guess they think the extreme face and coat of the Persian was plucked from a feral cat colony? That all dog and cat breeds occur in nature? Interestingly, there has been some speculation that Servals have actually bred domestic cats in the past, in the Egyptian days of old where Servals were kept as pets and to keep rodents from the grain store along with early domesticated cats. Some feel that the Egyptian Mau cat breed (which has been in existence for centuries and accepted as a fully-domestic cat breed) descended from possibly an original Serval-domestic cross. It seems possible, after all we now know that if you rear a male Serval kitten with domestic female cats, then they do indeed breed them and produce viable offspring. That’s how the Savannah breed started, a chance breeding of a male Serval and domestic cat. It wasn’t planned or forced, but a woman reared her Serval kitten as a pet with her domestic cats. Her Siamese female gave birth unexpectedly, she didn’t have a domestic male cat so this was quite a surprise, the kitten was spotted and grew up into a very exotic-appearing cat. She named this cat, Savanna, after the grasslands where Servals are found in Africa. So in reality, the mating of a Serval and domestic cat happens the old-fashioned “natural” way, there’s no artificial insemination or test tubes involved!

What BCR chooses to ignore is the GOOD that developing a hybrid domestic cat breed such as a Savannah achieves. Most people admit an attraction to the exotic cats, most when children dreamed about having a tiger as a pet or a cheetah as a companion. As we grow up, most of us realize that this is simply a dream, as living with an exotic cat is a huge responsibility and a lot of work. You need years of research and training to understand what responsible exotic ownership is about, and the changes to your lifestyle are more than most people would wish to make. This is where the hybrid breeds come in. They offer people the chance to live with a cat that appears like their wild ancestor, but behaves like a domestic cat. It eats cat food, uses a litter box and sleeps on the bed...but when it walks down the hallway it swaggers like it is the “king of the jungle”. It’s the best of both worlds. Most exotic cat rescuers appreciate that the hybrid cat breeds are a wonderful alternative to exotic cat ownership. They can see that by developing these breeds, people are less likely to want to buy that cute Serval or Caracal kitten, only to find out a year later that the cute kitten grows up into a wild cat that requires much more than they are prepared for. By promoting this viable and worthwhile alternative, there may end up being

less exotic cats ending up in rescues and burdening sanctuaries. So it is surprising that a Rescue facility that wishes people to stop trying to own exotics as pets is not 100% behind and supportive of these domestic cat breeds that are a reasonable and attractive alternative. I guess the issue is, if the hybrid domestic breeds decrease the number of exotics in Rescue, then what does BCR do for a living? Oops!

BCR tries to say that hybrid domestic cat breeding is wrong, because all first-generation hybrids are wild and uncontrollable and end up in Rescue. As the co-National Coordinator of Savannah Rescue I know this to be false. Not only do we rarely find Savannahs in Rescue or surrendered to shelters but even more rarely are these Savannahs F1 (first generation cross between Serval and domestic). We have a very long waiting list of people wanting Rescued Savannahs and they would love it if we could supply some early-generation Savannahs but we disappoint them year after year. The bulk of surrendered Savannahs at this stage of our developing new breed are later generation (F3 and F4, so 12.5 and 6.25% Serval respectively) Savannahs and the reasons they are surrendered are very typical reasons for any domestic cat to be surrendered. The most recent Rescue we have is an F4 female whose owner's husband has developed allergies to cats. People move states, move to HOA's that don't allow pets, get a girlfriend who hates cats, have a baby and are afraid the cat will smother it by sleeping on its head. Rarely are they good reasons, but that is the reality of domestic cat rescue. The stories are the same, the cats are similarly abandoned and frightened. All have responded to love and time and patience and found great new forever homes. It is important to point out that domestic cat shelters and rescues also get cats surrendered that have behavioral issues beyond what can be rehabilitated. So we cannot say that one day we shall receive a Savannah that cannot be reached by giving love and understanding, but we can say that Savannah Rescue is just like any other domestic cat breed rescue group and we deal with the same issues. Well, except that we have a dearth of Savannah Rescue cats for the applications we have of homes offering space to a Savannah!

So what am I trying to say? Don't believe the hype! Don't believe the lies that are forthcoming from Big Cat Rescue about domestic hybrid cat breeds such as the Savannah. Savannahs do not belong in any sanctuary with the tigers and lions, they belong in your house, on your bed or on top of the cat tree swatting at the moth that is flitting about your lamp (soon to be tipped over by a clumsy paw). And please, before you think about taking home an

exotic kitten, research the responsibilities but also research the wonderful rewarding alternative of a domestic hybrid cat breed such as the Savannah.

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USDA defines hybrids of domestic cat with wild/exotic cat (Bengal, Savannah, Chausie...) and wolf with dog (wolf dog) as domestics.

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/downloads/manuals/dealer/exemptions.pdf

Licensing exemptions document states:

*"crosses between wild and domestic animals are considered domestic, e.g., a wolf-dog cross
crosses between exotic and domestic animals are considered domestic, e.g., a zebra-donkey cross"
page 5*

Page 8 of their Definitions.

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/downloads/manuals/eig/2.1_eig.pdf

"Hybrid cross

an animal resulting from the crossbreeding between two different species or types of animals. Crosses between wild animal species, such as lions and tigers, are considered to be wild animals. Crosses between wild animal species and domestic animals, such as dogs and wolves or buffalo and domestic cattle, are considered to be domestic animals."

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/downloads/awr/9cfr1.1.txt

Section

[Code of Federal Regulations]

[Title 9, Volume 1]

[Revised as of January 1, 2005]

From the U.S. Government Printing Office via GPO Access

[CITE: 9CFR1.1]

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AGRICULTURE*

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