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MAINE COON CATS: THE LIONS OF THE CAT KINGDOM

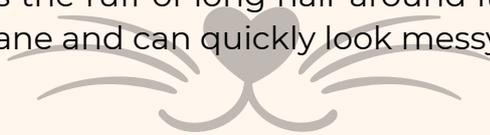


I must admit that I have a fascination for big-sized wild-looking cats. During my free time, I like to research and read on animals online and watch animal-related or wildlife channels on Astro, captivated by their behaviours and habitats. There are a handful of people who would love to have these exotic animals as pets, and I admit that I am one of them. However, knowledge is vital to consider the possibility, appropriateness, and feasibility of owning, raising, or breeding any animal, domestic or wild. Compassion needs to follow suit too.

I had been breeding Bengal cats for 7 years (2012-2019); so when I stopped, I was intrigued to get myself a different big-sized domestic cat. My topmost list was the savannah cat, a cross between the serval wildcat and a domestic cat, but a savannah is extremely costly (about RM25,000 then). Then, one of my ex-students suggested for me to get him a Maine Coon cat for his wedding present. I was not that fond of long-haired cats as I do not like cat fur cluttering my house. In addition, I am a lazy person when it comes to cleaning and fur maintenance (grooming), hence the reason I had the short-haired Bengals in the first place. However, I do like challenges and exploring my options. Even though that was a joke on my student's part, after careful consideration, additional reading on Maine Coon care, and searching the nearest and price-appropriate cat breeder via a Maine Coon

group on Facebook, I decided to adopt a female tortoiseshell Maine Coon which I named Hoshi ("star" in Japanese) from a local breeder in Kepala Batas, Penang. When he (my student) did not immediately get married, I ended up getting Hoshi a partner, a male orange Maine Coon from a different local breeder in Kulim, Kedah, which I named him Hikaru ("light" in Japanese). I raised both for 2 years, waiting for my student to tie the knot. However, due to some family matters, I had to give them away to a close friend who continues to take care of them until now. The good news is that Hoshi delivered her first batch of offspring this year on 26 March 2023, during the Ramadhan month. One of her 5 kittens, after completing 3 doses of vaccinations, was given to my ex-student who finally tied the knot on 28 May 2023.

Maine Coon cats are known as 'gentle giants' and are the largest domesticated cat breed. They have unique characteristics which differ from other domestic cats. Reaching up to 1.2m in length and weighing between 6 to 8 kgs, the males are bigger than females, and if neutered, they can grow much more. Smooth, silky, medium-long thick fur covers their huge, muscular frame to make these felines look even larger. It is of no surprise that the Maine Coon holds the record for being the world's longest and largest domestic cat. Hence, they are very popular in cat shows and most photos of very huge cats held by people are Maine Coon cats. They have waterproof coat, with a dense undercoat, firm hair, and bushy tail. One distinctive characteristic is they have big, pointed ears that are tufted at the end. Another notable aspect is most Maine Coons have big feet, almost like they are wearing clown shoes. They are polydactyl cats which means that they have more toes than average cats. This also means that their paws are snowshoe-like. One of the key physical features of a Maine Coon is the ruff of long hair around its neckline. This ruff is thought to resemble that of a lion's mane and can quickly look messy if not regularly groomed by the





owner. The European variety has longer ruff than the American Maine Coons, looking more wild-like compared to their regal American counterparts. Like normal cats, the average lifespan of a Maine Coon is 12 to 15 years. However, unlike normal cats, Maine Coon cats have a naturally slow growth rate and do not reach their full size until they are about 3 to 5 years old. They, particularly the males, mature at a much slower rate than other cats. Hikaru only started to mature after 2 years of age. That was quite a long wait compared previously to my Bengal studs which mostly started to mature at the age of 6 to 8 months. Based on its pedigree, a Maine Coon can cost from RM2,000 to RM10,000 in Malaysia, so it is advisable to do extensive research and be mentally and financially prepared before considering having a Maine Coon as a pet. Maine Coons have been around for more than two centuries, so their historical origins are uncertain because there are different accounts of how this domestic breed becomes widespread. The Maine Coon, as the name implies, hails from Maine, America whereby the breed was known as a popular mouser, farm cat, and ship's cat, as far back as the early 19th century. It is the only Native American cat in existence and the Maine Coons were very popular in North American cat shows in the late 1800s. Another account of its origins is that the Vikings brought them to North America, centuries before Columbus sailed the ocean blue. This account was supported by scientific analysis of ancient cat DNA which suggests Maine Coons descended from cats that traveled the world with Vikings and other sea-faring folks. Their love of water seems to contribute to this theory. Scientists believe that Maine Coons developed possibly from Siberian cats or Norwegian Forest Cats due to similarity in physical characteristics, especially with the Norwegian Forest cat. These older cat breeds were then bred with short-haired cats already living in America, and eventually, the Maine Coon came to be. Another possible story is they are the descendants of long-haired cats belonging to Marie Antoinette, sent to America in advance of the doomed queen, who had hoped to escape there. The story goes that Marie Antoinette attempted to flee France to avoid her imminent execution and had a ship readied to take her away. Captain Samuel Clough's ship was filled with her most prized possessions, which included six of her long-haired cats. According to the story, these cats were most likely Turkish Angoras or Siberian cats, and they all made it safely to the shore at Wiscasset, Maine, unlike their unfortunate owner. One thing for sure is that the Maine Coon is not the result of a mating between a cat and a raccoon, even if there is resemblance in their brown tabby coat and furry ringed tail. However, that may be the reason how the cats got the "Coon" part of their name. Roughly 75 Maine Coon colorings are thought to exist, though historically only the brown tabbies were given the title 'Maine Coon', whilst the others were named 'Maine Shags'. Despite their size, the "gentle giant" Maine Coons are affectionate, friendly, and goofy. Better yet, based on experience, they are not entirely picky on food, so you can feed them any recommended cat food brand, albeit there are many specialized Maine Coon diets available in the market.



Hikaru (left) & Hoshi



All cats need the following elements in their diet: protein, fats and fatty acids, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals, and water, so make sure to have them when you own any cat. Maine Coon cats have huge personalities and love spending time with their owners. They are easily adaptable, good-natured, but far from being needy. They are happy to receive attention when you direct it their way, but if you are busy, they are satisfied to just supervise your doings. They are not typically a lap cat, but they do like to be near you. This is true for Hikaru, my male Maine Coon. He does not like to be patted or carried and will run away when anyone (including me) approaches him (not a people's cat). However, sometimes when I was lying on my back on the floor, he would sit on top of me and knead my stomach or chest. Hoshi, my female Maine Coon, on the other hand, is extremely affectionate with people and would follow me around the house when active. However, she is the fiercer one between the two and she made her dominance clear when she constantly beat the much bigger Hikaru up if he approached her during her foul mood. As stated before, Maine Coon cats are muscular and athletic, with high levels of energy. They are an active breed, so a lack of exercise can cause them to become obese and prone to several health problems. Therefore, it is important to exercise your Maine Coon every day. They should also be strictly kept indoors as they are very distinctive and pricey which can attract attention from others (the possibility for them to be kidnapped is very high). The coat of Maine Coons is usually silky smooth, but to maintain this beauty, they need to be brushed at least once a week. Although they can clean themselves, it is recommended that you groom their fur every 1 to 2 days so it does not become matted or tangled. While they shed a bit, regularly brushing their coat will help to remove loose hair. When you talk about Maine Coons with other owners, the issue of grooming will mostly be discussed. Shaving a Maine Coon's fur can be done for medical, hygiene and climate reasons. Shaving can improve a cat's hygiene and prevent matted furs that can be painful for cats. It can also reduce hairballs and the risk of overheating when living in our Malaysian weather. One of the popular styles for Maine Coons is the lion cut, which involves shaving the body fur while leaving a mane around the head, a tuft on the tail, and sometimes boots on the legs. So, is a Maine Coon cat right for you and your family? Honestly, if you are an avid purebred cat lover and can withstand the energy of a very huge athletic cat, plus the responsibility of the fur and grooming habits of a Maine Coon, with careful planning and research, you can look for a reputable breeder online to adopt yourself this gentle giant. However, if you lack the necessary funding and patience, it is much preferable to adopt a stray cat as we need more kind-hearted people to rescue the stray cats which are increasing in numbers in the streets and markets. Regardless of whichever cat you adopted, it is a long-term venture, so commitment is important for you to consider.



Two of Hikaru & Hoshi's kittens

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