



## The Leopards of the Domestic Cat Kingdom: Bengal Cats

by Noor Azli Affendy Lee

"Kucing ka? (Is that a cat?) Nampak macam harimau. (Looks like a tiger.)"

That was normally the statement I got when visitors came to my house, or people in my contact list saw my WhatsApp status photos when I posted pictures of my Bengal cats. Despite their look, Bengal cats are not tigers but rather a cross between Asian leopard cats and domestic cats (Avery, 2022). Bengal cats are mostly medium to large in size and, in actuality, many are not much bigger than a normal household cat. They have an average weight of six kilograms (males are generally heavier) and can grow up to 0.4 metres long (Atrayee, 2022). However, their wild-like, exotic appearance, coupled with their big and muscular body, easily attracts people's attention, especially those who are not normally familiar in the purebred cat world. They are regarded as one of the smartest cat breeds (Atrayee, 2022).

The Bengal cat is among my dream animals to own due to its exoticness and wild-like features. Before getting the cat, I researched and studied about them for quite some time and surveyed several catteries and queried a lot of questions to cat breeders. I had my first non-pedigreed female brown spotted bengal cat in January 2012. She was around three months old when I bought her from a local Penang breeder. With the help of my student at that time, he drove me to Teluk Kumbar, Penang and we brought her back to my rented flat. I called her Muiezza, in Arabic it means "precious one", based on the name of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) favourite cat. The first one week was the most challenging week in my life owning this cat! She was hyperactive. She followed me around and tried catching my feet when I walked or ran. Whenever she caught them, her claws would be out to get hold of my legs. It is true that breeders say the Bengal cats are extremely curious, and they will chase after anything that piques their interest due to their strong predatory instincts originated from the Asian leopard cat ancestry (Atrayee, 2022). At the same time, she was very affectionate, extremely clingy as I was her only companion. After a week, I purchased another bengal cat to be her playmate. He was a two-month-old non-pedigreed male snow lynx-point bengal (white) marbled cat I named Fubuki (snowstorm in Japanese) from another nearby local breeder. At first, they did not hit it off well. However after being vaccinated they were less energetic and became good playmates. So, the first tip of owning a bengal cat is to get two of similar age. I had bred Bengal cats from 2012 to 2020. I did get some complaints from one of my cat's adopters who bought a kitten from me that the kitten was too active and energetic, which caused a lot of scratch marks to their new owners. My advice to them was to find another kitten based on my first-hand experience with Muiezza. Muiezza, unfortunately passed away on January 15, 2021, and with her passing, I stopped breeding Bengal cats. Within the nine years of owning and breeding pedigree Bengal cats, I had a wonderful and fascinating experience taking care of them.

My interest in Bengal cats stemmed from their unique looks. Bengal cats come in two distinctive patterns - spotted and marble. The marble pattern, a random patterning, and swirls all around the body, also appears in other cat breeds. However, only the Bengal cat spots a variety of spotted-like patterns among the cat kingdom, namely, the rosettes. There are several rosette pattern varieties you can find on a Bengal cat - the pawprint (C-shaped or dappled spots, punctuated with half open and dark outlines), the arrowheads (triangular spots pointed distally, fades toward the tail), and the most attractive and beautiful donut rosettes with outlined spots encircling a darker interior compared to the full coat colour (Avery, 2022). When it comes to patterns, the aim of Bengal breeders is for their cat to develop a pattern like a clouded leopard, so a combination of pancake donut rosettes on the body will make the Bengal cat look like a leopard. Affectionate, energetic, and animated, the Bengal cats, with their long face, large ears and muscular body, are beautiful, wild-looking and smart cats developed by breeding an Asian leopard cat with domestic cats like the Abyssinian, Egyptian Mau, or American shorthair (Kruzer, 2022).



Muiezza (left) and Fubuki (right) when they were kittens in 2012

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This hybrid cat is credited to Jean Sudgen Mill from the U.S. in the 1970s with the intention to produce a cat breed that had the disposition of a domestic cat but with the wild and crazy marking of the Asian leopard cat (Avery, 2022; Kruzer, 2022). In Bengal cat breeding, the ones which are sold by breeders are normally the 4th generation from the Asian leopard cat ancestor onwards. Bengal cats are just like any other domestic cats - their care and diet are mostly the same. It is just that they look wilder and more muscular, and unlike most lazy domestic cats, this breed is very energetic and active. Hence, as active indoor cats (you do not want to let them roam freely outside - either your neighbours will complain of a huge tiger-like animal roaming around the area, or someone will be interested to steal your cat), their diet should contain up to 60% protein and 30 to 50% fat (Atrayee, 2022). However, this diet is required due to their activeness and roaming behaviour. If you place them in cages and only let them out at certain times of the day for supervised play, you should reduce their protein intake for health purposes as a cat's liver is similar in nature with a human's liver when it comes to processing food - too much protein can slowly destroy the liver. Also, I recommend not having precious or expensive things lying around the house that are reachable to the Bengal cat. And they can jump extremely high too, so if one is planning on having a Bengal cat, house proofing is needed. I do not like to put my cats in cages because I enjoy seeing them roaming the house and stretching out their muscles, so you can guess that my house does not have many decorations. If you search for Bengal cat information from the Internet, most websites will tell you that they are stunningly beautiful, fiercely intelligent, trainable, easily adaptable, water-loving, super active, confidently verbal, extremely curious, quirky, and socially alert. All of these are true

based on my years of experience having them. One of my Bengal cats even became buddies with my fennec fox and almost all of them were able to coexist with each other and my other pet animals inside my house. In addition, another unique feature of the Bengal cat is they are considered hypoallergenic as this breed is relatively unlikely to cause an allergic reaction. This is another reason why I love them and wanted to own them as I was allergic to cat fur when I was younger, but I really wanted to have a pet cat. Now,

after years with them, my allergy to cat fur is gone. Another positive point is they are short haired cats; hence, they rarely shed and have low grooming requirements. In fact, we are discouraged from bathing them too frequently due to their natural shiny oily coats. A special unique feature that is rare even in Bengal cats is the glittering coat which makes a Bengal cat's fur glitter when hit by light. I was lucky that my Muiezza had a glitter coat. When it comes to colour of the coat, the Bengal cats have an extensive variety of colours - from the usual brown (ranging from orange to charcoal black), to snow white variations (seal lynx point, seal sepia, seal mink), to silver (metallic silver with black spots), to melanistic (solid black with even darker black spots), to blue (grey) (Avery, 2022).



*Among the many litters of kittens throughout my Bengal cat breeding years*

After one year of having non-pedigreed cats, I started to search for pedigreed ones (with official registered lineage to indicate that the cat is purebred). At that time, the Bengal cat breeders in Malaysia were slowly growing in numbers but not many people recognise the breed and the breed normally associated with high class societies. Due to this, the price of a pedigreed Bengal cat was, and still is, quite high due to Malaysian breeders having to import their original pedigreed lines from overseas such as the U.S., Canada, Russia, Germany, and China. For example, a high quality pedigreed rosetted stud/sire (unneutered male breeding cat) or dam (unspayed female breeding cat) can cost as high as RM15,000 or more. I bought my first pedigreed stud cat,

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Nusantara Battlestar Fenix (name given by me to be written on his birth certificate), from a then-still-rising Bengal cat breeder near KLIA (he studied the cat breed under one of the most prolific cat breeders in Malaysia at that time and now he is among the top famous breeders in Malaysia) at the cost of RM6,500 (yes, higher than your average motor-bike or marriage dowry). I bought my first pedigreed dam, Dominant Galactica Nova, from another breeder at the cost of RM3,000. The price normally depends on the quality of the cat and its lineage. The highest I paid for a cat was from the same breeder of my first stud cat, which was RM9,500. The furthest I travelled to buy a cat was Johore, where I bought my Mentari Langit (I call him Sky) and he is my only remaining Bengal cat that lives with me now. In the early years, I focused on the brown coat rosetted variation but later, I started getting the other coloured coats. I once travelled to Malacca to purchase a female snow lynx point which I named Camar Salji and, after that, while driving back, I stopped at Nilai, Negeri Sembilan to collect a charcoal (black) male which I named Garuda Komet. Throughout my years of Bengal cat breeding, I got to know a lot of renown breeders and teach a lot of new breeders of the ways of the Bengal cat and its breeding genetics. I am grateful for all the life lessons I learned, meeting up new people and travelling to majestic looking cat catteries. I have spent thousands of ringgits for this interest of mine and my advice to those who are interested in doing the same - research first, think of this as a long-term commitment, and you have to sacrifice your time, dedication, effort and money (as well as holiday travels) to ensure that these beautiful creatures get the proper, respected treatment they deserve.

#### References:

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Past pedigreed Sire (right) and Dam (left) pair