

Cat of the Pharaohs

THE AFRICAN WILD CAT FROM PAST TO PRESENT

by Reay H. N. Smithers

FROM THE VERY DAWN of recorded history cats have figured in the life of man. The sculptors of ancient Egypt over 4,000 years ago portrayed them in their limestone reliefs, obviously with regard and affection. Their Goddess of Joy and Love, Bastet, was frequently shown in the likeness of a cat, and pet cats were mummified, their remains often encased in beautiful bronze images and placed in the tombs of their owners. Small tombs were erected solely for cats, with saucers, presumably once filled with milk, being placed for the animals' use in the world of the hereafter.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth, the mummified remains of these cats were dug up in such huge numbers that they were used as fertilizer. The British Museum has a specimen taken from a consignment of 19 tons sent to England for this purpose. If each skeleton weighed eight ounces, this consignment alone represented some 80,000 cats.

Obviously, the Egyptians were appreciative of the value of cats in the destruction of snakes and rodents, for there are carvings on the ivory handles of knives illustrating cats killing snakes, and an exquisite painting in the tomb of Nakhte, Thebes, in 1415 B.C., of a cat killing a mouse under its owner's chair.

Now, where did these cats come from? We know that the Egyptians, long before the time of written records, had successfully domesticated cattle, sheep, donkeys, and pigs. Monkeys and apes, gazelles, ibex, and oryx were imported from countries to the south, but it was not necessary for them to import cats, as two species occurred naturally in Egypt. These were the swamp cat (*Felis chaus*), and the African wild cat (*Felis lybica*). Both species have been identified from mummified remains, the swamp cat short-tailed and much larger than the long-tailed African wild cat.

After examination of 190 mummified cats dating from 600-200 B.C., Morrison Scott of the British Museum recorded that, although the ancient Egyptians may have kept swamp cats, by far the largest proportion of this sample, 187 out of 190 were African wild cats (see photo on opposite page).

If you look at the paintings, the reliefs, and the bronze images of cats in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, there are several features of the majority of the cats which distinguish them from the conventional domestic varieties, with which we are familiar today. The legs and tail are long, the bodies elongated, the chest narrow, and the shoulder blades show prominently above the back, all of which are characters of the African wild cat.

You will notice that the majority of the Egyptian cats are depicted sitting in a more upright position than our domestic varieties. This is due to the great length of the front legs, which raises the chest and head high off the ground.

The gait of the wild cat has a great deal in common with that of its larger relatives, the lion, leopard, and, more especially, the cheetah. The movement of the high shoulder blades is probably the most obvious feature in common, and this, coupled with the long stride, gives a litheness lost in the shorter-legged domestic cat.

The general color of the wild cat varies geographically, and many races have been described. In the latitude of Rhodesia in the eastern higher rainfall areas, adults are dark gray, the markings black, while westward in the drier area of Bechuanaland and South West Africa they are much sandier and the markings reddish.

In the adults, the upperparts are plain with a darkening on the spine and very faint transverse bands, the latter more accentuated on the sides. The underparts are whitish to rich buff, plain or with indistinct spots. The limbs are distinctly marked with transverse bands both inside and outside, the tail with distinct bands and a broad dark tip.

The facial markings and narrow collar are black in the dark specimens and reddish in the sandy, and in all these the back of the ears is a bright rust color, a characteristic feature of the wild cat.

The markings, with the possible exception of the reddish ears, are very similar to the conventional "tabby" to be found in the back



In the latitude of Rhodesia adult wild cats are gray, with black markings. Westward in drier Bechuanaland and South West Africa they are sandier with reddish markings.

Komani, the author's pet wild cat, is marked with black. The back of the ears is a rust color. The limbs are distinctly marked with transverse bands both inside and outside.





Komani at four years shows the indistinct transverse black bands on the back. The distinctly banded tail has a broad dark tip similar to conventional "tabby."

alleys of any large city anywhere in Europe or the Americas, and surely what we are seeing in the "tabby" is simply a reversion to the general pattern to be seen in its primary ancestor, the wild cat.

F. lybica has a very wide distribution from near the southern tip of Africa throughout the continent into Arabia, parts of Asia and India, and the Mediterranean islands. Absent only in the most arid desert, in some areas it ranks as the most common small predator. It is one of the species of mammals which has benefited from man's activities in Africa, for, by the opening up of vast areas of the continent to agricultural development, man has created a better habitat for rodents, which form the principal food of the species. In the part of Africa with which the author is most familiar, including Botswana, Rhodesia, and Zambia, the wild cat is most frequently contacted at night in and around mealie (corn) lands where rodents are plentiful. The cats penetrate into the fringes of peri-urban areas, perhaps attracted by the heavier rodent populations found there.

In this part of Africa they appear to breed throughout the year, with a peak during the early months of the year. Up to five have been recorded at a birth, but three appear to be the more normal number. Litters have been found in standing crops where there is thick weed or other undergrowth. They will, however, litter down in any good cover of grass, underbush or rocky areas.

The wild cat breeds freely with domestic cats, and in the vicinity of large towns all sorts of crosses are found. Individuals which can be described as representing the true wild cat are rare in these areas. The differences between the wild cat and the crosses are fairly obvious as the crosses lose the red on the ears and are shorter in the legs.

One of the author's female wild cats, Komani, has now produced three litters of crosses, all with dark ears and short legs, the first litter being the best in color, closely resembling the mother. These have turned out to be splendid house cats, great hunters, and reached an adult weight of 12 to 14 pounds, some two pounds heavier than the mother. The

crosses are easy to handle and tame quickly. On the other hand, the progeny of Komani and a pure male from Botswana, Igola, were long-legged with red ears and from the earliest stages, unhandleable, spitting and scratching or diving for cover when approached. There are some complications in keeping three wild cats. One of these is that they are very territorially minded, and one eventually gains the ascendancy, driving the others away from the vicinity of the house.

Normally our three live in large enclosures in the garden. The two females, Goro and Komani, are let out in daily rotation in the early morning and return for their food just after sundown. In the earlier stages, we released them together, unfortunately at a time when we were leaving on holiday, with the result that Komani took to the bush for four months. When eventually recovered at night with the aid of a shooting lamp, it took her quite a few days to settle down, being nervous and shy. I will never forget that night, as I had previously spent weeks walking around the farm trying to call in a variety of cats, wild and domestic, that obviously did not respond to me. Somehow, I knew this night that it was Komani because, instead of moving off as the others had done, she very hesitantly moved toward me—near, but not near enough to catch. I called my wife, to whom she is particularly attached, and we sat down while she softly called the cat's name. It must have taken a quarter of an hour before Komani suddenly responded and came to her. The reunion was most moving, Komani going into transports of purring and rubbing herself against my wife's legs. It was to some extent humbling to find her in better condition than she had ever been under our immediate care.

Igola, the male, now has to be kept in, for chaos reigned when he was out. The bantams, chickens, and ducks went into paroxysms of fright as he tried to get at them through the wire of the run, the dogs slunk off, and the Siamese cats would take to the roof. Both Goro and Komani have caught bantams by getting them into a state of flurry and then catching them through the one-inch wire netting as they flew up toward the roof, a feat of some dexterity.

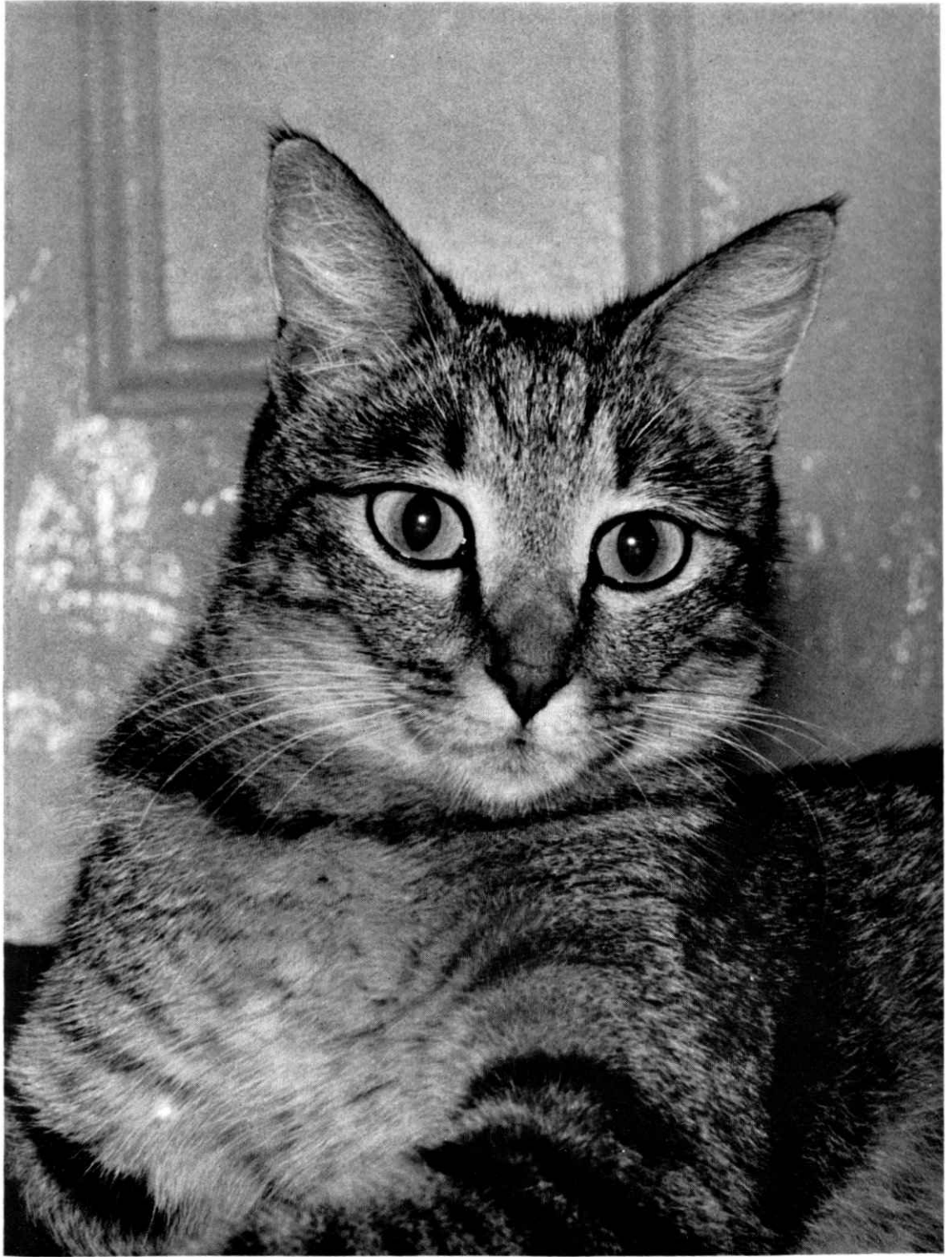
All three are inveterate and incurable thieves and at meal times have to be banished from the room. Even as kittens they showed their wild natures and, if smacked for jumping up on the table, instead of behaving like normal cats and flying through the door, they would lay their ears back, spit, show their teeth, and strike back. We discovered that a flick with a napkin or, better still, the use of an insect spray, which they particularly disliked, was a more effective and less painful way of getting rid of them. Another very effective method was to spit back as noisily as possible, a procedure only resorted to when my wife and I were alone.

As kittens they would stalk our peacock when he was displaying, leaping from behind onto his tail under cover of the spread feathers, sending him to the nearest tree, or onto the roof, squawking. The peahen was less easy to deal with, and quickly learned to turn on them and chase them off.

When they were about a year old, we were given a fine pair of geese which, we thought, because of their size and aggressive nature, were pretty safe. This appeared to be confirmed as, on the first encounter with our two dogs, the geese chased them with flapping wings and outstretched necks into the shelter of the house. Not so with Goro, who, at first contact, had one by the neck, and would have killed it had we not come to the rescue. The geese, like the peacocks, were given to safer homes. We no longer keep poultry.

Goro has strongly developed "auntie" instincts, and when Komani has kittens will frequently bring along a mouse and deposit it outside her enclosure. Komani will not, however, tolerate the presence of Goro or any other cat near her kittens, and adopts a particularly aggressive attitude in such situations. She does not object to the approach of the dogs, and in fact both she and Goro get on very well with them and will rub themselves against the dog's legs and curl up in front of the fire with them.

These cats never do anything by halves; for instance when returning after their day out they are inclined to become super-affectionate. When this happens, one might as well give up what one is doing, for they will walk all over



Goro has strongly developed "auntie" instincts, and when Komani has kittens will frequently bring along a mouse and deposit it outside her enclosure. Komani, however, will not tolerate the presence of Goro or any other cat near her kittens. Goro also gets on very well with the dogs and will rub against their legs and curl up in front of the fire with them.

The hunting instinct in Igola, the male, is extremely strong and chaos reigned when he was out. The bantams, chickens, and ducks went into paroxysms of fright as he tried to get at them through the wire of the run. Both Goro and Komani have caught bantams by getting them into a state of excitement and catching them through the one-inch wire netting as they flew up toward the roof, a feat of some dexterity. In the wild, these cats feed predominantly on rodents, but also eat a wide variety of other animals, including birds, reptiles, insects, scorpions, solpugids, spiders, termites, and centipedes. The largest known mammal taken by a wild cat was a springhaas, which in its adult form may weigh up to nine pounds. The largest bird was a red-crested bustard, about the size of a chicken.

the paper you are writing on, rubbing themselves against your face or hands; or they will jump up on your shoulder and insinuate themselves between your face and the book you are reading, roll on it, purring and stretching themselves, sometimes falling off in their enthusiasm and, in general, demanding your undivided attention.

They are very clean and completely "house-trained," and in their enclosure use a sand box. They go to tremendous efforts to teach their kittens to use this and, in their early stages, a great deal of demonstrative digging and sorting goes on.

In the wild, they feed predominantly on rodents, but also eat a wide variety of other animals, including birds, reptiles, insects, scorpions, solpugids, spiders, termites, and centipedes.

The largest known mammal taken by a wildcat was a springhaas (*Pedetes capensis*), which, in its adult form, may weigh up to nine pounds. The largest bird was a red-crested bustard (*Lophotis ruficrista*), about the size of a chicken.

In spite of the fact that, in parts of Botswana, rodent populations are at unprecedented low levels, due to disease and three years of drought, and trapping records show extraordinarily low catches, wild cats taken in these same areas show full meals of rodents, thereby putting the zoologist and his fancy traps to shame.



