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Introduction

I did not write this article because I believe that I am an expert, but because I hope it may help those new to my breed of cat. I purchased my first Savannah over seven years ago and my first breeder a little more than five years ago now. I have been heavily involved in the breed since, as I also have been showing Savannahs for over five years too.

I participate actively on many SV-related email lists, hopefully offering people the benefit of anything I have learned about this special breed of cat, and any advice that I may have too. I am one of two Rescue Directors of Savannah Rescue, the only active Savannah breed-specific Rescue in the US, it is affiliated with the International Savannah Cat Club. Much of my answers below reflect what I have learnt from others over the past

years. I hope the answers below help you understand more about the breed.

What is the Difference Between a Savannah and a Bengal?

This is a question I am asked all too frequently! Therefore I decided that this is the question that I should answer first.

Bengals are the more commonly-known domestic-wild hybrid breed. The most obvious difference between the two breeds is that Bengals are derived from a different exotic cat than the Savannah. The Bengal is derived from the Asian Leopard Cat (ALC) while the Savannah is derived from the African Serval.

The different wild cat influences many attributes of these breeds, so although both are spotted cats there is quite a difference in physical type. The Asian Leopard Cat is a smaller, more compact-bodied cat with "rosetted" spots (dark spots with a lighter center). It is a jungle-dwelling cat and known to be less friendly and sociable, therefore it is obviously not easily a pet. The Bengal breed derived from this exotic cat is well socialized (breeders pay careful attention to this) while still retaining a lot of the exotic looks of the ALC – the amazing rosetted spots, the compact athletic body, the small ears on distinctive face and large round eyes.

The African Serval is a tall, long, lean cat with outrageously large ears. It is a confident, sociable wild cat that is known as the most "dog-like" of the exotic cats. Their outgoing personality is passed to the Savannah, in a more domestic form. Our goal with the Savannah breed is to also retain the long legs, the long neck and body, and with the tall ears giving that long elegant look of the Serval. We also want solid black spots! The face shape of the Serval is quite different from the ALC and therefore the Savannah should look distinct from the Bengal – the face of the Savannah is angular with large, upstanding ears. The eye shape is not as big and rounded as the Bengal, instead they have a flattened upper eye shape. The nose is longer and broader, the chin is not as strong.

Will My SV kitten be BIG?

There really are no guarantees, be wary of any breeder that offers you that. The heritage of Savannahs is both the very tall Serval and the normal-sized domestic cat, therefore the kittens could end up close to either size. The extremely tall kittens that we have produced here (eg. Kirembo Babe or Kirembo Mondo, who can be viewed on our Previous Kittens page) started out very average weight and sized as babies and did not show signs of longer-than-normal legs until 8-10 weeks old. We will not guarantee size but feel that previous kittens from our Queens may give some indication of the size and legginess you might expect of future kittens.

When Does a Savannah Reach Full Size?

Savannahs appear to grow for at least three years. Granted, most of the height of a SV will be achieved in the first year, but an inch or two might be grown later on. More

muscle mass is gained in the second year, the body will fill out once it is not growing upwards so fast.

The size of a Savannah will depend a little on the generation. Although there have been some huge F2 and F3 SVs, the consistently largest generation is the one closest to the Serval – the F1 generation. Oddly though, the largest SVs are often F2, but there is a greater range of size within that generation. By the time you get down to F4 and F5 generations, mostly the SVs are simply taller and longer than a domestic but not much heavier.

I Want a Golden Kitten, Will the Kitten be Gold?

This is also very hard to predict. Kittens that are born looking as brown as their siblings develop golden highlights as they age, and most kittens that seem extremely golden as babies end up the average brown tone that you see in most Savannahs. Personally, as a breeder I am more concerned with type, and if I had to consider color would focus more on spot boldness and contrast before background color. A bold spotting pattern looks most dramatic, no matter the ground color. The Savannah Breed Standard does not favor any shade of background color but does prefer black bold spotting.

How Do I Select the Kitten with the Most Servally Looks When They All Look Cute as Babies?

This is a HARD question, and I am not sure that I have the answer! Too many times breeders of all breeds of cat have sold a kitten they thought was "pet quality" only to see it grow up into a stunning cat and wish they had kept it. There are some indications that a kitten will be better than another, but kittens grow and change so much in the first weeks and this change makes it difficult to really evaluate early on. It is easier when there is a previous litter of the same cross. Then you can possibly see pictures of how they turned out as older kittens or adults and compare that to the current baby pictures to get a better idea of how the kittens that are offered now might turn out. If you can also see baby pictures of both parents and compare to the parents now, then you might get some more clues.

How Do I Choose the Right SV Breeder to Get My Kitten From?

It's hard to decide where you might want to get your kitten from, for me it ought to be more than just who has a kitten available now. You are possibly going to have that kitten (cat) for 20-odd years, so it ought to be a very careful, thought-out decision. The breeder should be part of that decision; it should be someone you feel you can trust and whose opinion you value. The best way to find out if the breeder is right for you is to communicate with them (sounds obvious). Ask them lots of questions – about their breeding program, about the potential parents of your kitten, what those cats' personalities are like, ask about previous kittens and how they grew up. Basically, if a breeder is not prepared to answer all those questions patiently, then how much help are they going to be if any problems arise once you have the kitten and they have their

money? Even if you are "only" looking for a pet, you still want the best available, and when you are paying a considerable amount for that kitten you will want a quality animal. So, you still have every right to ask questions about the breeding program behind that kitten, to ask for a pedigree, and to discuss what breeds went into making that SV kitten. As this breed is young, there are a number of outcrosses that may be used to make that kitten and all will influence how that kitten will look when grown up.

Why is There Such Variation in the Prices Asked for Kittens of the Same Generation?

This happens in all breeds – some kittens conform more to the breed standard, therefore are more sought-after and the price reflects this. If the breeding stock was selected as the absolute best then that breeder probably paid "top dollar" for their cats and might then expect more for the kittens produced. Sometimes there is an element of "you get what you pay for" – a kitten that is not as typey might be priced lower than its littermate which is amazing looking. Remember that this does not mean the personality of the kitten is different or lesser-quality, and if you are looking for a pet then the blackest of black spots might not be as important as an outgoing friendly disposition. And of course, this doesn't necessarily mean that a kitten that is priced high is necessarily the "best" kitten available, just that the breeder is asking a premium price. Buyer beware – do your research and ask enough questions to know that the asking price is fair for that particular kitten.

Your Website Specifies That You are Committed to Breeding SV to SV. Why is This Important and What Does it Contribute to Your Program?

Ultimately, the Savannah breed truly becomes a breed when it is breeding SV to SV. Our breed has been restricted by the fact that early generation males (up to F5, five generations away from the Serval) are generally infertile. This has meant that we have had to choose other domestic spotted breeds to outcross to our SV females to breed down to this fertile generation of males.

Of course, outcrossing to other breeds not only dilutes the Serval influence, but it also adds the influence of whatever breed was used as an outcross. What we have hoped was that when we could eventually use SV males, then we would get better results in the progeny... at least that is what happened with the other hybrid domestic breeds (Bengal and Chausie). I think is exactly what we have seen in the past couple years, that there is a significant increase of type when the Serval comes on both sides of the pedigree. Currently very few Savannah breeders use outcrosses, most are using Savannah stud males now.

Why Do I have to Wait Until 12 Weeks or older, Why Can't I Have the Kitten at 6-8 Weeks Old?

This is not because we want to keep the cute little babies to ourselves for as long as possible (although a pleasing side-effect). This has to do with the health of the kitten. The immune system of a kitten is barely developed at 8 weeks and realistically is the earliest opportunity to vaccinate the kitten to get a good immune response and protection against disease. It takes a further two weeks to develop a decent immune response, and so, the absolute earliest time to leave would be 10 weeks. In the normal way of things, it never runs so smoothly and therefore 12 weeks is the time they will be leaving home. As a breeder, I prefer to also give them their second vaccination and microchip before leaving home.

Additionally, emotionally the kitten is far more mature and confident at 12 weeks than they are at 8 weeks. During those four weeks they have learned a lot about the world and act more independently. This confidence means that they cope with the huge change in their lives better, so this means less trauma to them. Remember, it might be exciting to YOU to have your kitten, but to them it is not such a great thing. They are losing their siblings, their momma, and the only home they have ever known. At 12 weeks old, they are more adventurous and willing to accept change. So, what is better for them is also better for you, the new owner.

What Does the "F" Mean in F1, F2, etc.?

"F" stands for "filial" generation... in the case of the Savannah breed, it refers to the number of generations away from the wild cat, the Serval. It is used differently from strict genetics. For example, an F1 is one generation away from the Serval, the Serval is the parent of an F1. An F2 is two generations away, the Serval is the grandparent.

What Does "A-Registered", "B-Registered", "C-Registered" and "SBT" Mean? Why is it Important?

These terms refer to the Registration Codes given to our cats by the feline registry TICA (The International Cat Association, www.tica.org). "A", "B", "C" and "SBT" can be found at the beginning of the registration code given by TICA to a cat.

A-registered Savannahs are SVs with only ONE Savannah parent, usually the SV mother and a domestic outcross sire (such as one of our permissible outcross breeds – Egyptian Mau, Oriental Shorthair, Ocicat or Domestic Shorthair). A Savannah is a B-registered SV when both parents are SVs, but not all grandparents are SVs. For example, crossing an A-registered SV to another A-registered SV will give you B-registered offspring. C-registered Savannahs are when all four grandparents are SVs... or two generations of SV to SV breeding crossing a B-registered SV to another B-registered SV will give you C-registered SV offspring. SBT stands for "Stud Book Traditional" and is a cat with three generations of SV to SV breeding – all great-grandparents are SVs. Two C-registered

SVs will produce an SBT litter. This is what is considered a “purebred” cat and is the ultimate eventual aim of our Savannah breed section.

These codes are not terribly important to the pet buyer, but critical to a breeder. To develop this breed, we need to progress through the codes to SBT. The importance to the pet buyer of codes might simply be that you might expect a "B" kitten to be typier than an "A" kitten, because of the additional Savannah heritage. This is not true in all cases, as careful selection of the cats is necessary no matter what the registration code is.

What are the Most Important Attributes of the SV Breed?

For me, size is not the most important attribute in a Savannah. Sure, it is definitely impressive to see a BIG cat, but to me the Savannah is so much more. The Savannah should be tall, long, lean and ELEGANT in appearance. The ears should be tall and upstanding and the spots dramatic. But it is the relative proportions of the cat that make it look exotic, and so, simply being large is not going to make a cat an outstanding Savannah.

For me, the Savannah is also about personality. They are highly energetic, intelligent and sociable. It is hard to describe what it is like to live with a Savannah, but they make the most wonderful companion for people that like to interact with their pets. They can be trouble too; that energy and intelligence can think up a lot of pranks, and you might not always be too impressed with what they come up with! So, a sense of humor is essential if you want to live with a Savannah... and a place to safely display your breakables that they can't access.

If Males Up Until F5 (Fifth Generation Away from the Serval) are Sterile, Why Would I Need to Neuter a Male Kitten?

Although early generation Savannah males may not make viable sperm, they still produce male hormones and will exhibit male (tomcat) behavior that makes them undesirable as pets in the intact state. For example, they will still spray and mark their territory and be continually searching for an available female to mate to.

Will I Need a Permit to Own a Savannah?

States, counties, and cities differ in their laws and regulations. You must check before you purchase your Savannah kitten. Remember that even if your State allows it you must still check your local laws as they will override State regulations – www.hybridlaw.com is a good place to start your investigation.

Will They Get Along with My Cats and Other Pets?

Yes, generally a Savannah gets along well with other animals. If you have a dog, it may take a Savannah a little while to adjust if they were not raised around dogs. Other cat breeds that are similarly high energy (Oriental breeds, Abyssinians, Ocicats) seem to work well, as do very patient breeds such as the Maine Coon, Ragdoll, and PixieBob

breeds. I do not recommend a highly energetic Savannah kitten in a house with an elderly cranky cat that will not enjoy the rambunctious enthusiasm of the new addition one iota!

I also would not recommend a Savannah in a house full of birds and fish. I am sure that with the right caging for birds (or separate room) then it might work, or with secure tanks for the fish. But a Savannah is highly energetic and intelligent, and most likely will devote its time to working out ways around your safeguards to get to "play" with your bird or fish.

Are Savannahs Destructive?

Savannahs are high energy cats, with loads of intelligence, but I would not describe them as destructive. If left alone for long periods though, a Savannah might find things to amuse itself that may not be what you would choose for them. It is important to make sure that they are well-occupied, possibly with another companion pet, or that your house is well Savannah-proofed. Alternatively, consider making one room the "cat room" and leaving your Savannah in that room when out of the house for long periods. Be sure to include lots of toys, beds and cat perches so that they are comfortable and happy in this room. It is also important to train your pet in the way you would like it to behave. Dissuade and distract from inappropriate behavior and give them suitable toys to expend their energy on. A Savannah is not simply a gorgeous animal, it is highly interactive and needs time from you. If you do not have much spare time between your job and activities, then maybe a Savannah is not for you.

Do Savannahs Need Special Toys?

The rambunctious energy of a Savannah can mean that is "hard" on toys. Many cat toys that are available are just not suitable for a Savannah nor most other high energy cats... not only will they not last long, but some are too tempting to be ingested and can cause harm to your cat. I recommend the toys made by Metpet as I have found them extremely sturdy and my Savannahs love them – www.metpet.com. Additionally, my cats love the "mice" made from real sheepskin; they do not appreciate faux lambswool! Petsmart does stock the real sheepskin mice – they are larger than the normal toy mice sold, and are sewn, not glued, together.

What is "Savannah-Proofing?"

I liken preparations to introduce a Savannah into your home to toddler-proofing your house from floor to ceiling. Any breakable objects should either be put away for a year or two, or safely shut into a glass-fronted cabinet. Savannahs are energetic and definitely can be clumsy when racing about the house in a fit of gleeful play. Secure objects that might be knocked over before bringing your SV kitten home. Museum wax/gel is reported to work well for some households. Remove poisonous plants, definitely. There are a number of websites to be found in a Google search that will identify plants that have been reported as having serious deleterious effects on animals. Be aware that a potted plant looks like a lot of digging fun to a Savannah kitten, and the plant itself is "asking"

to be dragged all over the house. So, even if the plant is not toxic to your cat you may not successfully keep house plants after introducing a Savannah to your household. Fake plants can also be "cat toys". While teething, many kittens will chew on inappropriate things, including electrical cords. Bitter sprays can be perfect for this, also consider removing and storing any cords that are not necessary at that time. There are also home products available that can encase many cords within the one larger tube. This is a really good idea, especially while your kitten is young. Toilet lids should be placed down, as a Savannah kitten may see an open toilet bowl as a "wading pool" and splash around in there. Additionally, at least one of the kittens I have sent out worked out for himself what wonderful entertainment the water swirling down the bowl could be and how to push the lever to make it do that again and again (quite an expensive water bill for his owner!). Some Savannahs will work out how to turn taps on, which will either require changing the taps (to a round shape that is more difficult for them) or learning to keep the bathroom door shut. Savannahs will often learn to open doors and drawers, so childproof latches on cupboards containing toxic substances (such as cleaning supplies) is a good idea.

There are many things I haven't listed here that may happen. Not ALL Savannahs will be so troublesome – it depends on the individual personality and the time they have to themselves. It is best to be aware of the number of things such an intelligent and energetic cat can get up to... forewarned is forearmed! As mentioned in a previous section, if the kitten is to be left alone for many hours a day, it may be advisable to make a "Savannah-Safe" room to shut the kitten in while you are away. Design it with cat trees and safe toys and comfy beds (maybe even leave the radio or TV on) so that it is a pleasant place for your cat to be until you return home.

Will My Savannah Play in Water and Jump into the Bath with Me?

Servals hunt in water for frogs and small fish, so we often find that a Savannah will be more tolerant of water than the average domestic cat. Some Savannahs LOVE water and will turn on taps and jump into baths and showers whenever possible. However, not all Savannahs share this trait, so please do not expect them to love the bath. No cat likes to HAVE to do anything. And like all cats, Savannahs do not wish to be dumped into the water – if they enjoy water they will come to play all by themselves. All my Savannahs enjoy going outside into their enclosure when it rains and come in dripping wet, but not all want to jump in the bath like my Katie does!

Can You Walk a Savannah on a Leash like a Dog?

Savannahs are curious, outgoing cats that often enjoy going for walks. They usually adapt well to a harness or walking jacket (www.joykatz.net/walkingjackets.htm). With careful training you can often have them walking on a leash like a dog, except maybe not quite as obedient. They love to explore so will want to wander around – mine are better than my beagle on the leash!

Can a Savannah be an Indoor/Outdoor Cat or Will They Stay Inside My Yard Fence?

NO and NO!

Savannahs have amazing energy combined with high intelligence and curiosity, they just LOVE to chase things. These cats just do not make good outside cats. They will be fascinated by a bird and go stalk it, see a butterfly and follow that, then see another bird and chase that one... within hours they will be miles from your home with no idea how they got there! One of my kittens got out of his new home and was found two weeks later five miles from his home. His owners feel very lucky to have found him, as when a cat wanders that far, they are rarely located and returned to their homes. Savannahs are not recommended as anything but indoor-only pets.

Savannahs jump higher and further than most domestic cats... those long legs are very funtional! Even with the highest fence, most likely a Savannah would find a way up and over it.

Do They Spray? Do They Use a Litterbox Faithfully?

Intact breeding cats often spray. When neutered/ spayed at an appropriate age (5 months is recommended) Savannahs are not known to spray. All my Savannahs use their litterboxes religiously! Like most cats, some Savannahs can absolutely require their boxes be extremely clean, and you must make sure there are plenty of litterboxes for the number of cats in your house. The general rule is one litterbox per cat and one extra. Additionally, Savannahs can grow to larger-than-normal sizes, so you will need the jumbo-sized litter pans. Some people find that plastic tote boxes make excellent litterboxes, especially with those cats that like to dig and fling litter about.

What Food Do They Eat? Will They Eat "Normal" Cat Food?

Savannahs eat commercial cat food like any other domestic cat would, but are usually also receptive to a raw diet. We recommend a high-quality cat food brand be used, especially as Savannahs grow fast in the first years of their life, so will need good nutrition. All pet owners will argue about processed vs. raw food diets and I am not going to get into that. My cats eat Royal Canin kibble, Nutro Complete Care pouches and cans, and raw meat. Some prefer one food type to another. It is not at all related to amount of "wild blood" in the cat. I have an F1 that is a kibble freak and an F5 that only eats raw meat.

What Health Problems are Common in Savannahs?

Savannahs are a new breed and as yet do not have any health issues associated with them. Of course, different breeds have been used in Savannah breeding programs and those breeds may bring genetic susceptibilities with them.

Conclusion

Lastly, due to the overwhelming popularity of this breed and the limited number of kittens produced annually, it is very important to note that, in general, Savannah breeders consider their kittens very precious, and many have adopted a screening process to qualify prospective buyers. As it is part of the breeder's responsibility to assure that the kitten you select is well matched to you and your living situation, please do not feel offended if at some part in your search, one or more breeders request a wealth of personal information from you.

While not all breeders will require this, you should be prepared to submit a written description to your breeder detailing your lifestyle and type of home you can provide, including information regarding your family, age of children, age and type of existing pets, space available for play, time spent away from the home working, etc. You should also provide your veterinarian's credentials and include a telephone number where he or she can be reached for additional comment and a personal reference.

For further information, please visit www.savannahbreedsection.org.