

The Story of the Norwegian Forest Cat

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The story of the Norwegian Forest Cat goes back to the days before people had found a scientific explanation for everything, when the world was still ruled by gods. Powerful as they were, these gods also knew human feelings like love and hate, envy and jealousy, and sometimes even weakness. The sagas tell of the god Thor, held in awe because of his great strength, who on a visit to Jotunheim, encountered a cat so large he was unable to lift it off the ground.

Actually, such big cats should have come as no surprise to the mighty Thor - his mother Freya, consort of Odin, was in the habit of hitching two great cats to her chariot for her nightly outings.

For centuries, nobody thought to write these stories down, but they were passed on by oral tradition, shortening the long winter nights around the fire and keeping the gods and their "fairy cats" alive. The first writers to make a systematic collection and transcription of the old legends were folklorist Peter Christian Asbjørnsen and poet Jørgen Moe. In 1835 they published a collection of Norwegian folk tales and songs that has made them famous as "the Norwegian Brothers Grimm."

As a rule, sagas and fairy tales contain a grain of truth. The image of the troll cat with the bushy tail is, of course, very picturesque; actually, though, the search for the origins of the Norwegian Forest Cat is largely a matter of conjecture.

Examination and comparison have shown that the Forest Cat is not related to the European wild cat - type and fur quality are quite different. It is assumed that around the fifth century A.D., after the death of Attila and the fall of the empire of the Huns, some middle and eastern European tribes wandered into Scandinavia. They were accompanied by their velvet-pawed mouse catchers, whose aid was already invaluable in the fight against rodent pests.

Although they were domestic cats, they were not really dependent on mankind. It is quite possible that now and then one of these gifted hunters decided to leave its service among humans and go off to follow its own way of life in the wild. Only those cats that were able to adapt to the raw Scandinavian climate had any real chance of survival. Their coats had to protect them against icy cold and penetrating wet, and provide camouflage. They had to be able to move equally well in deep snow and on barren rocks, and to defend themselves against natural enemies such as the fox and the wolf.

Centuries of natural selection coupled with the proverbial flexibility common to all cats provided an excellent solution to all these problems. The Forest Cat's so-called "double" coat is composed of a thick, lightweight layer underneath, that is woolly in texture and reliably warm. This is covered by heavy guard hairs that are smooth and slightly oily (like a duck's feathers), and act like a raincoat to protect the skin. This special coat allows the animals to survive the damp summers and snowy winters of their homeland without catching cold or freezing to death. The best-quality coat can look a bit unkempt, not overly groomed, and is mostly resistant to the tangles found in some other long-haired breeds. Only in the springtime, when the thick winter undercoat begins to fall out, do some knots form, especially in the armpits and between the back legs. Comb and scissors are a help

at this time, but cats living in the wild have always used their teeth to get rid of uncomfortable clumps; in fact, many living indoors still do this, if the human "friseur" is slow to the rescue.

Coat colors varied from region to region, matching the surroundings. In the woods of eastern and middle Norway there were more tabby cats than anything else, whereas the gray, rocky coast of western Norway produced more black and blue coats. Reds and tortoiseshells came from southern Norway, and in snowier areas the cats needed white or gray and white coats to hide themselves. It is interesting to note that the cats belonging to reindeer herders in Finnmark have an altogether different type of fur: shorter, rather thick, and plushy. The climate of Norwegian Finnmark is colder than that of the forest and fjord areas of middle Norway, but it is considerably drier.

On the bottoms of the paws, Forest Cats developed heavy bunches of hair, the so-called "snowshoes", that keep them from sinking into the snow. It is said that their claws are stronger than those of the European wild cat - after all, the Forest Cat had to be able to get around quickly and safely in an unfriendly, stony environment.

Thus equipped, most of these cats, formed by Nature's hand, lived undisturbed in the wide forests and hidden valleys of Norway and Sweden, where some cats can still be found living free today. In time, many of them chose to reverse the path of their ancestors, and returned to the tried and true bargain of life with humans: in exchange for a warm place to sleep they kept the farms and surrounding woods free from rodents.

Besides Asbjørnsen and Moe, another author who helped the Forest Cat to fame was the Norwegian Gabriel Scott, who, in 1912, published a children's book about the adventures of a Forest Cat named "Sølvfaks". In Germany, Sølvfaks had a new career under the name "Silberpelz" ("Silver Fur").

Unfortunately, domestication resulted in outcrosses with short-haired house cats, and since the short-hair gene is dominant, the typical Forest Cat coat began to be seen more and more rarely. In order to save it from disappearance, a small group of Norwegian breeders started a systematic breeding program in the early 1930's. Already before the Second World War, one Forest Cat was presented in a show in Oslo, and after the war a few admirers continued with the plan to preserve the breed, using the truest and best-typed examples they could find.

In September 1972 the Forest Cat was accepted as a breed by the Norwegian associations, and was given a preliminary standard. At this point the term "Norsk Skogkatt" became official; it is not a reference to geographical borders (the Forest Cat appears in other Scandinavian countries as well), but rather to the first country to recognize it. Still, a few years passed before the real breakthrough.

It began in 1973, when Else and Egil Nylund showed a picture of their cats to a friend who bred Persians. The friend, Sonja Borgel, realized that the Nylunds' cats were Forest Cats, and informed Helen and Carl-Frederik Nordane (chairman of the Norske Rasekattklubbens Riksforbund - NRR) and Edel Runas (NRR breed commission). These three had just sent out an appeal to all Forest Cat owners, asking for help in locating the remaining Forest Cats and checking out their suitability for reproduction.

On October 9, 1973 the appeal was answered: after a visit to the Nylunds', Edel Runas was able to report that they really did have Forest Cats, and that the breeding program could begin.

To begin with, Pippa Skogpuss, Edel Runas' female, was mated with Pans Truls, the Nylunds' male, and on April 17, 1974, Pjewiks Forest Troll and Pjewiks Forest Nisse were born - this can be considered the "zero hour" of Norwegian Forest Cat documentation. Pans Truls, born in May 1973, only left two litters; after Pippa he was "married" to Pans Trulte. However, his black-and-white son Pans Silver, born in the spring of 1975, had ten or twelve litters. His name can still be seen in many local pedigrees, as several of his descendants found their way to Germany. The breeding program was continued enthusiastically; various lines were crossed together and Forest Cats and their offspring were to be seen at many shows. During the shows, the cats would be presented to a breed commission, who made very strict choices and recognized only a few of the cats as representative of the breed.

In 1975 it was decided to establish a breed club. On the initiative of Edel Runas, the Nylunds, and Egil Bochgreving, Carl-Frederik Nordane readily agreed to the foundation of this group under the patronage of the NRR, and the first meeting of the Norsk Skogkattring was held in the home of Liv Loose.

The breeding program was difficult during the next few years because there were so few officially recognized parents, and so a certain amount of inbreeding was unavoidable. Before application could be made for recognition of the new breed by FIFé (Fédération Internationale Féline) three complete generations had to be authenticated. In April 1977, when there were about 150 Norwegian Forest Cats registered in Norway, FIFé sent a German judge to a show in Oslo. His assignment was to make a thorough report on the new breed, to help the FIFé Judges' Commission decide about its future.

On a memorable day in November 1977, Carl-Frederick Nordane travelled to Paris to attend the FIFé General Assembly. In his baggage he carried photos of the new breed whose recognition he had made his personal mission. He set up a display of pictures to appeal as strongly as possible to the severe eyes of the judges. In Oslo all fingers were crossed. It worked! Pans Truls, brown tabby/white, was recognized with full championship status as the first Norwegian Forest Cat, with the standard number 13 NF. On Norwegian television his picture appeared on screen with the commentary, "The Norwegian Forest Cat has been recognized as an official breed."

And all Norway rejoiced.

The rest of the world too was becoming aware of "the cat who came in from the forest". Just after the FIFé recognition, only fourth generation cats were approved for export. It was only in 1981 that second generation cats could be exported, and before leaving Norway they had to be "passed" by a jury of the breed commission.

In 1982 Forest Cats were divided for judging into four color groups: Agouti (tabby, NF A), Non-agouti (not tabby, NF B), Agouti with white (NF Aw), and Non-agouti with white (NF Bw). These codes come from FIFé's EMS system, so were only used by clubs affiliated with that association. In time the Forest Cat also appeared in the more than twenty "independent" German associations, where the standard numbers were different and where each color and even each pattern was judged in its own category (i.e., "Classic " = marbled tabby design, "Mackerel" = tiger striped pattern). This made for a completely different competitive situation from that in FIFé. Since at first almost every one of the few Forest Cats registered in independent shows was unique in its color group, it was easy to obtain a title.

Gradually, FIFé's use of the four large groups resulted in a predicament. Whether, for instance, the cats were red, blue, silver, or black tabby, they were all judged together, separated only by age and sex, so that even in the early days there were several rivals for each certificate. What began as stimulating competition became frustrating, and it was hardly realistic any longer to expect cat to win its titles. Therefore, in 1992, FIFé established a new system of dividing up the Forest

Cat colors. A much greater distinction is made than before, even though not every single color is judged individually. Within the nine color groups (group 1 = black/blue, group 9 = white), the EMS combination of letters and numbers indicates the specific color and coat pattern. (For example, a cat listed as "NFO ns 09 23" in group 8 is a black silver mackerel tabby with white.)

Although the standard specifies type and coat quality as taking precedence over color and coat pattern, more and more judges, especially outside FIFé, place importance on these superficial characteristics.

In spite of such variations in interpretation, Norwegian Forest Cats enjoy a steadily growing popularity. They are present at every show these days, and the visitors' verdict still confirms the claim of the original breeders: "That looks like a wild cat!"

Could there be a nicer compliment?