

Maine Coon Is an American Cat Legend

The 'gentle giants' bring love, loyalty and a great legacy to the home.

By Deborah Straw

Known as "gentle giants," the Maine Coon is one of the most popular cat breeds in the United States. At 15 pounds, Bruno is a presence. He has tufts in his ears and feet. He chirps and meows loudly. He fetches small toys and balls. He has large golden eyes and a magnificent coat. His plumed tail announces his entrance into any room. He follows his people around, greets them at the door and generally is extremely affectionate (if also a bit moody and demanding.) Although he usually uses his big paws lightly, he can sound like a herd of elephants when he hurls himself down the stairs, demanding attention.

WORKING ROOTS

Several theories exist as to how the Maine Coon came to North America, the most popular being that they came over on ships, protecting the grain bins. Originally a working cat, the Maine Coon probably has a staff of people working for it now. It is the oldest show breed in North America.

The Maine Coon probably came to North America as a working cat on ships, protecting grain bins. According to Marilis Hornidge's book "That Yankee Cat: The Maine Coon," the first Maine Coon to be historically recorded was a black-and-white male, Captain Jenks of the Horse Marines (named for a music-hall song of the mid-1800s) that lived in Maine. One of his humans, Mrs. F.R. Pierce, wrote that he ran the household.

The breed fell out of popularity between 1911 and 1953 as other pedigreed longhaired cats came into greater favor. But later it was developed into more than a regional oddity, thanks in great part to The Central Maine Cat Club, which promoted the breed enthusiastically.

The Maine Coon, often called the "gentle giant," now ties almost even with the Persian as the most popular feline in the U.S. In 1985, the governor of Maine signed into law a document naming the Maine Coon the official state feline. In February 1988, the cat appeared on a series of 22-cent U.S. commemorative postage stamps.

Myrna Miliani, DVM, consultant and author of "The Body Language and Emotion of Cats," recalls falling in love with the breed after meeting one particular Maine Coon. "He was always such a self-contained gentleman throughout the exam," she says. "Never resisting but always making it clear that he was allowing me to do whatever I wanted. When it was over, he would head butt, mark me and purr, and I always felt as if he were giving me his blessing. He and others like him were what made me fall in love with the breed."

WHAT A LOOKER

The Maine Coon standard states that the tail should be at least as long as the body, between shoulder blade and the base of the tail. It is a silky, mat-free tail that is long and flowing and sometimes held high in the air, like a flag.

Although the Maine Coon is large, it generally is not a huge cat. The breed looks bigger because of its long coat and stocky conformation. The fur on its shoulders is shorter and gradually becomes longer down the spine, ending in the heaviest fur on the hindquarters. The fur down the sides and on the stomach also is long and full. It wears a ruff, perhaps its second most proud attribute.

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One of the advantages of this longhaired breed is that it is relatively mat-free. Heavy shedding occurs primarily in the spring and fall, although cats shed all the time. But they do not seem to develop huge mats compared to some other longhaired felines. They also love to groom themselves, which removes most snarls. Brushing does not need to be a daily occurrence, but perhaps a weekly one, and most cats enjoy this bonding time. They know they are beautiful and like to be helpful in your keeping them that way.

Hairballs are another issue. To help eliminate that problem, breeder Nancy McKee of Vermont recommends adding some

canned pumpkin to the cat's wet or moist food. This also helps eliminate loose stools.

With their great beauty, intelligence and affection, the Maine Coon makes a wonderful addition to any family.

Deborah Straw lives and works in Burlington, Vt. Author of "The Healthy Pet Manual: A Guide to the Prevention and Treatment of Cancer," she and her husband have two Maine Coon cat roommates.