

## A Walk on the Wild Side

**Cloned African wildcats are getting a little help from some friends.**

*by Valerie Volinski*

Dr. Dresser poses with serval kittens. Nyla just celebrated her first birthday. To mark the occasion, her keeper made a chalk drawing in her enclosure. This intrigued the African wildcat, who spent the day rolling on it. Seven pound Nyla is literally the brainchild and product of a team of scientists, led by Betsy Dresser, director of the Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species. They are trying to find ways to push the envelope on assisted reproduction of wildlife, which aims to preserve different species of wildcats and safeguard their future. Wildcats are under pressure because of human overpopulation, hunting and unregulated interbreeding with domestic cats.

Nyla is a modern miracle; she is the offspring of natural mating between two cloned African wildcats. She lives at the Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species in New Orleans with her mother, Madge. Nyla looks and acts just like her wild born relatives: diminutive wildcats, who live in the sub-Saharan regions of Africa. So far she's thriving, as are her siblings, who were relocated to other zoos during Hurricane Katrina, which hit shortly after their births.

Dresser, who has worked with the big cats (such as lions and tigers), says the smaller the cat, the fiercer they are.

Ditteaux - African Wildcat clone (father of most of the clones including Nyla). "All those small wild cats have tough tendencies," she says, "I'm almost positive these are the predecessors of the domestic cat. Starting back with the Egyptians, when they tried to domesticate cheetahs, wildcats and leopards. They had luck with some of them and obviously some of them didn't [domesticate]."

Staff at the research center try to make the clones' captive lives resemble the wild — a big challenge given the wildcats' inherent nature. Dierdre Havnen, Nyla's keeper, tends to the clones in addition to the only known Sri Lankan rusty-spotted cat in the United States in captivity, 16-year-old Toby, among other species. Havnen loves her job, and often dreams up enrichments for her wildcats. She puts mice in boxes. (Like most cats, Nyla plays with the box itself.) Wood is provided, as is a box of dirt for an outdoorsy feel. Because wildcats have such a keen sense of smell, cinnamon, thyme and parsley infused objects are put in their area.

Nyla eats 12 ounces of zoo diet a day. On raw chicken day, Nyla's anticipation is palpable. But her favorite prey objects are peacock feathers, which she carries in her mouth. Crickets, grasshoppers and mealworms also spice things up. Havnen notes Nyla is still very much a kitten. "She'll chase anything that moves." Even after a year's work in Nyla's area, Nyla remains wary of Havnen, as it should be. Staff are constantly reminded how wild these creatures are. Pound for pound, wildcats are stronger than the feral domestic cat.

Nyla "All these small cats have these tough tendencies. Even the runty spotted cat, which is about half the size of a domestic cat, [is] extremely tough. They're the cutest little things [but] they have teeth that just don't stop," Dresser says. "It's as if these little guys have a complex."

For now, Dresser's team is busy banking sand, black-footed and rusty-spotted cat DNA, along with perfecting the cloning of these living treasures.

Valerie Volinski is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in The New Yorker and Los Angeles Times, among others. She resides in New York and New Jersey with her husband, Somalis and a rescued feral cat.

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