

The Origin of the Maine Coon Cat

Colorful stories exist surrounding the origin of the Maine Coon breed. Can we separate science from speculation and history from folklore?

The Only Long-haired Breed of Cat Native to North America



Perhaps the rings on the tabby-striped Maine Coon's tail encouraged the theory that the Maine Coon resulted from a cat breeding with a raccoon.

Many Maine Coons exhibit behaviors that remind us of the way raccoons sometimes douse their food in water before eating it, such as washing their front paws in the water bowl or drinking from running water. Scientists tell us, however, that such breeding is genetically impossible.

Could the Maine Coon be related to the wild cats that inhabited this continent hundreds of years ago? As far back as 12,000 years ago, it is believed that the first Native American people migrated to North America across the Bering Strait. From Alaska down to South America, these people settled and formed a variety of diverse tribal cultures, which included the Apaches, Navaho, InnuIt (or Eskimo), Cherokee, Mohawk, Hopi, and Comanche. Each tribe had a unique set of legends and religious observations, yet each felt a deep respect for the earth and the animals they encountered. Native Americans believed that the Great Spirit existed in all things, both living and inanimate. The wild cats that Native Americans would most likely have encountered were: bobcats (*right*), lynx, and the mountain lion (also known as the cougar or puma).



As recently as 1970, the mating of a bobcat or small wildcat with a domestic cat has been proven to be possible. The kittens of such matings are sturdy and heavily furred with large tufted ears and oversized furry feet. Adding to the credibility of this theory is the fact that today the bobcat is more prevalent in the northeastern United States than is commonly realized. Presumably, their population was even more dense in the forests of earlier times. Note the similar physical attributes of the bobcat and the Maine Coon (*right*)?



The Cats of Warriors?

Many of the great trade routes of the world were first established by the seafaring traders known as the Vikings, *below*. From 793 to 1066 AD, Scandinavian (mostly Dane and Norwegian) warriors and traders raided, colonized,



and explored large parts of Europe, southwestern Asia, Northern Africa, and eventually north-eastern North America. Did these venturesome Scandinavians bring the Maine Coon's ancestor to America?

An ancient breed believed to have originated in Norway over 500 years ago, the skogkatt (or Norwegian Forest cat), *below*, evolved from a similarly rough terrain and harsh climate as did the



earliest documented Maine Coons. The Vikings are believed to have used cats as rat catchers and companions, and as you can see, Norwegian Forest cats had many physical attributes in common with the Maine Coon. It is fascinating to think that today's Maine Coons might descend from Norwegian Forest cats that the Vikings brought with them in their travels to North America.

A Royal Heritage?

Could the Maine Coon breed have descended from cats that belonged to the French queen, Marie Antoinette



(*left*)? The queen's passion for small, fluffy, cats and dogs was well known. Believing that her life was in danger, the queen is thought to have shipped her beloved cats to this country - along with many of her worldly goods - on a ship owned by Captain Samuel Clough.

Did the good Captain see himself saving a maiden in distress? Letters are said to still exist that Captain Clough wrote to his wife, suggesting changes in his family's home that presumably were intended to help the Queen feel more at home. It is also said that some of the Queen's furniture is still found in Wiscasset, Maine, lending credibility to this story.

Perhaps the queen's longhaired cats bred with the American shorthaired cats, and the Maine Coon resulted? Timing makes this theory unlikely, however. Marie Antoinette was beheaded in 1793, and by the 1860's (only 70 years later) Maine Coon Cats were center stage at state fairs up and down the eastern seaboard.

The Pilgrims

What we *do* know is that during the period of colonization, pilgrim ships arriving to the northeastern coast of America are believed to have brought cats along with their crews and cargoes to



kill mice on the ships. These same cats would have been used by the early settlers (*left*) to control the rodents that would other-

wise spoil their crops and grain stores. With little or no interference from man, these early domesticated cats could very well have bred with less domesticated felines who were already in North America to create the breed we know today. This theory is consistent with both biology *and* history.

Although the early Maine Coons had a job to do, New Englanders appreciated these cats for their wonderful dispositions and good looks so much that they became America's first show cat.