

The Origin of the Maine Coon - Part III

This article is the last of three installments of an interview conducted with Don Shaw in Memphis in early March, 1976. Mike Hicks, Beth Hicks, and Rick Bramham talked with Mr. Shaw. The interview was taped and then transcribed verbatim.

This is an excerpt.

Resource Reference Pawpeds

<http://www.pawpeds.com/MCO/mchs/articles/DonShaw3.html>

RB - We talked a little about polydactyls and why, they have

DS - Yeah, that is a simple genetic dominant. It has variable expressivity in that it can have It has extra digits. How many extra digits and how well formed those digits are is subject to some modification. The basic gene that causes extra digits is a simple dominant.

RB - Is that a beneficial thing for a Maine Coon to have?

DS - Well, it would have given them Well, the snowshoe rabbit again we mentioned before in the polydactyl type phenomenon and it would have given extra supportive mass - area mass not weight mass.

RB - But because it is variable in expression you could have problems if you tried to breed for that? Would you have problems with defects? There are a couple of Maine Coon breeders interested in keeping this.

DS - I cannot give you any good reason why not to have a polydactyl Maine if that is what you want. I mean I cannot give you any good selective reason as to why it would be advantageous or disadvantageous; whether a polydactyl is healthier or less healthy than other cats. I will say that some personal experience with the poly is that they do have some dexterity with the front feet that's rather interesting. They can climb in a different way than other cats. They do not climb by simply hanging their claws in but they actually use the thumb-like digit.

RB - Would this enable them to handle their food in the same way as a raccoon which may be part of the reason for

DS - Well, polydactyls can do that to some degree. There are other cats that can, too. The poly would tend toward the more thumb-like phenomenon and therefore the adaptation would be there to do this.

BH - I don't know if you are familiar with it but there was a study done by someone connected with a university in the 1950's which showed that 40% of the Maines were polydactyls. Now, this was before they came back on the show circuit.

DS - That wouldn't surprise me at all. It would certainly regardless of whether it gives them an increased capacity for climbing on slick surfaces or rocky surfaces which I know from personal experience from the poly who used to climb the lattice work posts that were holding up my patio roof. He'd go up them like a monkey! That could have some advantages in their survival. Being able to handle food with more dexterity would certainly have some survival advantages. But I think we could definitely say, I don't think anybody would argue with us, that the increased area - the area mass increase compared to the weight mass increase of the polydactyl's feet - would give them a greater capacity to walk on snow. That alone would be sufficient selective advantage that it would not surprise me at all that polydactyl was very prevalent. If it was ever introduced, it would have become prevalent in that area.

RB - Where did it come from? What raw material carried that?

DS - We don't really know. Polydactyls have been popping up in cat populations universally. I am sure that it was in the European cat in 1500, 1400, 1300's. But what was its original origin, whether it was from an Asian origin or an African origin, I have no idea. I don't think anybody can speculate on that. We know mostly about it because of the British. The British write about it and the British talk about it but that doesn't mean that that's where it happened. We tend to think things happened with a British background because that's where we found out about them. That doesn't necessarily mean that's where they occurred. The British found them and exploited them. Thus it becomes known to us as of British origin. That's particularly been true in the cat fancy. We give a British origin to a lot of things that really did not originate in the British cats per se.

RB - You don't, then, foresee any real problems in breeding polys. It is not like taillessness?

DS - No, the skeletal abnormality involved here is not one that is deformative in the sense that it carries any ill effects to the animal. Living with a poly for a year and a half, I saw that he was as healthy and happy as any cat. His capacity to do whatever he did was only enhanced if anything by the structure. I find nothing I would say that would be against it. Except it is aesthetics, if you don't like it aesthetically then - you know.