

# Breaking Down the Abyssinian/Somali Standard

## The Abyssinian Coat – Wendy Newton

In the CCCA Standard, aspects of the Abyssinian/Somali coat are worth 45 points out of the 100, which is almost half the allocation of points for the whole Standard. Therefore, it would seem to be an important part of the breed to focus upon when judging, breeding or showing Abyssinian and Somali cats.

**Scale of Points:** coat ticking and clarity (15 points), coat colour (15 points), coat texture & length (10 points), condition (5 points)

### Coat ticking and clarity - 15 points

In the Scale of Points, ‘Coat ticking and clarity’ is listed; however, further down in the descriptors, there is a ‘Coat Pattern’ heading, which one presumes relates to the ticking and clarity points; however, it does discuss aspects of colour too.

The ticked coat is due to the agouti gene, where each strand of fur on the main coat must have two to three bands of colour. The base of the hair shaft is a lighter colour than the tip, which in a Tawny should be dark brown/black with bands of alternating colour. So, colour involves the ticking tips, undercoat colour and bands of ticking.

The Standard requires at least two bands of ticking which comprise of alternating bands of light and dark colours with the darkest colour at the tip. I think this needs clarification in that there should be at least two bands of ‘dark colouring’ with the darkest at the tip of the fur and two bands of lighter colouring with the lightest band next to the skin. The bands of ticking are mentioned in ‘coat length and texture’ section too.



Image 1: Tawny coat ticking and undercoat.

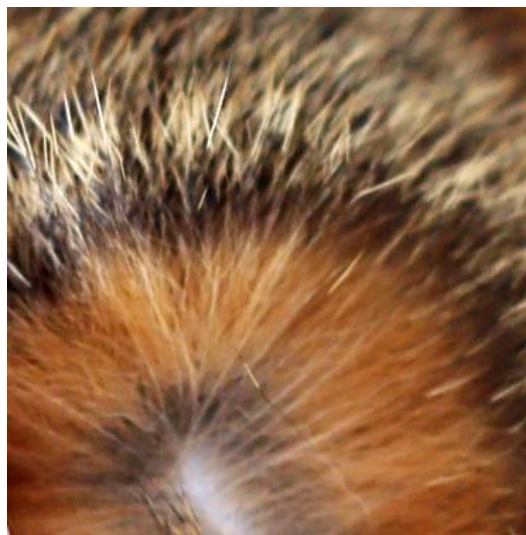


Image 2: Grey roots in the undercoat.

*Images 1 & 2* are an interesting comparison on a variety of levels. On the fur in *Image 1* the ticking seems to be concentrated at the top of the hair shaft with much smaller bands of ticking that have less contrast in colour than the fur in *Image 2*. The fur in *Image 2* looks slightly longer than the fur in *Image 1* and the bands of ticking look longer too. *Image 1* looks to have less undercoat density with smoother hair shafts that are clear to the roots. *Image 2* has richer colour in the lower band of pale ticking, however; the roots are grey. Are any of these factors related to the others or are they all independent of one another?

There is a penalty for less than two bands of ticking and ticking that is incorrect. Incorrect ticking may relate to what some breeders call ‘reverse’ ticking where the tip of the fur ends in a lighter colour rather than the darkest colour of the coat.

The way the points and headings are divided it would seem in this section, that 'ticking' just relates to the presence or absence of ticking and the colour and depth of colour of those bands should be/would be judged under the coat colour section.

The creation of the tabby pattern is via the tabby gene (T) and the uniform distribution of ticking over the Abyssinian coat is known as a Ticked Tabby pattern (rather than Mackerel, Spotted or Classic). While there are aspects of the tabby pattern that are seen as less desirable or a fault in the Abyssinian there are a few tabby remnants that are seen to be desirable. The Standard requires that *'there is an "M" on the head between the eyes and ears'* and that *'pencilings extend from the eyes and brows and there is cheekbone shading, with dots and shading on whisker pads'*. None of this seems to have been lost in the Abyssinian cats we see on the show bench in Australia.

Some of the points about clarity have been discussed in the earlier parts of 'Breaking Down the Abyssinian/Somali Standard' found in previous issues of the Abyssinian Breeder magazine. However, it should be noted that *'preference is given to cats unmarked on the undersides, chest and legs'* and that *'the tail is without rings'*. Penalties apply for a broken necklace that is too strong and for belly spots on adults. A withhold may be given for an unbroken necklace or distinct bars or rings on the legs or tail. The undercoat should be *'clear to the roots'* and complement *'the surface colour, with no coldness or grey tones'*. Image 2 shows grey at the roots of a Tawny coat. The grey roots may be found in specific areas such as around the shoulders or may cover the main part of the body. There is some discussion among breeders about whether the grey may relate to seasonal or hormonal changes, as sometimes it seems to lessen or increase on a cat.

## Coat colour - 15 points

Discussing the coat colour is complicated by the fact that the Abyssinian cat has a ticked coat. The Standard indicates that deeper shades of colour are preferred, *'however intensity of ticking is not to be sacrificed for depth of colour'*. *'In the Silver group, high grade silver is most desirable.'*

In Australia, on the show bench, there still seems to be a range to the depth of colour seen in Abyssinian cat coats. Over the last ten years, largely due to breeders selectively breeding for rich colour, there has been an observable improvement in the appearance of the Abyssinian coat, particularly the Tawny coat. The lighter bands of ticking have become richer in colour resulting in a fiery or rich glow to the coat. More recently, this richness has been seen in the Cinnamon and Blue coat colours. When all things are equal, apart from depth of colour, then deeper shades are preferred.



Images 3, 4, 5 & 6: Tawny, Cinnamon, Blue & Fawn coat colours.

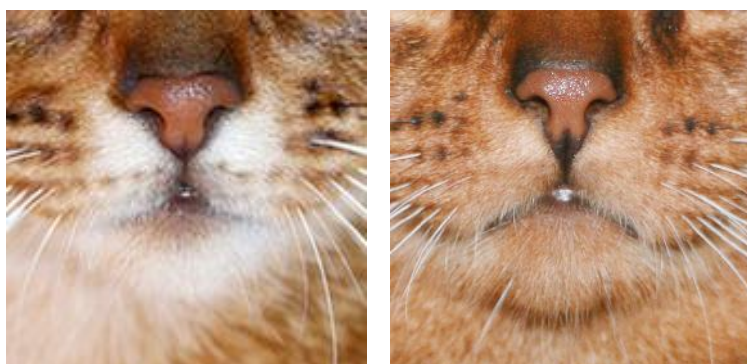
The Standard requires the spinal shading *'to be of the deeper colour'* and that *'darker hair colour should extend from between the toes to well up the back of the hind legs, preferably to the hocks, also showing as a solid tip at the extreme end of the tail'*. In previous issues of the Abyssinian Breeder magazine, there has been some discussion by breeders about the colour of the hocks and spine line in Abyssinian cats. Most breeders who responded in the discussion felt that the mention of the darker hocks and spine line should remain in the Standard and be something to which breeders should aspire.

On an Abyssinian the colour around the nostrils is sometimes quite pale and may extend down the throat region. Because of the contrast of colours on the face, I believe this enhances the striking look of the Abyssinian. Some judges and breeders do not mind this higher contrast look; however, more recently, I have noticed that there seems to be a preference for exhibits that are coloured all the way up the throat to the chin with a colour that is similar to the belly colour, rather than just complementing it. According to the Standard both are acceptable, as although the colour should *'harmonise with the belly, chest and forelegs'* a withhold fault only applies for *'white anywhere other than under chin, near nostrils or upper throat, except in Silvers'*.

Images 7 & 8: Throat colour



**Image 7** shows a paler coat colour extending quite a long way down the throat; some judges would suggest this is too low for the paler colour to be present; however, it is not white in colouring so should be acceptable. **Image 8** shows a more uniform colour extending across the chest, throat and chin region. **Image 9** shows the contrast in colour around the nostrils while **Image 10** shows the uniform colouring.



Images 9 & 10: Variation in colour around the nostrils and chin.

The Standard explains the requirements for each coat colour accepted by CCCA for Abyssinians. Most of the descriptions seem adequate for the specified colour; however, I feel there are some discrepancies that I will discuss briefly.

### **Abyssinian coat colours**

The Tawny coat is required to be *'ticked with black/dark brown'* and be a *'rich tawny brown'*. The belly and inside of the forelegs should be *'orange-brown'* with a *'paler orange-brown undercoat'*.

The Blue coat is required to be a *'soft blue'* colour with *'an oatmeal undercoat'* and *'ticked with deeper blue'*. How is it possible to apply *'intensity'* and *'depth of colour'* to the Blue coat colour if the colour requirement is for it to be *'soft'* which means pale/muted/subtle/understated/restrained? How can the blue be intense and soft at the same time? The definition of oatmeal colouring that I found described it as *'greyish-beige'*. It is interesting that the dictionary definition mentions grey when it is not a desired colouring in the Abyssinian. Also, I find the word *'oatmeal'* rather American, however, the Standards, no doubt, have been derived from outside of Australia and rely on some consistency with cat standards around the world.

Recently, I have heard some breeders discussing blue undercoat colour and saying it should be the same colour as the belly fur. For all colours, the CCCA Standard states a different colour for the fur on the belly and the inside of



forelegs (except for Chocolate) compared with the undercoat colour. For Blue Abyssinians, the belly and forelegs are required to be *'warm oatmeal with pinkish tone'* versus *'oatmeal'* for the undercoat, which infers the undercoat colour may be a paler or less warm version of the belly fur and inside of foreleg colour.



Image 13: Blue coat ticking and warm undercoat Image 14: Blue coat with paler coloured undercoat.

The Cinnamon coat colour is required to be *'glowing, warm, rich cinnamon-red'* with ticking tips a *'bright tan brown'*. The inner forelegs and belly should be a *'deep apricot'* in colour with the

undercoat being a *'paler cinnamon-apricot'* colour.

The Fawn coat colour is described as *'warm rose beige'* tipped with *'light cocoa brown'* and the undercoat *'pale pinkish buff'*. The belly and inside of the forelegs are to be *'beige blush'* in colour.

The Chocolate coat colour is required to be *'rich chocolate brown'* and tipped with *'deep chocolate brown'* and a *'paler chocolate undercoat'*. The belly and inside of foreleg colour is *'paler chocolate'* note that this colour description is the same as undercoat requirement.

The Lilac coat colour is described as *'pale dusty lilac'* tipped with *'deeper lilac'*. The colour of the belly and inside of the forelegs should be *'warm oatmeal'* and the undercoat a *'pale oatmeal'* colour.

### **Coat texture & length - 10 points**

The coat texture and length section is where the Standard differs for the Abyssinian and Somali. The length of fur is determined by the cat's genetic profile. The Somali longhair gene is recessive.

For the texture and length of the Abyssinian cat's coat, the Standard states *'short, but long enough to accommodate two or three bands of ticking.'* I have heard breeders and judges from other countries comment on Abyssinian coats becoming too short. Because there is no specific length mentioned in the Standard how does one know what is too long or too short? If the hair shaft contains the required bands of ticking does it matter how short it is? What effect does that have on the overall look of the coat? The fur is a different length over different parts of a cat's body so it would be difficult to state an actual length a coat should be without specifying the different regions. In general, the Abyssinian cats I have seen in Australia seem to have good length coats, perhaps with some even being a little on the long side. Shorter coats are starting to appear on some Abyssinians being shown in Australia so it will be interesting to see if it becomes a concern for breeders here too. Perhaps we should take heed of overseas experience.

The fur is expected to be fine, lying close to the body of the cat and should be resilient so it falls back into place when the fingers are run through the fur backwards. The thickness of the coat or density of fur on the coat makes a big difference to the appearance and feel of the coat. Do cats with a thicker coat have more undercoat? If so, why? Sometimes the thickness may relate to seasonality and hormonal levels; however, there are Abyssinian cats that, in general, do have thicker coats. I think that a thicker coat tends to be less resilient and therefore is seen to be less desirable. A thicker coat may give the illusion of the coat being longer to the touch as well as visually. There is a penalty for incorrect coat texture.

To me, the last part in this section, *'with a lustrous sheen'*, relates more to the condition of the coat than the coat texture and length.

## **Condition - 5 points**

'Condition' is listed in the 'Scale of points' just below 'Coat texture and length'. Apart from being allocated 5 points it is not described any further in the Standard. Because 'Condition' is listed with 'Coat texture and length' I have assumed that this means coat condition, however; does it relate to the general condition of the cat? In theory, the condition of the cat in terms of musculature would come under the other sections that relate more to the structure of the cat. The coat condition may be affected by a variety of variables such as genetics, health, diet, hormones, grooming and seasonal changes. Some coats may benefit from being washed a few days before a show, may exhibitors use brushes and grooming tools to remove excess fur; for a show, some owners will apply a lacquer to bring out sheen on the coat.

## **Bibliography**

CCCA Official Breed Standard for Abyssinian & Somali – January 2006 edition. Latest update January 2014.

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Readers please note that Wendy's excellent – and superbly illustrated – article poses some genuine and important questions. To show what you believe, please contribute to a standards discussion article in the next issue – *Ed.*