

## FUN FACTS ABOUT CAT COATS or How to More Accurately Identify the Cats in Your Shelter

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The vast majority of cats in American homes and shelters fall into the domestic short, medium or long hair category. But while they may not be rare purebreds, their individuality is expressed through both behavior and diverse coat markings. In honor of Adopt-a-Shelter-Cat Month, let's examine the terminology used to describe their coats of many colors. \*

- **SOLID COLOR CATS**

Did you know all cats have the gene that produces tabby (stripes/spots) markings? However, in order for the tabby markings to be prominent, the cat must also have the gene for **agouti** or light and dark banded hair from one of its parents. Without it, the hair shafts will be a solid color. In bright light you can sometimes see the "ghost" tabby stripes on a solid color cat.

- **TABBY PATTERNS**

Tabbies possess a coat that is a combination of agouti hairs and solid color hairs. There are four types of tabby patterning. The **mackerel tabby** is the coat most similar to our domestic cat's early relative, the African Wild Cat. These striped markings are called mackerel because they resemble a fish's skeleton with a solid line along the spine and streaks radiating down the sides. Cats bearing this pattern are the ones most often called tiger cats. **Classic tabbies** bear blotches or swirls of solid colors on their sides. These cats are frequently referred to as watermarked tabbies. **Spotted tabbies** may have stripes on their faces, legs, and tails but those on the body are broken up into many dots. This pattern is the hallmark of Occicats and Egyptian Maus. The **ticked tabby** has virtually no solid colored hairs, so it lacks spots or stripes. The Abyssinian is an example of the all-agouti-haired ticked tabby. Mixed breed cats may have agouti-haired patches but they are generally combined with other markings.

- **PIEBALD/PARTICOLOR CATS**

Piebald or particolor cats are white and any other color. **Bicolor** is the term used to describe a cat that is 1/3 - 2/3 white and usually has patches of color on its head and torso. The **van** is almost all white with colored patches on head and tail. Turkish Vans bear these markings as well as mixed breed cats. The **mitted** cat typically has white on its chin, chest, belly and feet. When black and white, it may be called a tuxedo cat as we do on Petfinder. A solid colored cat with a spot of white on the chest is said to have a **locket** and one with white on chest and belly is said to be **bikini-marked**.

- **TORTOISESHELLS**

A tortoiseshell cat has red hairs and black hairs in the same coat. Since it takes two X chromosomes to create this coat pattern, tortoiseshell cats are almost exclusively female. (Only in very rare cases will this coat appear on a male and he will most likely be sterile.) When the hairs are blue (grey) and cream, the pattern is **dilute tortoiseshell**. A **calico** cat is a red and black tortoiseshell with white patches, a **dilute calico** one who is blue and cream with white patches. And last, a **torbie** is a tortoiseshell that bears patches of any tabby pattern.

- **POINTED CATS**

The pointed coat pattern is the result of gene mutations that cause the coolest parts of the cat's body to be a different color or pattern than the rest of the body. The areas that bear the pointing are ears, muzzle, tail and legs. A cat with solid color points is called a **color point** and is generally referred to by the color of the points such as a chocolate point Siamese. Point patterns include **tortie point** (tortoiseshell points), **lynx point** (striped points), **tortie lynx point** (torbie points).

- **SILVER CATS**

Another gene mutation results in removing the yellowish-tan pigment from a cat's hairs. The regular tabby becomes a **silver tabby**. In solid color cats, the silver gene lightens the hair shaft resulting in a **smoke** coloration where only the tip of the hair is colored and the rest is white. Ticked tabbies are affected by the silver gene to the point that the lighter bands on the hair shafts are both further lightened and widened. These coats are referred to as **shaded**. The lighter bands are further widened in the **chinchilla** coat pattern leaving color only at the tips of the hairs.

Now that you know the various patterns, practice your identification skills on the cats in your home or shelter. By using the pattern delineations, the description will more accurately pinpoint a specific cat. Instead of saying I have one tabby and one grey cat, doesn't the following paint a richer, more detailed picture? My cats Olive Oyl and Gracie are a mitted mackerel tabby and a bikini-marked blue domestic short hair. Can't you just see them in your mind's eye?

\* For an illustrated overview of this material, check out *THE ASPCA COMPLETE GUIDE TO CATS* (Chronicle Books), pp. 71-79.