

The Polydactyl Maine Coon



Dirigo Polydactyl "ThumbPrince"

The History of the Polydactyl Maine Coon

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Maine Coons come from Maine and polydactyl Maine Coons most especially show their Maine heritage visibly in their extra-wide, multi-toed paws.

Descended from cats that hardy seafaring people chose, our present-day polydactyl Maine Coons are a direct visible genetic link to the beautiful heritage of maritime family life. A polydactyl Maine Coon from a Kennebec River town or village has living visible proof of its original native Maine heritage. This heritage goes back through the generations of kittens possibly 300 years or more, to the earliest Maine cats, when the polydactyl gene became intertwined with and irrevocably part of the original Maine Coon.

Purified by centuries of natural selection, polydactyl Maine Coons embody the most distinct and visible proof possible of the long and esteemed heritage of this native Maine Coon breed.

A polydactyl Maine coon is a Maine Coon in every characteristic and with extra toes. This word means multi-toed, and the extra-large paws are nick-named double-paws, because the paws are usually double-wide in size. They can walk through snow more easily, hence another nick-name of snowshoe cat; but most often though, they are simply called polys.

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Dazzle "Snowshoe" Polydactyl: Dirigo's "Dazzle"

The history of Maine's polydactyl Maine Coon tugs and whispers from the porches of stately sea captains homes and from memories of old ships and schooners; one wonders, how did the double-pawed cats get here?

The visible heritage embodied in a polydactyl Maine Coon stems from the olden days of Maine, when hardy self-reliant families sailed and settled along the shores. The distinctly unique Maine coastal environment favored the origins of this breed. The byways, sloping shoresides, and deeper coves were launching ways for locally built schooners and other vessels. Salt-water farms lined the shores where we have forgotten now, that everyday people did business by sail with canvas and masts and wind, not trucks and gasoline. The highways of yore were the rivers and the sea. Maine has excellent deep and navigable rivers. The Kennebec River, for example, is famous for the number of vessels built and launched from its shores. The talented Maine maritime families and the vastness of the trade they dealt in are the real reason it is the Maine Coon Cat. This breed was developed in the Maine coastal regions specifically as a result of ship cats coming home to families who prized them for their usefulness board ship as well as on the farm and around the wharves. The years following the evolutionary War were likely the heyday of the Maine Cats development, as the state was known for its bustling shipyards. Downeasters sailed with wheat world-wide, clippers sailed to China and back, but mostly the trusty schooners carried vital local maritime cargoes; as hundreds of various Maine-built vessels were launched every year from riverside shipyards.

Cats were just as common at working waterfronts as dories, and are still to be found living free at the working waterfront area of Portland Harbor, for example. When Kennebec cargo schooners sailed to Boston and back with lumber, bricks and supplies,

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cats were simply on board to control rodents, and for pleasure. Boston Harbor has been scientifically designated the arrival point in this country of the polydactyl cat, and location of the first polydactyls in America. It was an easy matter for the cute poly cats to be accepted aboard the Maine-bound vessels, for luck as well as something new to share with family at home. The Boston wharfside poly cats and Maine-bound schooner cats mingled as they pleased.

In this manner, the poly gene was introduced into the isolated early Maine Coon gene pool; protected as it were, by villages united only by sea or horse-drawn wagon. The early Maine Cats were able to breed pure and without dilution, and the polydactyl gene became intertwined with the other characteristics, back in the chill coastal and riverside locations, where the pure strain of Maine Coon was developed. Long-coated, rugged bodied Maine Coons naturally developed for survival, as a working cat that people treasured, and their adaptation to the cold winters and chilly ocean air resulted in eventual recognition as a legendary distinct breed.

The poly Maine Coon is more adept, and often smarter, because of the increased ability that the shape of their paws gives them. Their larger paws enabled them to survive in conditions requiring them to catch their own food. Some of them always survived and to this day the dominant gene, polydactylism, continues to be present in a certain percentage of native Maine Coons. Being still visible, it is likely present in the same percentages now as in the earlier times. It can be estimated rather accurately from genetics rules that a constant minimum of 25% of early native Maine Coons would have been polydactyl, and perhaps more in some isolated locations and the many coastal islands.

Thus the early Maine Cat developed into the traditional type and style still seen in todays moderate Maine Coons. These early cats were known as "Maine cats' with the name "Coon" added prior to 1865 (in publications by a celebrated Maine author of that period, whose "coon-cat" named "Polly," grew up together with her.) Of course, normal-footed Maine Coon Cats developed concurrently, often as littermates; and were the feline stars in the first CFA Cat Shows in the USA in the early 1900s. (See [The Maine Coon Cat Authenticated](#) by Beth Kus

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Dirigo's Wild Native Hooch

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In 1988, the Dirigo polys began with a visit to an old Kennebec River historical settlement, Augusta, Maine, a short few miles from our nearby hometown. A polydactyl mother cat and her male kitten, a kitten with four huge paws and nice brown mackerel coloring, were acquired there. The mother cat, Tuffy of Dirigo, was so named for biting the policeman who rescued her from under a riverside building.

The kitten was named Dirigo's Wild Native Hooch and came back to Dirigo to join the breeding group of Maine Coons. Registered in CFF, the male joined in smoothly and every kitten from him was as healthy as could be. Those that inherited his huge feet, typically 25%, were treasured also for their intelligence, disposition, and fine markings.

A notable female daughter born 3 years later in 1991, was Dirigo's "Hooch P. Honey", a four-footed poly of lovely large feet inherited from her father, and disposition and intelligence unmatched. Later she bred with the well-known key Dirigo male, TICA and CFF CH Dirigo Swift River Ruffian, and her son, Dirigo Amos P. was born in fall of 1995. Amos as he is called, still is a huge purr machine and incorporates the finest qualities of all Maine Coons over the centuries.

In having a poly Maine Coon from the shores of the Kennebec River, one has a true and visible genetic tracer straight back through hundreds of years, to the original strong and hardy polydactyl Maine Coons. Undiluted, purified by centuries of natural selection, the proof is there visibly, of the true and long heritage of the native, original, Maine Coon Cat.

Tuffy and her son were Dirigo's first source of poly Maine Coons. Several years later, a second source of registered Dirigo polydactyl Maine Coon Cats began with Dirigo Phoebe. Dirigo Phoebe was an incredibly loving blue poly female. The daughter of Phoebe, Dirigo Mitsigirl P, born in 1996, became possibly the finest mother Dirigo ever had. Four poly feet, sweet nature, lovely coat, make her all the more endearing, but strong and healthy kittens are her forte.

Poly Maine Coons were always present in the registered breed as exemplified by Whittemore Ginger, believed to be the first polydactyl Maine Coon registered (from Augusta, Maine area) and another early poly foundation-source cat, Gray Luv Perry, originated from outside of Maine. The earlier-registered poly kittens became rare because they could not be shown. Betty Ljostadt was well known for her staunch support and affection for the poly Maine Coon, but the polydactyl characteristic was not included in the first breed standard she helped develop for show acceptance, due to cat politics. Because of this omission, registered polydactyl Maine Coons nearly became bred out. After acceptance of the Maine Coon breed by CFA, CFF, ACA and CCA, cat club politics kept many discussions and breedings of poly kittens very quiet. Pursuit of grand championships became more important to some early breeders than the preservation of the original Maine Coon as it had always been. Dirigo was an exception, keeping the lineage of polys preserved.

Eventually staunch breeders loved the poly Maine Coon, followed their hearts, and got them going again, and kept them going. Now the poly Maine Coon is in a fine resurgence. Dirigo has to date introduced two separate sources of poly Maine Coons

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into the registered pedigree breed. After learning of Dirigo's Wild Native Hooch and being impressed with his strong kittens, a very brave lady, Karen Jacobus, (Soho Mews,) showed a poly Maine Coon as HHP, at a Maine Coon Cat Club breed show in Connecticut. This broke the ice publically in the Eastern Region forever. This particular cat was obtained in the Augusta, Maine region and sent to Karen by the late Marty Foss, (Kriscaj). It was eventually registered by Karen, but not bred, as HHP adult entries are required to be altered.

There are now some other newer breeders working with their personal interest in the Maine origin polydactyl Maine Coon, but at that time, nearly 20 years ago, the only polys from Maine sources (except those descended from Whittemore Ginger) included Karen's cat, rare Lynart or Choate cats, and Dirigo cats. These breeders have retired and only the Dirigo Maine-origin polys continue on uninterrupted from the original sources.

Dirigo poly Maine Coons have been shown many times. Two achievements bear note: Dirigo Dazzle won 13 rosettes as best HHP kitten in her first show at TICA, in Portland, Maine in 2000, and in 2005 Dirigo Glory P. won TICA 20th best HHP kitten in just one show. Now, TICA allows poly Maine Coons to be shown in the New Traits class. Dirigo Brown Polly has earned over a dozen Best rosettes to date.

Living visible proof of the long and esteemed heritage of authentic Maine Coon Cats is embodied in a polydactyl Maine Coon. Always part of the true breed, these big-foot cats bring joy and satisfaction to all who have one -- a little bit of Maine in a cat-fur coat!

About the Author

Beth E. Kus, a native Mainer, notable Maine author and artist did her undergraduate studies in fine art and literature at Syracuse University. She has written many articles on this unique breed of cat. Her articles are internationally published and have been translated into other languages since 1990. Beth has written many of the most authoritative articles about the unique Maine Coon breed.

Beth is internationally recognized as a foremost authority on the Maine Coon breed. She has been a breeder for 33 years who is dedicated to preserving native Maine Coon cats. She contributes substantially to the history and evolution of the Maine Coon Cat breed, genetic topics, and breeding articles about Maine Coon Cats.