



Polydactyl cats all have an extra toe like Diggie

# Kittens with mittens!

Cats with extra toes are getting the thumbs up

If Suzan Grindell had been alive during the 17th century she may well have ended up burned at the stake and all because of her choice of pets.

The retired optometrist breeds polydactyl cats, which have extra toes that look like thumbs. Once believed to be associated with witches, polydactyl cats are now prized for their unusual paws. Sometimes known as "mitten cats" some of them can use their thumbs with startling human-like dexterity.

"You can understand why they've always been the subject of superstition," says Suzan (48). "There's something quietly powerful about them, something magical."

The myths and legends that have dogged polydactyl cats didn't stop with the end of the witch trials. Although they were widely exterminated in parts of Europe because of their undeserved reputation for black magic, they flourished in parts of North America and eventually became symbols of good luck among sailors.

While Suzan talks, Diggie – short for Digitally

Enhanced – purrs in her lap looking very self-assured, while his mother, Heddie, nestles in the arms of Suzan's husband John. Both cats are Maine Coon polydactyls and – according to Suzan – are well aware they're a breed apart from ordinary pussycats.

"We've heard stories about the polys using their hands to open screw-top jars, although we've never seen it ourselves, yet," says Suzan.

But right on cue, Diggie stretches out his paws one at a time, splaying them as if to say, "I could if I wanted to..."

"Remarkable, isn't it?" Suzan says with a smile. "He loves his hands, he's much more fussy with them than any of our ordinary cats."

Last year Suzan went and collected Heddie from the US, so she'd have a cat to breed from.

"I took her on the plane as hand luggage when we travelled within the US. She'd sit beside me in a little ventilated cat-bag."

But once they returned to Auckland, Suzan nearly lost her precious cat. Shortly

after Heddie gave birth to her first litter of kittens, she contracted gangrenous mastitis and was put on intravenous antibiotics.

"We got the call from the vet saying if her temperature didn't come down within a few hours all her organs would fail – it was awful," recalls Suzan.

"Not only was her life in danger, but she was desperately missing her newborns. Even when she was having the infected tissue removed from her teats she would meow, thinking she was suckling her kittens."

Fortunately, Heddie pulled through and the other good news was that six of her seven kittens were polydactyls too.

To give Heddie a break during her recovery, Suzan and John hand-reared the kittens.

"The polys would hold the milk bottle with their little hands while they suckled," says Suzan. "It was absolutely adorable."

Max Currie