

Breaking Down the Abyssinian/Somali Standard

Introduction

According to the CCCA standard for Abyssinian and Somali cats, the allocation of points is as follows: coat ticking & clarity 15 points, coat colour 15 points, coat texture & length 10 points and condition 5 points. This means aspects of the coat are worth 45 points which is almost half the allocation for the standard. Eye colour is 5 points and I must say I don't think I have seen an Aby with incorrect eye colour although the eyes do vary in richness and depth of colour. The remaining 50 points are really about the structure of the cat: 15 points for the body, 5 for the tail and 5 for the legs & paws, then 15 for the head and neck, 5 points for the ears and 5 points for eye shape.

The standard uses words that are open to interpretation so it is hard to say what is wrong or right. All judges and breeders will have their own opinion about what is moderate, what is medium, what is relative and basically what they think an Aby or Somali should look like.

Part One – The Aby Eyes

Eye shape – 5 points

The standard states that the eyes should be 'large & expressive', large compared with what? Do they mean large compared with other cats' eyes or do they mean large in relation to the face of the individual cat? Expressive means to convey thought or feeling so how do an Aby's eyes do this? Well, it is something I am sure we have all encountered as they do seem to look into your soul or give you that naughty stare that says they about to do something that they know they probably shouldn't.

The standard uses the word 'almond' to describe the shape an Aby's eyes should be. What shape is an almond? According to the dictionary almond used as an adjective means 'of an oval shape, pointed at one or both ends'. Oval means having a rounded and slightly elongated shape. In relation to the eyes the standard continues by saying 'not round' and 'not oriental' in shape.

Illustrating the eye shape with photographs is difficult as the size of a cat's pupil may alter the impression of eye shape as may the use of a camera flash. And of course, cats will just hold their eyes differently depending on what they are looking at and the general lighting conditions in the area.

Photograph 1 – almond shaped
Photograph 2 – more round than almond shaped
Photograph 3 – more oriental than almond shaped



Eye colour – 5 points

The standard allows for a range of colours from dark gold, gold, hazel and green. Missing from the list is yellow so I wonder if their use of gold and dark gold differentiate between what I would classify as yellow and gold. Richness and more depth to the eye colour are preferred. I am not sure about the use of hazel to describe the eye colour of an adult Abyssinian. One dictionary describes hazel as a greenish brown and I don't think I have seen that in an Aby while another describes it as 'a yellowish light to strong brown'. I can understand its use for kittens whose eye colour is still developing. I'd be interested to know what others think about this term. I would say there is scope for a greenish yellow for eye colour.

Photograph 4 – dark gold
Photograph 5 – gold/yellow
Photograph 6 – green
Photograph 7 – greenish yellow



Penalties

For the eyes the only penalty given is for lack of pigmentation around the eyes. They are supposed to have ‘the fine, darker line of the lid encircled by a light coloured area’ so will be penalised if lacking the pigmentation.

Bibliography/References

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

New Oxford American Dictionary 2010.

The Penguin English Dictionary, Penguin Books 2002.

Part 2

The Aby Ears – 5 points

This part of the standard seems very open to interpretation, with judges’ and breeders’ opinions on what is ‘too high’ or ‘too low’ for the Abyssinians’ ears that vary greatly. My interpretation of ‘neither too high nor too low’ means that they are in between and my mathematical side likes to take over and look at the angle that is created with the top of the head and ears. If a horizontal line is drawn across the top of the eyes and then a line is drawn down the middle of the face it creates two 90° angles. If these angles are split equally in half with a line drawn at 45° (see Diagrams 1 & 2) it is neither too high nor too low because it is perfectly in the middle. If the top edge of ears angle out at approximately 45° it will give a balanced look to the face. The rounding to the head and width of the space between the ears also plays a part in achieving the desired look with the ears, as a narrow width will not create the desired angle for the ear placement and make the lower edge of the ears seem too high as will a lack of cupping to the ears. If the ears are too low it will give a more oriental type expression and reduce the alert expression desired in an Abyssinian cat.

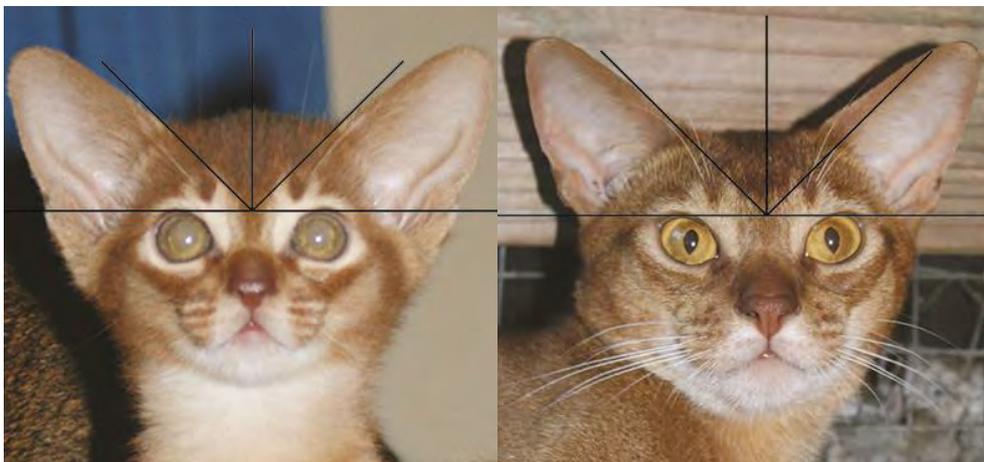


Diagram 1. Kitten ear placement

Diagram 2. Adult ear placement

Ears ‘set wide apart’, what does ‘wide’ mean? I would suggest that this means there should be more space between the ears than the base width of an ear. Someone once said to me that you should be able to fit three to four finger widths across the space between the ears and this seems to work.



Left: Photograph 1 – Ears set wide apart and are moderately pointed on an adult male.
 Right: Photograph 2 – Good cupping and ear placement on an older kitten.

The use of the words ‘relatively large’ and ‘moderately pointed’ infers that the ears should be fairly large in relation to something, presumably the face, and shouldn’t end in a point but be slightly rounded at the top. The terms ‘broad and cupped at the base’ mean that the ears shouldn’t be narrow and need to have a wide base that curves around the edge of the head.



Left: Photograph 3 – smaller, narrow ears that are too high.
 Middle: Photograph 4 – long, narrow ears that are not broad enough at the base.
 Right: Photograph 5 – a kitten with narrow width but good-sized ears and cupping.

The ears help to give the Abyssinian cat its alert and expressive look, so when viewing them from the side, the ears need to be tilted forward to give the impression they are listening. The ears should have fur on them culminating in tufts on the ear tips. Ear tufts seem to be few and far between on the Abyssinians in Australia although some of the Somalis have retained them.



Left: Photograph 6 – kitten ears tilted forward to give the impression of alertness.
 Middle left: Photograph 7 – cat ears tilted forward.
 Middle right: Photograph 8 – Fur covering the ears with a thumbprint pattern.
 Right: Photograph 9 – very small tufts of fur on the end of the ear.

The ears and their placement are an important element to the overall impression the cat portrays, despite being worth only 5 points in the standard. When judging, the face will be the first and last part of the cat that judges will tend to see so it will leave a lasting impression, whether it be for positive reasons or not.

(To Be Continued)