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BY ELISA JORDAN
PHOTOS BY PRESTON SMITH

WHAT STARTED AS A PHOTOGRAPHY ASSIGNMENT TURNED INTO THE FOUNDATION OF THE TURKISH VAN BREED.

PICTURE PERFECT

It was time to play. And when a Turkish Van cat decides it's playtime — or decides on anything, really —it will usually conceptualize a plan and follow through on it until completion. Thus, South Carolina breeder Karen Hooker woke up one day with a pile of toys on her pillow so one especially playful Van could play fetch. Many Vans, it turns out, enjoy a game of fetch.

"You can throw a crumpled paper ball or their favorite furry mouse, and they'll keep bringing it back to you for more," she says. "You will tire of this long before they do. When Vans play they go all out."

Van Life

Vans are intelligent, inquisitive and playful. They're also loyal, extroverted and bold. But before pegging all of them with distinctive Van traits, remember that above all else they are individuals and can't really be pinned down at all; they're too smart for any of that. In general, owners can expect a happy, outgoing and energetic companion.

"They are active cats that need some form of activity center to keep them happy," says Marianne Upham, a breeder based in the United Kingdom. "Toys are a must, and they need time to play to release some of their energy. They love to chase wadded up paper and will bring it back to you to throw again."

Texas-based breeder Sharon Walcott, who also serves as The International Cat Association's (TICA) Turkish Van Breed Chair, agrees.

"Vans are either full tilt or asleep," she says. "They love to play. They're very kittenish, even into old age. I have a 10-year-old that runs across the floor playing 'shuffleboard' with his paws, like a kitten would do. He runs across the floor batting at toys with his two front paws. It's amazing to watch."

Because of their energy level and prowess for play, it's recommended that Vans have playmates, preferably another Van. If that's not possible, another cat with a similar energy level should work out and help keep feline family members happy.

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From Turkey to the World

Thinking of Vans in pairs comes naturally, really, because it was as a pair that this breed from Turkey first became known to the western European world.

In 1955, two British photographers named Laura Lushington and Sonia Halliday received an assignment from a tourism board to snap photos of Turkey. While exploring the region, they discovered the area's native cat: a cat with especially close ties to the Lake Van region of the country.

During their assignment, they were given unrelated male and female Turkish Van kittens. The cats featured what is now known as the "Van pattern," which means they had color on the ears and tail and often some various spots on a white background, in auburn and white. (The British breeders use the term "auburn." American breeders now use the term "red" to describe the same color.)

The photographers brought their Turkish cats home and found that the cats bred true. This was the start of an organized breeding program in the U.K.

"These ladies, with a select group of friends, established a breed program with the aim to gain recognition of the breed," says Upham, who currently owns a descendant of Laura Lushington and Sonia Halliday's original cats.

The Governing Council of the Cat Fancy (GCCF) formally recognized the breed in 1969, Hooker says. That was "followed by acceptance in Australian, Scandinavian, European and South African registries."

PHOTO BY **LARRY JOHNSON**

The Turkish Van made its way to the United States and was accepted by the Cat Fanciers Association (CFA) in 1994.

In the Swim

Since then, Turkish Vans have become famous for more than their good looks and charismatic personalities. Legend dictates that these cats are aquatic marvels and relish the opportunity for a refreshing dip. It started with reports that Vans cool themselves down by swimming in their native country's lakes to find relief from the heat.

Before showing off your Vans' abilities to "kitty paddle," though, remember that Vans are individuals and some may hop in the shower with you or dunk toys in their water bowls, while some may not like water at all.

"Because Turkey is a very hot place, in the wild Vans get in the water to cool off," Walcott says. "Their mamas teach them how. Since they're no longer in the wild, they're not taught to swim anymore, but most of them aren't afraid of water. We've put toys in the tub with an inch or two of water and the cats will get in and shake their paws to play with the toys."

Texas breeder Barbara Lindsey further notes that many breeds have a fascination with water, not just Vans.

"It's not that Vans like water better than other breeds because there are a couple of other breeds that also like water," she says. "But they have a fascination with it. As far as swimming goes, some like swimming and some don't. If it's on their terms, everything is fine. They don't particularly care for baths because you're dealing with soap and all that stuff, but they learn to deal with it. I can put a little tub of water out and they get in and play in it."

Their adventurous spirit, the same one that made them survivors in the Turkish wild, remains intact to this day. Now, though, it comes through in playtime, like when they fetch, jump after teaser toys and run. Walcott, for instance, once had a girl who liked to chase raindrops in her enclosed cat run.

Owners will also have to understand that they're sharing their homes with Turkish Vans.

"They know everything that is going on in their house," Hooker says. "If you bring in something new, they will have to inspect it thoroughly. They can also figure out how to open doors and cabinets. You can almost see those wheels turn in their heads as they work out a solution to a problem."

As active as they are, Vans are equally loyal to their favorite people. Although they're most comfortable with "four on the floor," they'll watch TV with their people and listen for your car to pull up in the driveway so they can greet you immediately upon opening the door.

"Another interesting characteristic is the 'head butt,'" Hooker says. "That is their way of saying hello to their favorite person!"

Freelance writer and editor Elisa Jordan shares her Long Beach, Calif., home with her two cats: a British Shorthair, Spencer, and a domestic shorthair, Roscoe.

AT-A-GLANCE

■ **Appearance:** Turkish Vans are notable for their long coats and have what is called a "Van pattern," which is white with coloring on the ears and tail. Associations allow some random spotting on the body and a spot on the left shoulder blade is commonly referred to as the "Mark of Allah," which legend says is Allah's thumbprint on the cat. "The term 'Van pattern' is used to describe this distinct coloration for other purebred cats as well as domestics, termed after the breed that originally sported it," says breeder Karen Hooker.

Those spots come in a variety of colors; all white cats are permitted for competition in The International Cat Association (TICA) but not in the Cat Fanciers Association (CFA).

■ **Standard:** When you think of Turkish Vans, think medium. "They don't have a short, cobby body, but they don't have a long body," says breeder Barbara Lindsey. "Their legs and ears are the same way — not long, but not too short, either. They are moderately large, and their eyes are peach pit-shaped. Their profiles have a little break where the forehead comes down, and when their nose goes out there's a little indention there. In other words their muzzle isn't quite straight."

■ **Care and Grooming:** Although they have luxurious coats, with regular upkeep, they're not difficult to groom. Lindsey recommends combing about once a week, maybe a little more during shedding season.

Hooker also adds that because they don't have undercoats, they're less likely to mat. "Turkish Vans do not require much grooming to look absolutely gorgeous," she says. "They are meticulous in grooming themselves and also enjoy being brushed. Not only does it feel good, but the interaction with you is very rewarding. This also prevents them from getting hairballs from ingesting loose fur during the grooming process. They really do not require regular bathing, unless they happen to get into something."

■ **Health:** Fortunately, Turkish Vans aren't known for any health concerns associated specifically with the breed. A balanced diet, regular veterinary care and good breeding practices further lend themselves to a healthy feline companion.

To keep them mentally happy and challenged, provide plenty of toys and activities. They're best off when they have an equally playful companion, such as another Van.

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Turkish Van

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Photo by
Tetsu Yamazaki

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