

A Visual Guide to Identifying Cats



When cats have similar colors and patterns, like two gray tabbies, it can seem impossible to tell them apart! That is, until you take note of even the smallest details in their appearance.

Knowledge is power, whether you're an animal control officer or animal shelter employee who needs to identify cats regularly, or you want to identify your own cat. This guide covers cats' traits from their overall looks, like coat pattern, to their tiniest features, like whisker color.

Let's use our office cats as examples:



- Oliver (left): neutered male, shorthair, solid black, pale green eyes, black whiskers, a black nose, and black paw pads.
- Charles (right): neutered male, shorthair, brown mackerel tabby with spots toward his rear, yellow-green eyes, white whiskers with some black at the roots, a pink-brown nose, and black paw pads.

As you go through this guide, remember that certain patterns and markings originated with specific breeds. However, these traits now appear in many cats because of random mating.

This guide covers the following features:

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Coat Length



Hairless

Hairless cats have no fur.

Shorthair

Shorthair cats have short fur across the entire body.



Medium hair

Medium hair cats have longer fur around the mane, tail, and/or rear.



Longhair

Longhair cats have long, fluffy fur.

Coat Colors

Below you'll find the most common base coat colors. Coats may be solid color or a combination of colors. Tortoiseshell and calico, while technically coat patterns, are only seen in the specific colors.



Black

Black is one of the most common colors. Many black cats have golden eyes.



Gray

Gray is a diluted black. It is often seen under tabby stripes.



White

Pure white cats exist, but the most common way to see white on a cat is in a bicolor pattern—patches of white with another color.



Buff

Buff, or tan, is a diluted orange, often accompanied by dark orange tabby stripes.



Brown

Solid brown cats are very rare and usually only seen in specific breeds. Brown is more commonly seen along with tabby stripes.



Orange

Orange, also known as red, is another very common color. About 80 percent of orange cats are male.



Tortoiseshell

Tortoiseshell (tortie) is a mixed blend of orange and black, or a diluted version with gray and buff. Torties are almost always female.



Calico

Calico is distinct patches of solid orange, black, and white, or a diluted version with buff, gray, and white. They are almost always female.

Coat Patterns

Patterns can appear in many colors, and cats can have multiple patterns. For example, a cat can be orange and white bicolor with tabby stripes (as seen below left).



Bicolor

- Also called piebald
- Always white and another color
- Can have a lot of white or very little



Pointed

- Light-colored body
- Darker color on ears, face, tail, and legs



Shaded

- Fur is white at base and gets darker toward tips
- Typically seen in longhair cats



Four types of tabby patterns



Tabby

- M-shape pattern on forehead
- Typically striped, but there are four types
- Can appear in any color or pattern



Classic

Wide stripes in a marbled, circular pattern



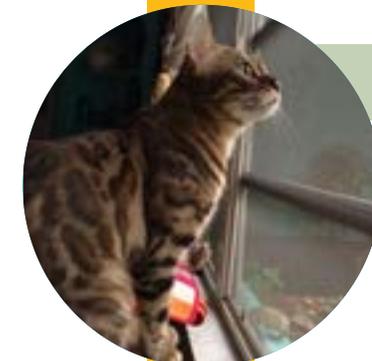
Mackerel

Thin vertical stripes down from the back, with a dark stripe the length of the back



Ticked

No body stripes (individual hairs have bands of color) and thin stripes on face, legs, and tail



Spotted

Round spots instead of stripes

Markings

Markings are an important factor in identifying cats. They can present themselves in different colors and patterns, and non-white markings can also have patterns. Cats can have several markings at once. These are just a few common markings.



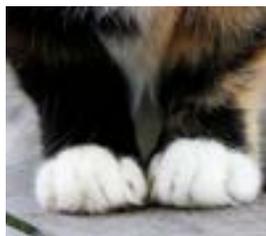
Locket

Triangular white patch on the chest



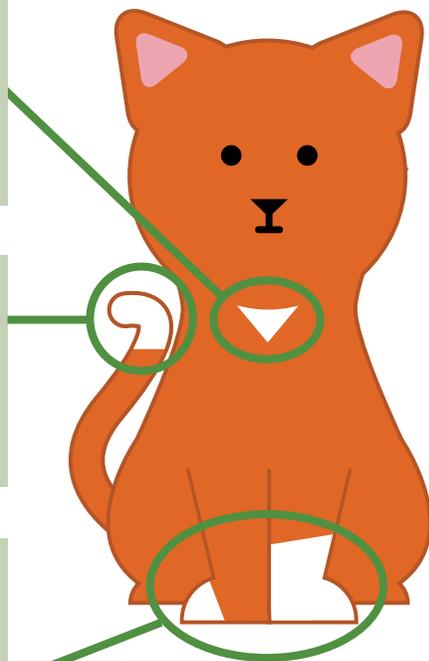
Tail Tip

Different color, usually white, on the tip of the tail



Socks

Different color, usually white, on paw or leg



Did You Know?

Kittens can be born with tabby markings that disappear over time, or be born a solid color and develop markings.



Blaze

White stripe between the eyes



Eye patch

Colored spot across one eye, on a mostly white face



Tuxedo

Typically black and white, with a blaze up the nose and a “jacket” on the back



Snowshoe

Pointed pattern with blue eyes and white markings on the face and body



Van

All-white body with colored markings on the head and tail only

Feature Colors



Eye Color

Typically cats have green, yellow, or blue eyes in a variety of shades.

All kittens are born with blue eyes, but their true color develops between 6 and 8 weeks old.

A **dichroic eye** (not pictured) has patches of different colors.

Odd-eye cats have different colored eyes.

The color of cats' eyes, paw pads, whiskers, and noses can help in their identification.

Whiskers

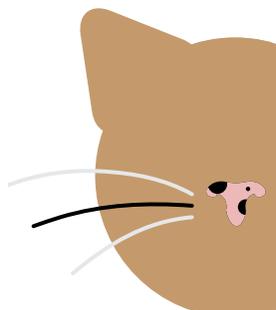
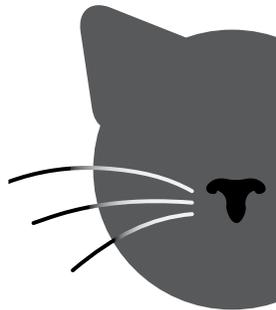
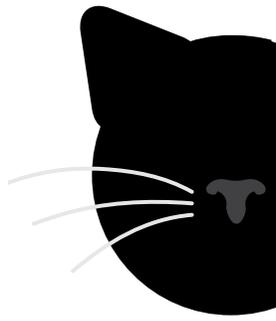
Whiskers are typically black, white, or a combination. Even individual whiskers can have both colors.

Noses

Noses are typically black, pink, gray, brown, tan, or a spotted combination of these colors.

Paw pads

Paw pads are typically black, pink, mauve, or a spotted combination of these colors. Each paw pad can be a different color.



Did You Know?

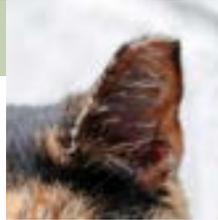
The wild ancestor of the domestic cat species had tabby stripes. Through breeding, a variety of different patterns and markings developed over time.



Unique Identifiers

Eartip

The universal sign that a community cat has been spayed or neutered. Learn more at alleycat.org/Eartip.



Ear Notch

An alternative to the eartip, but not recommended by Alley Cat Allies.



Folded Ears

The tips of the ears are folded over, often due to genetics.



Polydactyl

Also called Hemingway cats, these felines have an extra toe, or toes, on one or more paws.



Manx

A missing or partial tail, due to genetics or previous injury.

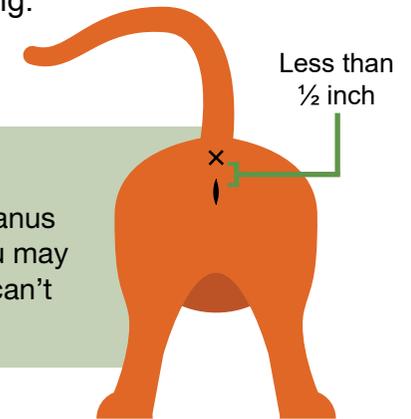


Determining Sex

It can be difficult to determine if cats are male or female. The easiest and quickest way to tell is by looking at the space between the anus and the genital opening.

Female

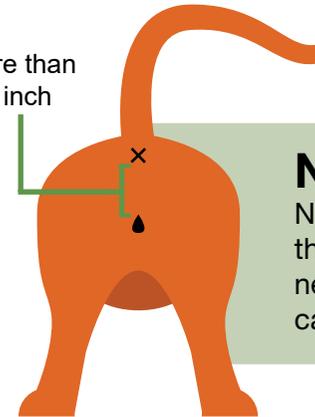
Females have less than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch between the anus and the genital opening. If she is spayed, you may see a surgery scar on her stomach, but you can't always tell without a veterinarian's help.



More than 1 inch

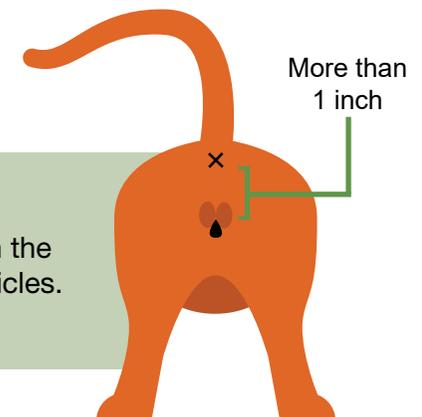
Neutered Male

Neutered males have more than 1 inch between the anus and the genital opening. Although neutered males no longer have testicles, some cats still have the extra skin and fur in that area.



Intact Male

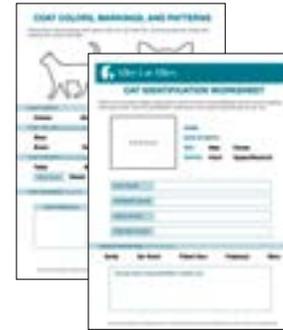
Intact males have more than 1 inch between the anus and the genital opening, and have testicles. They also have broader heads and jawlines.





Additional Resources:

Learn more about identifying cats to increase their chances of returning to their owners at alleycat.org/IDGuide.



Record your own cat's colors, markings, and more with our helpful worksheet. That way, you'll be able to accurately describe your cat's appearance if needed.

Download for free at alleycat.org/IDGuide.

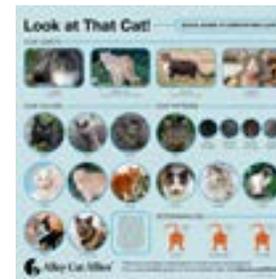
But my cat doesn't look like any of these cats!

All cats are unique and can have a variety of colors, patterns, and markings. This guide covers the basics of cat identification, but no guide can capture all the distinct characteristics, variations, and combinations of features.

It's helpful to consider other distinct features:

- Does she have any unique markings, like an orange tail tip or a spot shaped like a heart?
- Does she have old injuries that stand out, like a missing eye or a patch of missing hair?
- Does she have all her teeth?
- Is she declawed? If so, on which paws?

Note: Alley Cat Allies is against the cruel and unnecessary practice of declawing cats. However, if a cat has been declawed, it can help identify her.



Get an at-a-glance version of this guide with our "Cat Coat Colors, Patterns, and Lengths" poster. Hang it up in your shelter or veterinary clinic for quick reference, and to make identifying cats easier. You can find it in our shop at alleycat.org/Shop.



Microchips play a critical role in reuniting cats with their families. Owners should ensure their cats are microchipped, and animal shelter staff and veterinarians should plan to scan every cat who comes into their facility for a microchip. Not only does it get cats back home, it also saves lives.

Learn more about the importance of microchipping and our Plan to Scan campaign at alleycat.org/PlanToScan.



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