



# Cornell University

## College of Veterinary Medicine

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## Biobanking the Big Cats

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What has spots, can jump 7 1/2 feet in the air from a standstill, and is helping improve the health of cats around the world? The Cornell Feline Health Center was pleased to host a visit from Peanut and Motzie, two **Savannah cats** who stopped by the **College of Veterinary Medicine** this past Friday to donate blood samples and undergo testing for a feline health screening study of the Cornell Veterinary Biobank. At 20 pounds and 16.75 inches tall at the shoulder, Motzie is the second tallest cat in the world, according to the Guinness Book of World Records.

By donating a small sample of blood and undergoing examinations by the veterinary specialists at **Cornell University's Hospital for Animals**, cats like Peanut and Motzie are helping to build a database of genetic sequences and medical information that scientists will use to identify the underlying causes of many inherited diseases of cats, says Biobank director Marta Castelhana, DVM. Conditions like inflammatory bowel disease, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, and diabetes mellitus may have some basis in genetics, says Castelhana, and by comparing DNA from cats that have these diseases with DNA from healthy cats, the Biobank hopes to locate the genes responsible. These answers will help identify cats at risk of disease and may eventually aid in developing more effective treatments, says Bruce Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., Associate Director of the Cornell Feline Health Center, which helps fund the Biobank.

The Savannah cat is a cross between a domestic cat and a species of wild cat native to Africa called a serval, a breeding that results in a cat with some features of both animals. Savannahs are legal to own in Oklahoma, where they live with their owner Deborah-Ann Milette, a retired veteran. She says they behave a lot like your typical housecat.

"They're extremely playful," says Milette of Peanut and Motzie. "They have a 7 and a half foot high cat tree they can jump on from a dead sit. And Peanut runs around the house with his tail in full fluff chasing phantoms or chasing Motzie."

Peanut and Motzie are extraordinary cats, but felines of all stripes (and spots) can help with the study, says Castelhana. Forty-eight healthy domestic cats over the age of ten years are still needed to complete the study, and cats belonging to specific breeds are particularly helpful. To participate, cats donate a small blood sample and undergo a physical exam, bloodwork, urinalysis, a nutrition exam, an echocardiogram of their heart, body measurements, an oncology exam, an eye exam, an oral evaluation, an orthopedic exam, and a whole body computed tomography (CT) scan. The results of these exhaustive examinations are useful for the Biobank, but they're also shared with the cat's regular veterinarian and can provide important information for follow-up.

The team at Cornell is able to carry out these wide-ranging specialist exams and DNA sequencing work because of the triple strengths of the animal hospital, top-notch research resources, and excellent scientists and clinicians all working in concert, Castelhana says.

“This feline health screening day requires an immense amount of coordination to make sure the patient gets all of these exams and procedures done in the shortest amount of time possible,” she says. “Here at Cornell we’re able to effectively coordinate all these services and departments to get the work done.”

Do you have a healthy cat over the age of 10 years? [Learn about how your feline friend can help](#) provide samples and medical information for the Feline Biobank.

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