



The Dawn Patrol | If your cat is a night stalker, don't despair

by ARNA COHEN

Dawn is breaking. At the Golon household in Huntersville, N.C., Romeo the cat is on a mission—he wants his breakfast and he wants it now. He begins his wake-up tactic. Meow, meow, meow. Poke, poke, poke. Meow, meow, meow. Drag tail across human's face. MEOW, MEOW, MEOW. Caroline Golon ignores his demands for a while but finally slides out of bed, shuffles to the kitchen, and dishes out some food for the 8-year-old Persian and his brother Pugsley. Mission accomplished.

Though they aren't thrilled about being coerced into an early rising, Golon and her husband don't have the heart to banish the cats from the bedroom. They've learned to accept the fact that their pets' biorhythm will never align with theirs, and having "the boys" sleep with them gives Golon a sense of family and peace. "It's just so sweet and loving," she says.

Millions of cat owners derive great pleasure from curling up with their felines and being lulled to sleep by rumbling purrs. But not everyone is so sanguine about their cat's nocturnal escapades, particularly when kitty inevitably decides to groom hair or

hunt ankles and toes at 3 a.m. Behavior hotlines and Internet pet forums are filled with complaints from cranky, tired owners who've learned that simply ejecting their cats from the bedroom only whips up a frenzy of sleep-deprivation torture in the form of scratches, door rattling, and yowling to be let back in.

Some, like Lisa von Heeder of Las Vegas, Nev., acquiesce in the face of such racket. After her cat "screamed and screamed" to be let into the bedroom, von Heeder realized peace would come only through an open-door policy. It worked: Mea jumped onto the bed, got under the covers, rested her head on the pillow, and went to sleep, a routine she maintained for 18 years. Von Heeder accommodated her cat's preference, lifting the covers for Mea. "My husband said I used to do it in my sleep," she says. "... I was well-trained."

Cats like Mea and Romeo mean no harm; they're just doing what comes naturally. Despite thousands of years of domestication, house cats don't operate on people time. Like their wild relatives, they're crepuscular: They sleep and play around the

clock but are most active at dusk and dawn, when birds and small mammals—their natural prey—are also most active. The typical pattern is hunt, eat, groom, sleep. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Rather than blaming the cats, experts advise learning to think like one. Though we may believe that a basketful of toys in the corner is adequate entertainment, Pam Johnson-Bennett, a certified animal behavior consultant in Nashville, Tenn., says most homes are woefully understimulating for our mighty hunters, and as a result, cats become overly dependent on their owners for excitement. Given cats' incredible sensory perceptions, she says, it's no wonder they act out. "You take this amazing animal with ... this package of amazing abilities; you put them in this home where food is endlessly supplied. There's nothing to do," she says. "What is he going to do with ... all this talent?"

To challenge his mind and body, Johnson-Bennett recommends enriching your cat's environment with toys and activities that appeal to all of his senses. Playthings with different sounds, novel smells, and varying textures offer mental stimulation, while cat trees with dangling items provide exercise as well as perches from which to observe the world. Placing a variety of toys in every room builds confidence and independence, making the cat less reliant on you as a playmate.

But no toy can replace daily interaction with you—an essential part of your cat's life. While you've been at work or otherwise occupied, he's snoozed the day away, eager to



Romeo



Sweet Dreams

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- ▶ **RULE OUT MEDICAL ISSUES** If your cat's nocturnal antics are a new behavior—or have worsened in intensity—he may be trying to let you know that he's not feeling up to par. Take him to the vet to have him checked for any health problems that could be causing him to act noisier than usual.
- ▶ **SET UP COZY CORNERS** Attract your cat to alternative sleeping spots by placing cat beds, blankets, or a piece of your clothing in other areas of the bedroom or house. Molly Strothkamp's Siamese-mix cat, Lucy, keeps watch at night from the cat tree in the bedroom, while Charlie is attached to the blanket he's had since kittenhood.
- ▶ **TEACH A CAT TO FISH** Instead of getting up to feed your cat on his time, enable your cat to help himself. Automatic feeders have compartments that open at timed intervals and can be used with dry or wet food. Your cat will learn that you aren't the sole source of food. Behavior consultant Pam Johnson-Bennett also recommends a puzzle feeder, a small plastic ball with a hole that dispenses kibble randomly while the cat plays with it. The puzzle feeder nourishes your cat's body and mind while keeping him out of your hair.
- ▶ **DON'T LET THE CAT TRAIN YOU** As annoying as your cat's hair chewing or toe attacking may be, try not to react. This negatively reinforces his behavior. Getting yelled at or pushed off the bed is not the reaction he wants, but for a bored kitty, it's at least a reaction, and he'll come back for more. Instead, take a good look at your house and come up with ways to enrich your cat's environment so he's not relying only on you for excitement.

▶ **FIND** more training and enrichment tips at humanesociety.org/pets.

get the party started; Johnson-Bennett recommends playing with him as soon as you get home. "You are his whole world, and he's been waiting for you all day," she says. "So the mail can wait five minutes; dinner can wait five minutes. Just engage your cat in some kind of activity. Then you can take care of your business."

Reset your cat's internal clock by providing a longer, more intensive play period before bedtime with fishing-pole type toys that fire up his hunting instinct but require a minimum of energy from you. Finish the session by serving him a small meal. This puts your cat into the hunt-eat-groom-sleep cycle, so that by the time you're ready for sleep, he will be, too. Though he'll most likely roam around later, if he has the proper activities to keep him busy in other parts of the house, he won't insist that you get up with him.

That was the route Molly Strothkamp of Mesa, Ariz., took when her boisterous kitten, Charlie, grew into a holy terror. To call Charlie "active" is an understatement; the 15-month-old tabby destroys toilet

paper, chews electrical cords, smacks treats away from the dog, and once turned the oven knob to "on" with his teeth. Strothkamp allows Charlie to sleep with her partly because it's the only time he's calm enough to cuddle, but also out of concern for his safety. "What really keeps me awake at night is ... the anxiety over what he's going to do next, because he really comes up with some impressive plans," she says.

On her veterinarian's advice, Strothkamp instituted nightly play sessions with Charlie and his brother Leo when they were 8 months old to help them expend some of their boundless energy. She says the situation has improved, though waking up to a toy-mousie-covered pillow in the morning reminds her that the two are still quite busy during the night.

Though Golon knows of ways to discourage Romeo's behavior, she is hesitant to put them into action. Romeo has his own blog on which his daily wake-up tactic report is a wildly popular feature. If Romeo ceased waking her up, asks Golon, "what would I write about on the blog?"

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