



Demystifying the Feline *Mystique*

They warm our laps, rub our faces, delight us with their play. But cats also confound us: They may jump on the counters, scratch up our couches, interrupt our sleep with pre-dawn yowling. In this excerpt adapted from her new book, The Cat Whisperer, behaviorist Mieshelle Nagelschneider shares insights gleaned from thousands of hours helping clients solve common problem behaviors. What she's learned may surprise even the savviest cat owners—and save these endearing but sometimes inscrutable companions from losing their homes.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID POHL

1. Kitty Bit #1: Cats are evolutionary champions. *Wild Dog crawled into the Cave and laid his head on the Woman's lap, and said, "O my Friend and Wife of my Friend, I will help Your Man to hunt through the day, and at night I will guard your Cave."*

"Ah!" said the Cat, listening. "That is a very foolish Dog." And he went back through the Wet Wild Woods waving his wild tail, and walking by his wild lone. —RUDYARD KIPLING, "THE CAT THAT WALKED BY HIMSELF," JUST SO STORIES

There is no animal quite like a cat. All other domesticated animals began in the wild as group-oriented animals, and they remain so. Horses, pigs, sheep, cattle, donkeys, ducks, chickens, goats, and dogs all live, by instinct, in groups.

Most of the wild counterparts of these domesticated species are now either extinct or nearly so. But although most of the other 36 feline species in the world are endangered or threatened, African wildcats have spread across the world in the form of their genetic twin, the "domestic" cat. There are an estimated 40 to 70 million feral cats in the United States alone.

As Stephen Budiansky points out in his priceless *The Character of Cats*, "Cats ... did not need to throw in their lot with man to survive; they did not undergo the rapid and automatic genetic transformation that broke down the barriers between the wild and the tame in the case of other wild beasts that became malleable and accommodating partners of man."

Like the human and the shark, the crocodile and the cockroach, cats are evolutionary champions. What

helped them survive? Unlike social felines like lions and, according to recent speculation, even saber-toothed cats, the African wildcat is generally solitary. African wildcats have large territories and live far from each other, so they don't need a tight social structure and don't go in for all the appeasement behaviors you see in dogs. Unlike lions, who hunt cooperatively, both wild and domestic cats always hunt alone. Wildcats interact with each other harmoniously only during mating and the first few months of kitten rearing.

In the wild, male cats travel throughout a home range of about 153 acres; females about 42. A territory, which is the area a cat defends against other cats, is usually smaller than a home range, but cats' territories in the wild are still considerably larger than our houses. And the closer one cat gets to another's core territory, the more aggressive the defender will be.

Let's be clear: Domestic cats have recently been proven to be quite "social" in the sense that they like to be with other cats as well as with humans and other special friends. They mutually groom one another and bond; they have preferred

associates; females midwife and cooperatively rear one another's kittens. Indeed, cats have twice as many vocalizations as dogs and many ways of communicating through scent, touch, and posture that would not exist if they weren't social beings. Even when cats aren't in close proximity, they are always communicating—by means of scent and visual markings.

Even feral females, usually under the watchful eye of a dominant matriarch, will set up a kind of Ministry of Mutual Defense and Welfare. The girls share duties of defense, kitten training—jointly rearing and even suckling the kittens—and hunting or bringing back delicacies from the garbage dump. A queen who gives birth may be aided by a female who quietly cuts the umbilical cords (with her teeth), helpfully eats the placentas, and licks clean the kittens' perianal areas. (You think you've got good girlfriends?) And like domestic cats, feral cats curl up and sleep together, and groom one another in ways that we find touching.

But absent a pathological separation anxiety, cats don't badly need to be social in quite the same way humans and dogs do. (Thus the occasional "aloof" house cat.) Cats' more self-reliant nature is linked to an extreme territoriality you won't find in other animals. That territoriality, far greater than in dogs, gives us the champion-survivor behaviors that most people fail to see are natural aspects of catness: their suspicion, their dislike of novelty, their single-minded predatory behavior, their spraying and claw marking, and their aggression, especially toward newcomers. Their territoriality can even cause compulsive behaviors and can also cause an intimidated cat's avoidance of litter box areas, which leads to elimination problems. It all starts here.

Kitty Bit #2: You can't take the jungle out of the cat.



2. *Cats have spread over the world in the company of man faster than man himself ever did, all the while keeping one foot in the jungle.*

—STEPHEN BUDIANSKY, *THE CHARACTER OF CATS*

The other primary way that cats are unique among domesticates is that their domestication is only partial—and relatively recent. Dogs were first domesticated at least 15,000 years ago (and perhaps as long as 33,000 years ago). Cats didn't show up routinely in domestic settings alongside man until about 3,600 years ago, in Egypt, when they were brought into human establishments first to control rodents and later for religious reasons. They still weren't domesticated, even then.

It seems that you can take the cat out of the jungle, but you can't take the jungle out of the cat. All other domesticated animals have been bred and selected, over and over again, for domestic traits, with the wild traits bred out. But for most of our shared history, humans did not selectively breed cats for domestication features at all. Even today cats are bred primarily for physical traits.

Our lack of control over cats' genes is obvious: While cats have been breeding in our midst for many years, house cats and their African wildcat ancestors are still the same species—*Felis silvestris* (though sometimes domestic cats are denoted as the subspecies *Felis silvestris catus* for clarity). The genetic differences among and between African wildcats, European wildcats, and domestic cats are no larger than the difference between, say, any two domestic cats. Genetic studies have proven that domestic cats differ from their wildcat cousins almost solely in their hair color—and, in some breeds, a few other superficial physical differences brought about through breeding.

True, house cats' ancestors had to be minimally tamable, capable of and even desirous of socialization. European naturalists in Africa in the 1800s described how easily the indigenous peoples caught and kept African wildcat kittens, "reconciling them to life about their huts and enclosures, where they grow up and wage their natural warfare against the rats." Another European, writing from Rhodesia (today, Zimbabwe) in

1968, found that while the wildcat kittens were initially difficult to handle, soon enough they grew unnervingly affectionate:

These cats never do anything by halves; for instance, when returning home after their day out they are inclined to become superaffectionate. When this happens, one might as well give up on what one is doing, for they will walk all over the paper you are writing on, rubbing themselves against your face or hands; or they will jump up on your shoulder and insinuate themselves between your face and the book you are reading, roll on it, purring and stretching themselves, sometimes falling off in their enthusiasm and, in general, demanding your undivided attention.

Sound familiar?

However, people who have been befriended by African wildcats report that while they are indeed “superaffectionate” toward humans, they are even less likely to put up with human punishments than domestic cats. They are also highly territorial and may prey on other animals in the household. Now consider that our cats split from the African wildcats only 4,000 years ago—a blink in genetic time. (Compare their divergence to the 1 million years separating the lion and leopard.) No wonder we still see so much of the wild in them. Real aficionados of “domestic” cats appreciate them precisely because they feel a sense of awe, feel honored that these essentially wild beings choose to live and be with us.

3. *“Well, then,” the Cat went on, “you see a dog growls when it’s angry, and wags its tail when it’s pleased. Now I growl when I’m pleased, and wag my tail when I’m angry. Therefore I’m mad.”*

“I call it purring, not growling,” said Alice.

“Call it what you like,” said the Cat.

—LEWIS CARROLL, *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*

Dogs are quintessential pack animals. The mere act of being in the pack satisfies a real survival craving. That’s why it’s normal for your dog to follow you (the alpha of the pack) around, to be desperate to go on a



Kitty Bit #3: Dogs have masters; cats have staff.

walk with you, or to sleep with you, or to listen and respond to your commands. No other animal has been so bred to hang on to our every change in tone or facial expression.

At the same time, humans have bred in dogs a facial musculature that gives rise to a rich vocabulary of apparent expressions, which humans choose to interpret as if they were coming from another human: sad, forlorn, happy, guilty, embarrassed, curious, etc. My Great Dane, Jazzy, seeks out the expressions on my face as if they were signs from heaven. If she could think in words, they might be: *Approov? Disaproov? Hapy? Stay in pack? R u lukiing at treat cubbard?* My cats—not so interested. (On the other hand, maybe cats *can* read our facial expressions but just can’t think of a good enough reason to pay attention.)

Cats have no intrinsic desire to please us. Some people resent this autonomy; others prize it. As the joke goes, a dog looks at all the things we provide for it and thinks, You must be God. A cat looks at all the things we provide for it and thinks, I must be God. Here’s another favorite: Dogs have masters; cats have staff.

Yet many cat owners who are familiar with dogs suffer from an irresistible temptation to project the dog mind onto the cat, which usually involves borrowing the alpha model concept of behavior from dogs. This is a big mistake. Regardless of the validity of the alpha model for dogs—a model that many experts dispute, most alpha research having been done on the very different wolf—it definitely does not apply to cats.

While cat colonies may have an alpha male in the sense that there may be one cat who simply has taken over more territory, cats do not behave like alpha wolves, and any feline group will lack a clear linear hierarchy. It is much more fluid and subtle and can change with the time of day and location, cats being experts at time sharing. One cat may be the higher-ranking cat in the morning and be found sitting at the top of the cat tree, but later in the day he may defer to another cat in that location. Similarly, a higher-ranking cat may defer to a lower-ranking cat in the latter’s sleeping area. Through trial and error, scent marking to communicate information, and the performance of a finely nuanced dance, they often make it work.



objects. They dine lavishly on fresh meat, while the other inmates and I are fed some sort of dry nuggets.

The dog receives special privileges. He is regularly released and seems to be more than willing to return. He is obviously retarded. The bird has got to be an informant. I observe him communicate with the guards regularly. I am certain that he reports my every move. My captors have arranged protective custody for him in an elevated cell, so he is safe. For now ...

If you're a cat lover, you nod and smile as you read this. How true, you think to yourself! And yet ... it's not.

I understand that it's hard not to think of animals as being personlike, with personlike feelings and, especially, thoughts. It's fun and touching to imagine that my cat Josephine (on the cover of the North American edition of my book) is my little girl who is so sweet and such a good little girl, who is nice, who loves me and wants to express her love to me, who really feels my love. I'm especially moved when I imagine she is lonely without me and needs my love. And there are definite benefits to such anthropomorphism, for the pets as well as their owners. One is simply that when we feel empathy for an animal's suffering and feelings, we become curiously more human, and more happy. Imagining that our cats feel and think as we do helps us feel closer to them and contributes to our taking better care of them.

In the last decade, research on many animals has shown they lead rich emotional lives. Beyond mere fear and anxiety, they are capable of grieving the loss of their human or animal companions; they can become depressed; they can experience anticipation and pleasure. And they experience dramatic emotional responses to changes in their environment. Cats share with humans the same brain neurochemistry that allows us to feel.

But cat emotions are at once far less complicated and far more foreign to us than people often make them out to be. In reality, cats do not think about us, at least not in our sense of thinking, because they lack the cognitive framework necessary to such thinking. The cat merely regards us,

Kitty Bit #4: Sometimes poop in ze shoe is just poop in ze shoe.

4. *If man could be crossed with the cat it would improve man, but it would deteriorate the cat.* —MARK TWAIN, *NOTEBOOK*, 1894

I always enjoy the anonymous "Excerpts from a Cat's Diary" that frequently makes its way around the Internet. It begins with the "Dog's Diary," which simply lists a dozen things like "Wagged my tail!" and "Milk bones!" each followed by the refrain, "My favorite thing!" The more cunning cat's diary is an amusing example of thoughts and motives attributed to a cat:

Day 983 of my captivity. My captors continue to taunt me with bizarre little dangling

without thought or judgment at all. “I have lived with several Zen masters,” Eckhart Tolle has said, “all of them cats.” That we cannot often identify with this state of being is unfortunate, but that doesn’t make it any less true.

The patron saint of cats is not Freud but Buddha or Lao Tsu, not Dr. Phil but, yes, Eckhart Tolle. Cats just are. This is why we love them. Lacking our kind of cognition, lacking ideas about how things ought to be, cats simply observe or respond, with no verbalized thought in between. They respond reliably, dependably, to what we call love and affection, which they feel in their cat bodies as good energy and pleasant touch. They respond to our generosity in setting down a bowl of food, not with gratitude but with relief from hunger and from anxiety about being hungry. They respond to what we do just as nature has conditioned them to. They respond to their environment in ways that would have maximized their survival strategies in the wild. There’s no good or bad about it.

In short, anthropomorphizing may be good for you. It feels good to feel, or imagine, that connection. I know I will continue to “feel the love” from my cats and, even better, give them back my love. And I wouldn’t suggest that you stop. But it’s the dark side of anthropomorphism that I want to talk about most. I call it the Anthropomorphic Trap.

When we imagine that cats feel the same kind of love we do, that they are happy in the way we are happy, that they are trying to be sweet or adorable, or are embarrassed, it’s a very short step to giving them other, less attractive human intentions like spitefulness or vengefulness, stubbornness or intransigence.

And then we do things that harm them.

As veterinary and shelter staff know too well, we punish cats when we think their problem behaviors are somehow directed at us or are done when the cats supposedly know not to. We scold them. *You know very well you’re not supposed to be on that counter!* We hit them. *You peed on that to get back at me. Take that!* We throw them out of the house. *If you can’t stop scratching you’ll have to stay outdoors!* We abandon them. But it’s wrong to think that cats

understand the connection between our abuse—for that’s what it is—and their behavior. And it’s certainly misguided to project rebellious or spiteful intent. Cats are motivated purely by survival. Spite, like any other higher-order human emotion or intention, doesn’t serve the cat’s survival. Urine and feces are not used as ways to get back at humans. As Sigmund Freud might have said if he had been a cat behaviorist, “Sometimes poop in ze shoe is just poop in ze shoe.”

Falling into the Anthropomorphic Trap can be an especially bad idea when you react with punishment and reprimands, which:

- *are ineffective—they usually won’t stop the behavior*
- *are often counterproductive—they may increase that behavior or begin another problematic behavior*
- *can ruin your bond with your cat*
- *are inhumane*
- *don’t reflect well on the intelligence of our species*

Stick with positive anthropomorphism (“He’s sweet”) and stay away from the negative (“He knows he shouldn’t do that and wants to annoy me”). Better yet, learn how to meet your cat on his own turf.

Kitty Bit #5: Cats make us better people.

5. The secret to being a “cat whisperer,” as it were, is to be a cat listener—to learn to listen to what they are telling you about their needs and desires, and to see the world through their eyes. Cats have taught me much, including a lot about the human species and, especially, myself. I really don’t think I could ever be completely happy without having them around me. They have always been my truest friends.

I know it is possible for you to live in complete harmony with your cats, in a state of mutual calm and contentment. Practice looking at your world through their eyes, and the rest will come.

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Implementing the C.A.T. Plan

IT’S RELATIVELY EASY TO CHANGE problem cat behaviors, cat behaviorist Mieshelle Nagelschneider writes in *The Cat Whisperer*, “but doing so almost always requires changing our own behaviors and the environment we have created for the cat.” Here’s a brief overview of Nagelschneider’s C.A.T. plan for wayward felines:

- 1. CEASE** the unwanted cat behavior: Remove elimination odors from inappropriate places with an enzyme-based cleaner; apply double-sided tape to scratched areas; place a motion-sensing air can on counters
- 2. ATTRACT** the cat to a desirable behavior or location: Distract with toys; use a retraining litter or litter attractant in boxes; offer multiple cat scratchers
- 3. TRANSFORM** the “territory”: Adopt a second kitten; use pheromone plug-ins; spread dishes and litter boxes throughout the home in open areas with multiple access points

➔ For more behavior tips, check out humanesociety.org/catanswertool.