



Well Look At What The Cat Brought In!

By Robert Gallegos

As a young boy growing up I never gave a second thought as to what my grandmother, in her charming, but colloquial way, was trying to say to me. It usually referred to my being late for dinner or that I probably was covered with the grass stain of whatever field I had been playing in. Only later I realized that she was comparing me to the touselled and beaten prey that our domestic cats have a habit of bringing home and presenting to us from time to time.

Most cat owners are truly perplexed by this habit especially since well cared for cats are regularly fed with, hopefully, quality nourishing cat foods. It seems reasonable enough that if a cat is well fed, she should give up her need to hunt and stalk prey, except maybe to play with them. But, of course, what is 'play' to us is serious business for your cat.

Why Cats Hunt... Even if They Don't Have To

When kittens begin to move around at the age of around 2 weeks, they will begin to 'play' with their litter-mates. As their coordination develops, they become more active with their leaping, jumping and attacking from any hidden ambush they can find. This endearing 'play' is rooted in an ages old instinct which has allowed the cat to survive long enough to become domesticated and share our homes. Long before cats moved in with us, they survived by instinctual drives honed through eons of evolution. A mother cat would mark off a territory with her scents and refresh those scents often enough to keep them clear and prominent to both her and any other animals in the area. At night she would patrol her territory and if any unwitting prey should venture into her domain, it might end up as breakfast the next morning. If our mother cat has kittens back in her nest, she would first bring the slain prey home and show the kitties how to devour her catch. As time goes on, she would only wound the prey, bring it home and show the kittens, now grown larger, how to slay the prey, allowing them to 'play' with it until they get it right. And as usual, while mom is out earning her living, the kids are back in the nest 'playing' while developing their coordination and agility. Eventually, when the youngsters are old enough, they will be able to hunt and survive on their own thereby assuring the continuation of the species. As you can see, this 'play' is very serious and directly related to the survival of all cats to this day.

Your cat has not lost this instinct. Especially since the cat is the newest pet to be domesticated, her instincts are still well embedded and will probably be so for quite a while, if not forever. In an environment where she has a comfortable, well appointed home with plenty of nourishment, she will still mark her territory by rubbing her scent glands on prominent objects, patrol her realm, chase off intruders, be strongly maternal and hunt. Asking her to change any of these habits would be like asking her to stop being a cat. That would be more difficult than asking a person to change a habit because people have cognitive thought processes and can be successful through determination and force of will. Without cognitive thinking, cats, indeed all animals, rely on instincts to get them through life. Basically, they have no 'choice'. But, that's a subject beyond the scope of this discussion.

Also contributing to the predatory nature of cats is their dependence on fresh meat protein for survival. Cats cannot survive optimally on a vegetarian diet. Many of the



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essential amino acids, such as taurine, which are necessary for a healthy cat to stave off disease or malnutrition is only found in fresh meat protein. If one is going to undertake the responsibility of preparing their own cat food, vegetarian or otherwise, it'll have to be done very carefully. Having a good reference book such as *The Whole Pet Diet* will make your task wiser and safer for your cat. If your cat's diet is lacking in nutrients her metabolism craves, she may try to supplement her needs with fresh prey. The quality of your cat's diet whether it is homemade or store bought will have a direct effect on her daily habits.

When kitty brings home that distasteful present to you, there's not a lot you can do about it. Some say she is trying to show how incompetent you are at hunting and is trying to train you. That's a bit tongue in cheek, but probably not far from the truth. Most likely she is redirecting her maternal instincts that tell her what she should be doing with a caught prey, and/or her social instincts are trying to please you. Something like when two kitty friends are lying together and one holds the other's head between her paws while she gives a good licking; eyes closed and purring motors revved to high idle. Getting upset, scolding or yelling will only confuse her at best, and teach her to fear you at the worst. Erasing the habit of hunting prey from your cat's personality is not possible. She would be harmed and crippled emotionally if you tried and you would not be successful in any case. About all you can do is praise her for being such a fearless huntress, then dispose of her gift when she's not looking. If your lucky, the prey might still be alive and you can release it back into the wild, maybe outside of your cat's territory. You do watch her patrol her territory boundaries, right? I don't think it would be a good idea to give her a treat at that time. She may associate bringing home a fresh catch with earning a treat. Then you'd really have your hands full!

What to Do About Her Hunting Habits

Some advocate keeping your cat indoors all the time. Most cats can adapt to this lifestyle, especially if they have indoor activities for them to release their energy. As for me, I believe cats were made to spend some time outside and shouldn't be deprived of their desire for a basic natural experience even if it is a bit risky or a little extra work on my part. Your best bet would be to try to distract her hunting instincts from chasing live prey, to her natural desire for 'play'. Availability to toys that hold her attention and interactive play activities can help reduce her instinctual need to hunt. Along with a balanced, quality diet and special times when she can spend time on your lap with some gentle stroking, she may feel comfortable enough to only become alert when she sees possible prey in the distance of her domain; but to just lie back down and wait for the dinner bell. Then again... maybe not.

Robert J Gallegos, author of <http://www.catlover-giftsworld.com> a web site dedicated to proper cat care with quality cat lover gifts based on an understanding of cat behavior, instincts and the unique requirements for healthy cats as pets. Cats are the newest of animals to be domesticated and still have one paw in the wild. It's a major reason why they're so mysterious and resistant to human expectations. Robert is a life long lover of cats. He is dedicated to sharing his understanding of the cat experience, reducing the epidemic feral cat situation, and helping cat lovers to provide the best care for their cats.

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