



What Makes A Cat - A Cat?

By Robert Gallegos

And why does a cat stubbornly insist on behaving like a cat?

Just about everyone can list the things that most accurately identifies what a cat is to them. Some will cite their amazing grace, agility and speed. Others will wax nostalgically about their intrinsic beauty. There will always be comments about their powers of concentration, excellent night vision, the cuteness of kittens that elicits such strong maternal instincts, and their seeming aloofness and self-confidence. And why does it seem that cats don't handle changes or stress well? In reality, these traits and others, are all just the symptoms of underlying characteristics that more rightly define the make-up and nature of cats. The feline characteristics elicit both enjoyable and maddening responses from humans, especially those who expect cats to act like people, dogs or other domesticated animals. Without question, cats are unique.

What needs to be kept in mind is the fact that cats are the newest of any of the domesticated species. This puts them very close to their 'wild' roots. Studies of small wildcats, that is, undomesticated or untamed cats that live beyond the comfort of human households, gives insight to what the 'natural' character of the cat is. It is generally agreed upon that today's house cat has descended from a small African wildcat, *Felis silvestris libyca*. One of the notable characteristics of the wildcat is that in order to insure its own food supply and decrease its chances of becoming prey itself, is to limit it's activities to seeking food when others aren't. Namely, at night. Cats have perfected this night-time strategy and can function very well in limited light, or even in what a person might consider total darkness. Along with excellent night vision, some other characteristics have also been developed:

A broken, erratic tabby pattern and coloring of the fur coat which offers a well conceived camouflage for hiding in tall grass or forest settings. A black cat may possess the best camouflage on a dark, moonless night. How about a keen sense of hearing that can track predators or follow a prospective meal as it moves through the darkness. In addition to excellent night vision that makes the most of limited light, there's the additional advantage of eyes that also detect even the slightest motion.

Along with all this night-time advantage, a cat must also be able to move swiftly and precisely through it's territory to escape predators or other threats. They are able to accomplish this with the use of scent glands located on their feet and on the sides of their face. As they pass through their territory, they'll mark prominent objects along their path. With these scent glands they can lay down a trail that's extremely easy to follow. Now, these scent marks can communicate on the brightest day or darkest night and unlike sound, they won't alert predators. Unfortunately, these marks have to be freshened up from time to time, as well as added to if a new trail is to be explored. A resident cat, that is a cat that has claimed a territory for herself, must continually inspect her territory to keep the scents fresh and to mark any changes to it, such as a newly downed tree or other obstruction on her path. She doesn't want any surprise encounters in the dead of night while fleeing a predator.

All this scent marking plays a critical role in the survival of the small wildcat. With only so many hours in the day, she can't spend all her time marking a territory and leave no time for hunting, finding water or mating. If she did she would become extinct quite soon. She can only claim an area that supports her with food (and her kit-



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kittens, too), and that area must be efficiently maintained with her scent trails. Under these conditions, it's easy to see that it's not practical for her to share her space for (2) reasons:

There's usually a limited food supply in the territory she has to maintain on a regular basis. The scent trails from other cats would probably be confusing.

Finally, there's the unique maternal nature of a cat that makes it very different from all other domestic animals. The answer to that question lies in her wildcat heritage, also. Survival of the cat species is dependant upon the survival of the kittens. Unlike 'pack' animals, a mother cat, or queen as they are known, is totally responsible for the care of her young. There's no one else around for her to rely on. She must teach her young everything they need to know to survive and do it before their food requirements exceeds the ability of her territory to provide for them. She must do this in a very short time and the kittens must have the capacity to learn all she has to teach. Needless to say, a very strong maternal bond is necessary if either mom or the kids are going to be successful at survival. And, as they learn to survive on their own, the young will one day leave the queen's territory and establish territories of their own. Or else, mom will kick them out. Now, we have (5) characteristics that make a cat... a cat:

Cats are nocturnal Cats are territorial Cats are solitary Cats are predatory Cats are maternal

So, What's all this Heat About??

The female cat's usual heat cycles are influenced by seasonal changes in the amount of daylight. These cycles run from January (as the days begin to grow longer) to October (when the days begin to shorten). She will cycle every 10 to 14 days until she is bred. Heat cycles are easily identified with a lot of vocal calling, rolling on the ground and constantly rubbing against furniture or your legs. She will assume a breeding position with her rump in the air and forepaws near the ground. Note: Spaying and neutering is the perfect cure for this situation. Heat symptoms will be eliminated as well as the risk for ovarian cancers and infections of the uterus. Not to mention the eliminating of kitten litters that can't be properly cared for.

Mating in cats presents an interesting diversion for animals known for their solitary nature and a strong sense of territory. In feral colonies it has been noted that a female in heat will mate with 18 or more males in a single day. Some ethologists attribute this rather promiscuous behavior to the fact that cats must really enjoy sex as much as humans do. The point is moot and probably can't be determined one way or the other. But, it does offer one answer as to why such solitary creatures would gather and form complex social interactions on a seasonal basis. As noted above, the maternal characteristic of a mother cat and her kittens is necessarily strong thus providing a kind of social interaction for cats at a young, impressionable age. So, it's not like cats never experience any degree of socialization from which they can draw the tools of getting along in a large gathering of like minded animals.

When cats gather around a regular, dependable food supply, such as a dump or rodent infested barn, a queen may not wean her young for up to eighteen months. This does have some distinct advantages:



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Nursing keeps the queen and kittens together longer than is usual in the wild, keeping everyone social longer and living peacefully. Since lactating females won't come into heat, the population is limited and preserves peace. The nursing kittens won't mature sexually quite as fast which also keeps peace and provides some population control. With a more complex social environment, the kittens will learn more social skills. The longer a kitten nurses, the longer she is in a learning mode, hence, the more she learns.

When a wildcat queen teaches her kittens to accept kill as nourishment and then to hunt for themselves, they will make the transition back to solitary behavior. As the kittens provide more for themselves, the queen will resist nursing. The kitten play will become more aggressive and each will eventually make their way to the solitary life. She will resume her solitary life and the kittens will assume theirs. But, in the feral colony supported with a reliable food supply the driving survival instincts may be ameliorated or softened because of the plentiful food resources and an enhanced social development amongst the neighboring cats. That's not to say that the colony won't outgrow the ability of the territory (dump or barn) to provide food and some may find themselves striking out on their own for greener pastures. One might surmise that cats can get along in groups, establish rules of engagement for mutual survival and be quite successful at it. But, they are not afraid to go it alone and can be very efficient at surviving by their own guile if they have to. They really are quite amazing animals.

So, when you watch your cat as she displays her everyday habits, remember she has a lot of inherited behaviors that are motivating her. Whether it's her scratching or spraying instincts, or walking her domain in the same fashion every day reestablishing her scent trail, or arguing with other pets in your home or neighborhood (because it is after all, her territory). She does so because she learned to survive in an elegant, complex, yet sophisticated way. And it's probably just as hard for her to adjust to your domesticated life as it would be for you to adjust to surviving in the wild. It helps to remember... you're both pretty smart creatures.

The next time someone asks what makes a cat... a cat. Go ahead and tell them. "It's their cute paws, nubby nose, soothing purr, the way she rubs against your leg when you come home, etc, etc, etc". But, you'll know there's a lot more to it than that.

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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