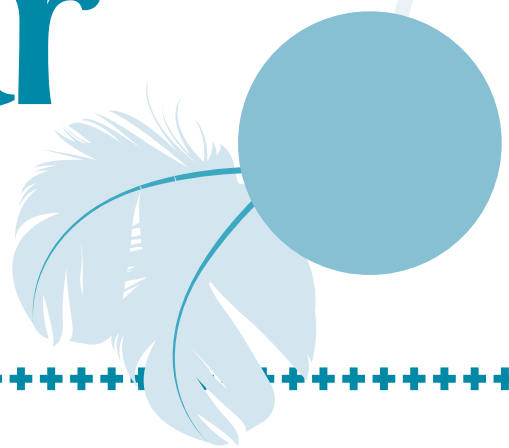


# Behaviour matters



**Nicky Trevorrow BSc (Hons), PG Dip (CABC), RVN**

Nicky works in Cats Protection's Veterinary Department at the National Cat Centre as a Behaviour Manager. Nicky holds a BSc (Hons) degree in Animal Behaviour from Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. More recently, Nicky completed a postgraduate diploma in Companion Animal Behaviour Counselling from the University of Southampton. Nicky is a registered veterinary nurse. She is a member of the International Cat Care's Behavioural Advisory Panel and represents Cats Protection on the Animal Behaviour and Training Council.

## Part two of *Nicky Trevorrow's* top cat, boss cat, alpha cat?

In the previous article, we discussed different cat-to-cat interactions that are commonly misconstrued as being a sign of 'dominance', such as how cats behave around feeding time or their use of space in relation to other cats.

Already we have seen that changing our vocabulary to describe cats as 'bold' or 'shy', as well as looking at the individual cat's motivation can help us to understand and explain how cats really view each other. By ensuring that multi-cat households have sufficient resources, ideally one resource per cat plus one extra, it can help to reduce competition and tension around resources and improve feline relationships.

In this issue, we'll explore the idea of 'dominance' and the history of where this theory originated from. The concept of dominance is an interesting one, in part because the original use of the word in scientific literature is very different to everyday use today. Scientists use it to refer to a relationship between two individual animals to simply show which animal can maintain access to resources, such as food. Whereas most people you speak to use it to describe a personality type of a specific individual, similar to how it is described in a dictionary. This in itself can cause problems. So where did the idea of dominance come from? Surprisingly it was from a different species entirely.

### A wolf in cat's clothing?

The concept of dominance hierarchies came from early studies of grey wolves around the 1940s. A hierarchy is a social structure whereby the leader or 'alpha' animal wins the 'top position' through competitive success and therefore gets access to resources, such as food, first. Other animals

are considered as 'subordinate' or lower down in the group structure and give way to the 'alpha' animal.

Historically, wolves were very difficult to study in the wild due to years of persecution by man. As a result, studies of wolf behaviour were conducted in zoo conditions. It was not known at the time, but these captive wolf packs were made up of unnatural groupings in which the wolves may or may not have been related to one another. In addition, wolves were relocated between zoos to facilitate breeding programmes. Being bound by captivity and unable to escape interactions with unfamiliar wolves led to behaviours being expressed that are atypical of those seen in the wild. The resulting research concluded that wolves organised themselves in rigid hierarchies, maintaining their so called 'status' by aggression or aggressive posturing. It coined the term 'alpha' to refer to the breeding pair of wolves at the top of the hierarchy that suppressed other, more subordinate, wolves from breeding.

This early research in wolves shaped early dog training methods, which were based on behaviours seen in the captive wolves. The theory was that dogs have evolved from the grey wolf, and therefore dogs behave in the same way as wolves and should be treated accordingly. While the grey wolf is still considered to have shared ancestry with the dog, they have evolved to be very different species.

The idea that dogs had a desire to constantly compete against one another for the top spot in the group hierarchy quickly grew very popular. The theory was also assumed to apply to the relationship between humans and dogs, believing that dogs would attempt to 'dominate' their owners and therefore the owners needed to ensure they were the 'pack leader'.

Dominance theory has also spread from wolves and dogs to other species. In the past, when little was known about cat behaviour, it was assumed that cats may behave in a similar way to dogs. Sometimes this can happen subconsciously, for example, even today many people would rub a cat's tummy in response to them rolling over. While most dogs love a good belly rub, many cats either tolerate it or actively dislike it. It is extremely common for cat owners to think that one of their cats is the 'boss' or 'alpha' over the other cats in the household. Some owners also believe that they need to be the 'alpha' in their relationship with their cat.

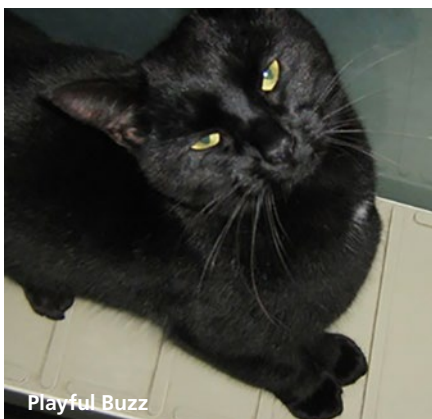
## What's new, pussycat?

Over the last 20 years, there has been growing evidence that reassesses these entrenched ideas. Wolf biologists have now had the opportunity to study wild packs or groups of wolves. They have discovered that, rather than having an 'alpha' pair, wolf packs are a family group with parents guiding their offspring. The interactions are predominantly displays of friendly behaviour and group cooperation. Rather than the 'alphas' often eating first as previously believed, the recent studies revealed that the parents often encourage their young to eat first, depending on environmental conditions.

This research is ground-breaking in that it shapes not only our knowledge of wolf behaviour, but the way in which we treat dogs. Dogs are considered part of our 'social unit' and many owners refer to their dog as part of the family. While grey wolf behaviour still provides a starting point in understanding dog behaviour, it is now agreed to treat dogs as dogs, rather than small wolves. It may sound obvious, but this applies to cats, too – we need to treat cats as cats, and not small dogs or wolves!

## How does the idea of dominance affect CP?

Sadly some cats are given up by their owners as they are perceived as 'dominant' by their owner, owing to a variety of scenarios. Take Buzz, for example, whose previous owner described him as dominant during play. During further discussion, it seemed that Buzz was showing inappropriate



play behaviour. This is commonly seen in cats that, as kittens, have been played with using fingers and toes. So Buzz simply thought that fingers were a fun game from his kittenhood.

While in CP care, Buzz was provided with regular interactive play sessions with fishing rod toys as part of a programme to redirect his behaviour onto appropriate toys. He has now found a new loving home and no longer shows this behaviour. This example shows that misinterpreting the behaviour as 'dominance' did not address the real underlying cause in the first instance and unfortunately led to Buzz being relinquished by his original owner.

## There's no 'top cat'

Cats are fascinating animals that certainly keep us guessing at times, but you can rest assured of one thing: your cat is not secretly plotting world domination in your household, however much it may be joked about. As we have seen through the *Behaviour Matters* series, some cats are in the same social group as other cats in the household, whereas others have retained more of the wild blueprint for independence and maintaining their own territory. While there are often situations where it can be tempting to describe a cat as 'dominant', we now know from new research that a cat's personality (such as bold or shy), motivation, previous experience of a situation, medical conditions and availability of resources can be used to understand and explain their behaviour. So why not be a feline welfare ambassador and help cats by spreading the word?! ●



Photo: istock.com/rogerrentham