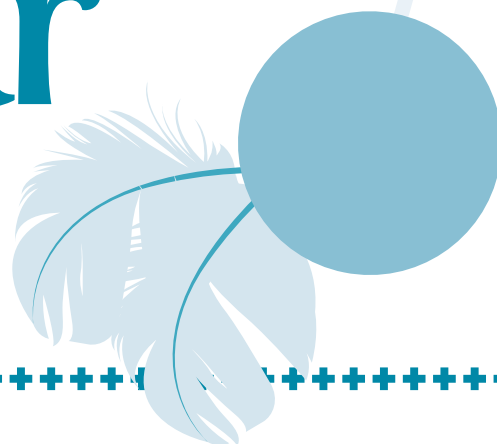


Behaviour matters



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.



Nicky Trevorrow encourages us to learn to speak 'cat'

Many of us have often wondered what our cat is trying to tell us. When faced with a miaowing moggy, their desires are not often clear and it is all too easy to assume that the cat wants to be fed. Perhaps not understanding our feline friends could be a contributing factor to the growing rise in feline obesity in the UK. So why do we find cat communication difficult? Sadly we are not blessed with the abilities of Doctor Dolittle to speak to the animals so we will need to look at alternatives ways to 'speak cat'.

Cats are naturally not as facially expressive as social species such as ourselves and dogs. In fact, a pure dog lover could be forgiven for struggling to interpret a cat as cats have not evolved the complex facial muscles to show a wide range of expressions – they are indeed more difficult to read! It's not because cats are deliberately trying to be sneaky. As an animal with solitary ancestry, they simply haven't needed to communicate their emotions or intentions in the close company of others. For cats, their preferred method of communication is using scent as it helps to avoid other cats while still acting as a signal. We humans often struggle with this as we are such a visual species!

Cats do subtly express how they feel using facial expressions, body language and vocal communication. The whole combination needs to be taken into account rather than looking at signs in isolation. We know that cats are emotional animals and they can express their mood, emotional state or impart information using these signals. All cats, of course, are individuals and can have very different personalities.

Oh my! What big eyes you have!

The size of the pupils are very useful to help indicate how the cat is feeling, however the context needs to be taken into consideration. For example, large, black pupils could indicate that a cat is feeling frightened or threatened, or in a playful mood or hunting mode, or simply that there are low light levels. Many people will often exclaim that the cat showed 'no warning signs at all' for aggressive behaviour. However, cats *do* show signs; it's just that they are often very subtle and very quick! A cat's pupils can dilate and constrict at lightning speed. Other useful indicators are the position of the cat's ears and whiskers; are they forward, relaxed or back?

Strike a pose

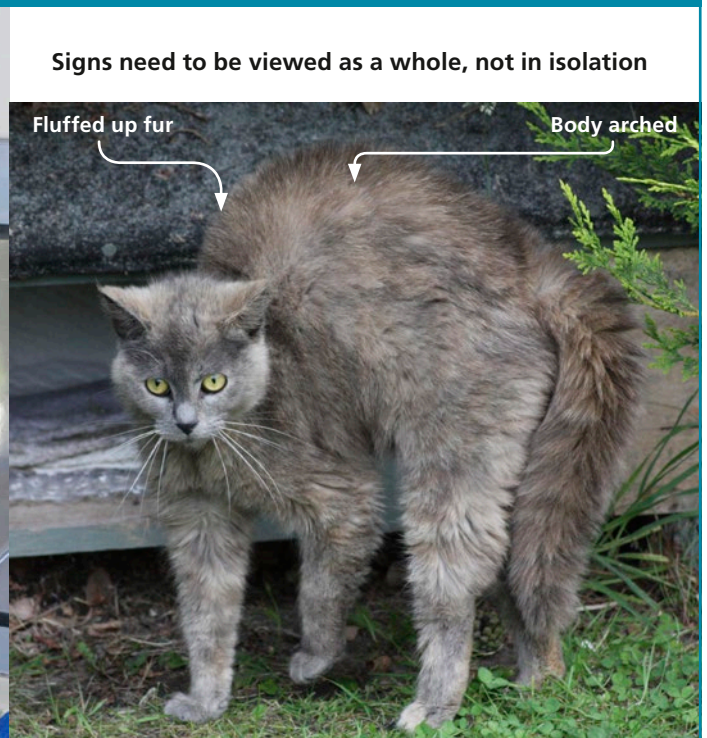
The most obvious feature of a cat's body language is looking at the overall posture. From very relaxed postures such as lying on their back with their vulnerable tummy exposed to more tense postures like the 'crouch' – still on all four paws tucked underneath their body, ready to run if necessary. Body language can be as subtle as looking for changes in muscle tension.

A cat's tail can be a source for confusion. Cats are not small dogs and the tail is classic example. For many owners, the sight of a dog wagging its tail often signifies a happy, content dog. It's very easy to see why people may be tempted to transfer the same logic to cats. Frequently, however, a cat wagging its tail can mean quite the opposite, showing that they are unhappy, agitated or threatened by something. Unfortunately tail language is not as black and white as that, both for dogs and cats, and there's a whole range of messages that can be conveyed. For example, a cat that is wagging its tail at a

Behavioural signs of stress



Greeting behaviour



Signs need to be viewed as a whole, not in isolation

Feeling threatened

mid-height with a mid-speed wag, which when combined with the other behaviours of pacing, could mean that the cat is feeling indecisive. This behaviour can be seen on occasions such as needing to toilet but it's raining outside and the cat doesn't want to use the litter tray provided.

Why does my cat...

...scratch at the ground after eating?

It is thought that this is a caching behaviour of saving the food for later, that their ancestors may have shown. It looks strange to us when they scrape at the floor and nearby cupboards, however they may cover the food if there was something nearby that would do the job, eg a towel.

...make a funny 'chattering' noise at the birds?

There are different theories as to why cats make this noise, often seen when they are watching birds outside the window. Some experts think that the cat is practising the 'kill bite', while others say that the cat is feeling frustrated or showing 'barrier frustration' when seeing the birds through the glass window barrier. Or it could simply be that the cat is experiencing a high arousal level or excitement at seeing the birds nearby.

...quiver their tail but nothing comes out?

Some cats may fake spray or 'pseudo' spray. Cats might actually back up to an object as if to spray and it is thought that this can serve as a marking function for cat even though no urine is sprayed. Other cats seem to use it as a greeting behaviour or if they are a little overexcited.

...hide a bit more than usual?

For any change in behaviour, we recommend that you take your cat to your vets for a health check to rule out any medical reasons. If your cat is given a clean bill of health and your vet feels the problem could be behavioural, then we would recommend a vet referral to a qualified behaviourist such as a member of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (www.apbc.org.uk) or the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (<http://asab.nottingham.ac.uk>). ●

For more information about cat body language check out:

- Cats Protection's *Body language in cats* video on YouTube <https://youtu.be/bvsfB7sf4QU>
- Our other videos on YouTube www.youtube.com/user/catsprotectionuk
- Feline behaviour explained visual guide bit.ly/1BVRQwG
- Cats Protection's e-learning course on cat behaviour <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/ufo>
- *Understanding your cat's behaviour* and other Cats Protection leaflets bit.ly/1ycuV0z