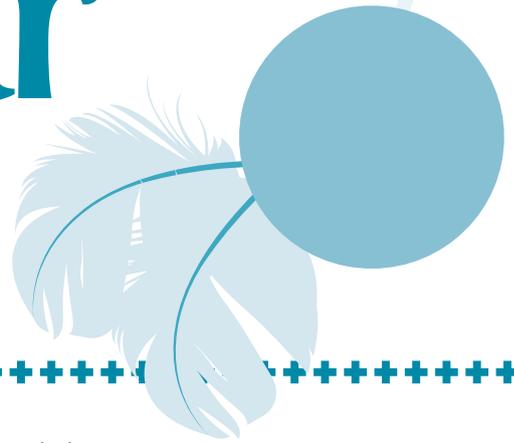


Behaviour matters



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 investigates turf wars – too many cats, not enough space

Turf wars among cats are more likely to occur when there's a large population of them living in the same neighbourhood. As we move out of winter and into spring, cats are spending more time outdoors enjoying the better weather. In general, cats prefer to avoid unfamiliar cats or those not in the same social group to prevent conflict. They naturally lack the communication skills to be able to diffuse a stressful situation with other cats.

'Despotic cats' refers to cats that are particularly territorial and confident and often intimidate or attack other cats in

the neighbourhood. Despotic cats often enter houses, eat the resident cat's food, spray urine or attack the resident cat. Not only do the target cats suffer from injuries on occasion, but the effect on their mental state should not be underestimated. Target cats may show a variety of behavioural problems as a result of the stress or develop stress-related illnesses. It is extremely important that both cats, especially the target, are not punished or told off as this will only make the situation worse and does not address the underlying issues.

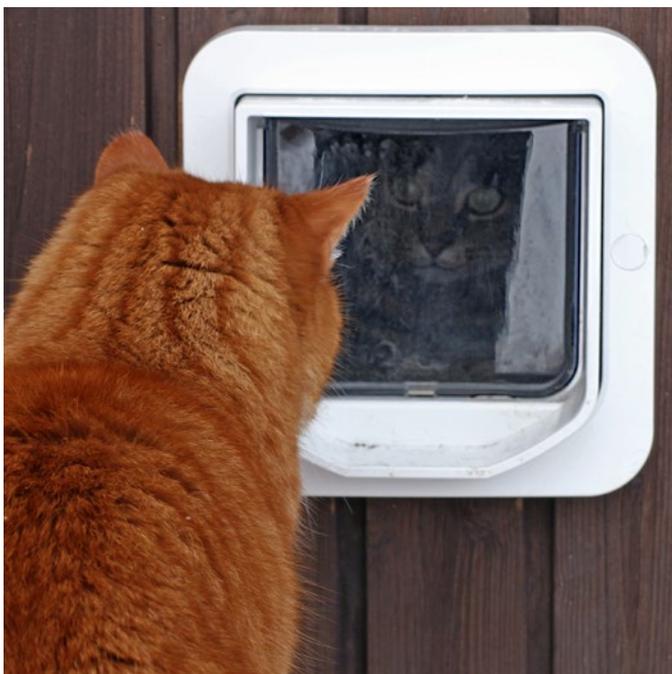
A trip to the vets

Both cats involved will need to be health-checked by a vet and any underlying medical conditions addressed before considering behavioural interventions. The most common medical reason for aggressive behaviour is pain, but of course there are many other reasons for this behaviour.

While any cat could show despotic behaviour, entire toms are often reported. It would be worth finding out if the despotic cat is owned and if so, whether the owner would consider neutering the cat. Both male and female cats are more likely to have a smaller home range if neutered. However it is up to the owner whether they choose to neuter their cat or not.

A question of ownership

Reasonable efforts should be made to find an owner, such as taking the despotic cat to a vet practice to scan them for a microchip, as well as putting up posters advertising a found cat and putting a temporary paper collar on the cat asking the owner to get in touch. Record efforts made to find an owner, just in case they come forward in the future. If there is no evidence of an owner, then the cat could be neutered and rehomed through an animal welfare charity, in accordance with the charity's stray policy. If the despotic cat



Photos: istock.com/Astrid860



is feral or poorly socialised with no one claiming ownership, then the cat could be relocated to another suitable outdoor environment through the help of an animal welfare charity.

The best way to manage this situation is for both owners to have a tactful and collaborative chat to agree a way forwards. Each owner has responsibility for their own cat and it is not conducive to blame the owner of the despotic cat.

Resources and cat flaps

Both the despotic and target cats will need a safe, secure territory with sufficient essential resources (litter trays, food and water bowls, beds and hiding places). An exclusive entry cat flap, such as a microchip or magnetic cat flap, can help prevent other cats from entering the house. Attention needs to be given to other potential entry and exit points in the house like windows or doors left ajar. Fly screens or products designed for indoor cats could be used on windows in the summer. Some cats may even need their cat flap to be blocked by locking it and placing a solid board on both sides of the cat flap to send a clear message to both cats that it is no longer an entry or exit point. In this case, the resident cat will need the owner to provide access to outside and will benefit from being escorted outside by their owner for a sense of security. The resident cat may feel safer if the windows are obscured with an opaque covering at cat-height so that they cannot see outside. This could discourage them from spending a high proportion of their time being hypervigilant, looking out for the despotic cat. If both cats have enough resources in their home and garden, they are less likely to wander further afield. Target cats in particular need to be provided with litter trays as they may be too anxious to go outside.

Despotic cats can sometimes be quite charming towards people. It is crucial that everyone in the target cat's household is consistent and that no one is encouraging the despotic cat into the garden or house.

Time-sharing

Sometimes owners can work together so that the cats are given outdoor access at different parts of the day to avoid conflict. This relies on good communication by all owners involved. Additionally it can be helpful if the despotic cat wears a quick-release collar with several bells on it to alert their presence to the target cat and their owner. Another option is for one or more of the owners to cat-proof their garden to provide a safe outside space for their cat.

When rehoming a cat, it is important to consider the local cat density for particularly territorial cats, especially if they have experienced known conflict with other cats in the past.

Home is where the fishing rod toy is

Interactive play is great mental stimulation and physical exercise. Both the despotic cat and target cat need to have regular, little and often play sessions throughout the day. The target cat will also find this a good distraction and help to relieve their stress, and interactive play is good for the despotic cat as it can help relieve that pent up energy. Fishing rod toys with feathers on string are great as they can be moved to mimic prey. These kinds of toys need to be stored safely out of the cat's reach once the play session is over.

Introducing both the cats involved to very basic feeding enrichment is a great way to make meal times more interesting. A cardboard egg box with a portion of the cat's daily allowance of dry food placed where the eggs would normally sit is a good starting point. It is important to show the cat how to use it by 'pawing' out the biscuits for a couple of minutes before letting the cat have a try.

For more ideas on feeding enrichment, check out Cats Protection's YouTube channel and search for 'Boredom Busters' and the behaviour section of our website www.cats.org.uk/cat-care/cat-behaviour-hub ●