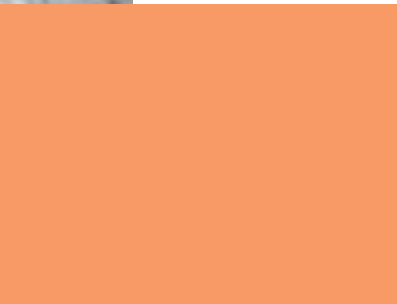




**‘cat’**

*small, domesticated, carnivorous mammal with soft fur, a short snout, and retractable claws. It is widely kept as a pet or for catching mice, and many breeds have been developed.*



# A GLOSSARY OF CATS

From clowders to smurgling, Christina Orieschnig delves into the dictionary of fine feline words

Cats meow. They purr, they claw, and hiss. They have tails and paws and whiskers. That much every child knows.

But cats also smurgle. They strop, they buff, and bunt. Moggies have furnishings, breeches, breaks, and pockets. Some sport scarabs. They form clutters, and clowders, and kindles.

If this sounds like gibberish to you, keep reading. Wonder no more what these words mean, or where they come from. **For this is a glossary of cats.**

## A cat by any other name would be as sweet

According to archaeologists, cats have been graciously tolerating human love and adoration, cohabiting with us lanky bipeds since first sidling into settlements in the fertile crescent during the eighth millennium BC. And they have been called 'cats' for quite a long time, too.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the English word 'cat' can be traced as far back as the 8th century AD. But its roots are far older. Forms of it are scattered across today's European languages. Germany's katze, France's chat, Italy's gatto, Gaelic Ireland's cat, and Russia's kot all go back to the same words: Byzantine Greek katta, and the Latinate cattus, in use around 75 AD. The source of these, in turn, is still debated among etymologists, though Nubian kadis and Berber kaddiska point to an origin in the languages spoken in West and North Africa.

Kittens are easier to trace. Medieval French cat lovers tacked a diminutive onto their beloved mousers, making their chats have chatons. An old French variant imported into English became first chitoun, then kitoun in the 14th century – and kitten today.

Pussies, too, have a somewhat palpable origin. The term 'puss' is the root of the principal word for 'cat' in Romanian, pisica, and the origin of the Lithuanian puz. Some scholars suggest that 'puss' could be imitative of the sounds cat lovers sometimes produce to capture a cat's attention.

## When kitties come they come not single spies – but in destructions

Cats are solitary by nature, happiest reigning over their own exclusive territory. Only when necessity dictates do moggies band together. Street cats, for example, join ranks because resources are scarce. Consequently, people have always needed words to describe groups of cats. Sheep form flocks. Fish get together in schools. A group of crows, curiously, make up a murder. But what about cats?

One of the most common terms for this purpose is 'clowder', though 'clutter' and 'cluster' are not far behind. All three have their origin in Middle English 'clodder', meaning a 'clotted mass'. Whoever looked at a group of fluffy furballs crowding together and thought the term was apt was definitely onto something.

It doesn't end there, though. The variety of names for groups of cats is astounding – and reflects the circumstances forcing felines into too-close company. There are 'douts' of cats, and 'glarings' of cats, 'nuisances' of cats, and entire 'pounces' of cats. A group of feral cats is called a 'colony' or a 'destruction' – giving rise to the suspicion that whoever thought up this particular variant might have been recovering from having their pantry raided. >

When talking about kittens, still more specific terms apply. There is the term litter, to denote a group of sibling cats born of the same mother, or 'dam'. These kittens don't necessarily share the same father, or 'sire', though. An unsprayed female – a 'queen' – can mate with several 'full toms' – unneutered males – while she is in heat. In a process called superfecundation, any of her egg cells may then be fertilised by sperm from any of these toms. As a result, kittens of the same litter may actually be half-siblings. Kin relations aside, though, the cuteness-packed spectacle of a group of kittens is also referred to as a kindle.

### To buff or not to buff – that is the question!

Cats are not transparent. As the collective internet likes to document, they often come up with convoluted ideas that require immediate execution. Dashing wildly through the flat at 4am? Check. Randomly nibbling at the toes of sleeping humans? Absolutely. Scaling drapes to perch on curtain rods? Why of course. Some cat behaviours, though, are so common and well known that they have particular words denoting them.

Any owner of a content, happy kitty will probably have been on the receiving end of 'smurgling', or 'kneading' as it is more commonly known. A cat will lie purring in your lap, enjoying caresses, and suddenly begin treading your thigh with pawfuls of claws, rather more acupuncture than massage. This is a behavioural remnant from kittenhood. When kittens suckle at their mother's teats, they stimulate the flow of the milk by kneading the area around it. Later in life, when suckling is a thing of the past – and claws have grown sharp – smurgling remains a sign of contentment.

Bunting can be similarly painful for cat owners. Also a sign of happiness and affection on the cat's part, it involves head-butting the target of their love. For those prepared, it is a gentle bump. If you don't see it coming, it may result in an aching nose.

Buffing and stropping have more practical purposes. The former term describes a cat rubbing their head against anything they wish to claim for themselves. In this process, secretions from the kitty's scent glands are rubbed onto the objects (and people), effectively incorporating them into their realm. These secretions are also known as pheromones. Each cat has their unique pheromonal scent, and spreading it far and wide helps mark their territory and make it homely and reassuring to the cat. The second term, stropping, describes a cat sharpening their claws – on a scratching post, if owners are fortunate. Not only does stropping help a cat keep their claws in prime condition, it also spreads even more pheromones.

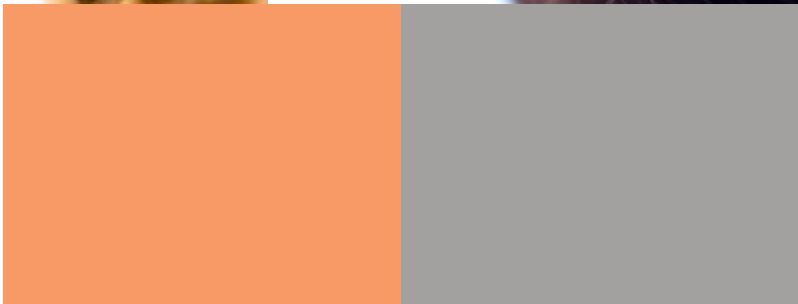
A final word relating to the wonderful weirdness of cat behaviour is 'pica'. This denotes many a cat's proclivity to chew on things that are decidedly not food, be it doomed wool, stray shoelaces, or unwitting cardboard boxes. Unfortunately, this behaviour can be dangerous for cats. Kitties can choke on objects they're trying to swallow, or have them get jammed in their gastrointestinal system. From sewing thread to hairbands, owners should keep anything pica-worthy out of areas where their furry darlings roam unsupervised.

### Is this a scarab that I see before me?

As any observer of cats will know, feline bodies are wondrous contraptions. Lightning fast, sleek, and elegant, they can squeeze themselves into confined spaces (apparently turning liquid in the process), and leap over large distances with lethal precision. Over time, an assortment of words has accumulated to describe moggies' bodies and general appearance.

'Tabby' is one of the best-known overall descriptions of cats. Tabbies sport distinctive markings in the form of stripes, dots and bands, which line and fleck their coat in swirling patterns. The origin of 'tabby' is similarly convoluted, beginning its history in Baghdad. A neighbourhood known as Attabiy was famous for its cloth and silk fabrics, which became all the rage in England in the 17th and 18th centuries. The French tabis denoted a rich, watered silk taffeta – which was often striped. Given the silky feel of a healthy cat's coat, it was not a large leap from there to apply tabis to similarly patterned felines. Also related to tabbies: The distinctive 'M'-shaped forehead marking is called a 'scarab' for its vague resemblance to the beetle venerated in ancient Egypt.

In other body-related cat terminology, furnishings, breeches, breaks and pockets deserve a mention. A cat's break is the tiny indentation on the front of their nose. Breeches denote the longer hair on the back of their upper hind legs. And if you've ever wondered if there's a word for the adorable tufts of silken hair growing in and around your furry friend's ears, wonder no more. These are their ear furnishings. Looking at cats' ears, you might also have noticed a small skin fold on their rims. The formal anatomical name for this fold is cutaneous marginal pocket – though it's most commonly called Henry's pocket. Where this name comes from, though, is almost as mysterious as the purpose of the skin fold. One theory holds that it helps cats attune to high-pitched noises – especially when shifting their ears.



## Journeys end in ailurophiles meeting – every wise cat this doth know

At this point, any cat-loving reader will hopefully be amused – and conclude that they will adore their darling, no matter what words are used to denote their behaviour or looks. That in itself makes them ailurophiles. Quite aptly, this word is composed of the Ancient Greek *aiélouros* (domesticated or wild cat), and *philia* (love).

And finally, a reader of this very magazine pointed out another reason why ‘ailurophile’ is such an apt description for those who adore cats. In 1939, *The Cat* was on the prowl for a fitting word to describe knowledgeable cat lovers, and involved its readers in the search. ‘Ailurophile’ eventually won out. One reader was particularly satisfied by the choice: “I like the name ailurophile very much to express a cat lover, and when one is done with the Greek derivation, there is still the phonetic ‘lure’ or ‘alluring’, which is certainly one of the chief characteristics of the cat.” 