



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



Taming the wanderlust – how do I keep my cat close to home?

Vicky Halls investigates...

In the back of many a cat owner's mind is the thought "if I let my cat out, what guarantee do I have that he'll come back?" Sharing our homes with a territorial species can be fraught with such concerns because, on the whole, we care more about family and friends than our surroundings and find it hard to imagine being a cat that puts the environment above everything.

A cat's territory is fundamental to its survival; it contains everything the cat needs to survive and thrive and therefore is worthy of protection. Despite the advent of the loving owner and copious food at home, the instinctive (and somewhat redundant) notion of territory is alive and well in most. The size of territory and how it's patrolled is influenced by the proximity of other cats and the density of the cat population in the neighbourhood. Other things that may influence how often a cat goes out and how far he roams are numerous: genetics, temperament, other cats in the same house, dogs next-door, to name a few. It is testimony to the adaptability of the cat that, despite the pressure from all those other cats outside, the majority return home with predictable regularity.

It is very difficult to keep a cat at home against its will without confining it indoors and, at that point, the end result can be a very miserable, broken cat. Keeping cats indoors at night in many areas of the country is a straightforward safety issue but, if the environment allows, it will always be best to give cats freedom of choice to come and go during daylight hours as the whim takes them.

Whether or not your cat roams depends on the individual, broadly speaking I tend to think they fall into any one of four categories:

The 'hunting, shooting, fishing' cats

These are the cats for which hunting is everything. They seem to have a primitive instinct to patrol, defend and hunt that overrides the fact that they are fully fed and nutritionally satisfied at home. These cats can be particularly driven in the spring; as the sap rises so does their desire to be free to stalk and catch prey.

The home lovers

These are ideal for those owners who forever find themselves looking at adverts for GPS cat-tracking devices. The home lover is a fair weather cat that prefers to be outside with you when you are gardening than venture out alone. They often have a territory, with which they appear perfectly satisfied, that consists of three rooms indoors and a sunny bit of patio outside in the summer.

Cats that 'vote with their paws'

These are the free spirits that have very specific requirements about what they want from a home base and surrounding area. If another cat comes into the house or a dog, for example, this cat may decide that enough is enough and take it upon himself to go seeking a 'better place' that suits his needs.

'Billy-five-dinners'

Some cats like to indulge in 'opportunistic feeding' – the urge to find and eat food in places other than the predictable ones at home. 'Billy-five-dinners' eats his breakfast, waves goodbye to his loving owner and spends the rest of the day visiting various homes in the neighbourhood, vacuuming up any remaining food that has been left by the resident cats, and returning by the end of the day in time for supper. Occasionally these cats are so free with their affection that several people within the same area will swear blind they are Billy's one true owner.

What can be done?

If you worry about your cat roaming there are steps you can take to ensure that he stays predictably close to home.

- Start as you mean to go on, keep kittens indoors until after their vaccinations and neutering (at four months old)

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the International Cat Care's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For more information about these books or if you have any concerns about your own cat's behaviour please visit her website: www.vickyhalls.net



- Microchip your cat in case he does go missing (fitting an appropriate safety collar with your telephone number on is a quick form of identification but don't rely on this alone as collars are easily caught on branches and lost)
- Keep compatible individuals in the same house, ideally two related cats, to avoid the need for either to leave home if they grow to hate each other
- Create house rules early on – if your cat is to stay indoors at night then this occurs from day one
- Check out the neighbourhood – are there lots of cats around? If so, consider securing your garden to keep your cats in and other cats out
- Always provide a litter tray indoors so that your cat has somewhere safe to toilet when things get scary outside
- Give your cat plenty of opportunity to have time out away from everyone in the privacy of his own home, allow him to take control of the relationship so he doesn't feel under pressure to be sociable
- Have play sessions daily to satisfy that predatory instinct
- Fit a microchip-operated cat flap, and encourage neighbours to do so too, to prevent the temptation for your cat to snack elsewhere

Cats returning to their previous homes

Occasionally when cats go missing they have a very definite task in mind if their owners move house within a relatively short distance of their old hunting ground. They are trying to return; a journey that may traverse busy roads, railway lines

and even rivers. If you are moving within a couple of miles of your previous home then, if your cat goes missing and he was a great hunter in your last place, that's where you should start looking once you have ruled out the usual nearby sheds and garages.

If you have moved (or are planning to move) a short distance away then consider the following:

- Make sure your cat is microchipped and your address change is notified immediately
- Keep your cat indoors for a couple of weeks in the new home and feed small tasty meals three or four times a day
- Allow your cat outside first just before a mealtime
- If your cat goes missing inform your neighbours in your previous home to keep a look out
- Inform the new occupier that your cat may be on his way back
- Ask everyone *not* to feed your cat but to notify you immediately if he is seen
- If he is easy to handle ask a neighbour to pick your cat up and secure him somewhere awaiting your arrival
- Take your cat home and provide a tasty meal and plenty of predatory games with toys

I truly believe the old adage that cats *choose* to live with us and, on the whole, we need to trust them to do what they need to do outside. Thankfully, only a small minority, choose not to come home in the end. ●

