

# Understanding your cat's behaviour



**CATS PROTECTION**  
**ESSENTIAL GUIDE 9**



It is the very nature and behaviour of cats that makes them one of the UK's most popular pets today. Their independence, playfulness and curiosity are among the traits that make many cat-lovers melt. By understanding the behaviour the cat has developed to enable it to thrive in a changing world, we can learn how to best provide for our cats, meet their needs, maximise their welfare and ensure long-lasting friendships for happy cats and owners.

This leaflet explains the normal behaviour of the cat and suggests some approaches to manage some of the issues that can occasionally test the owner-cat bond. If you are concerned by any aspect of your cat's behaviour, you can look at Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Managing your cat's behaviour*, but it often helps to first consider the cat's normal behaviour, needs and motivations.

In order to understand the behaviour and needs of today's pet cat, we first need to explore its wild origins. The domestic cat shares common ancestry with the African wildcat – a shy cat originating in the Middle East which has many physical and behavioural similarities with our domestic cat and is still found today.

Changes in man's farming systems led the cat to naturally evolve to become closer to humans around 10,000 years ago. This is fairly recent 'domestication' and with relatively little human influence over the breeding of specific cats, the domestic cat still retains many of the behaviours and needs of its wild counterparts.

## African wildcat

The African wildcat lives a solitary lifestyle in a harsh terrain that has a relatively small concentration of rodent prey, so the cats are dispersed over a wide area. Each wildcat maintains a large territory but exhibits many of its normal everyday behaviours in a safe core area within this territory.

As a carnivore, the wildcat only eats meat and cannot be vegetarian. It is most active at dusk and dawn when its prey is active. Hunting episodes are frequent and tiring. Not every attempt is successful, so it has evolved to hunt before it becomes hungry. Each 'catch' is taken back to the core area where the cat can eat without threat from larger predators or rivals.

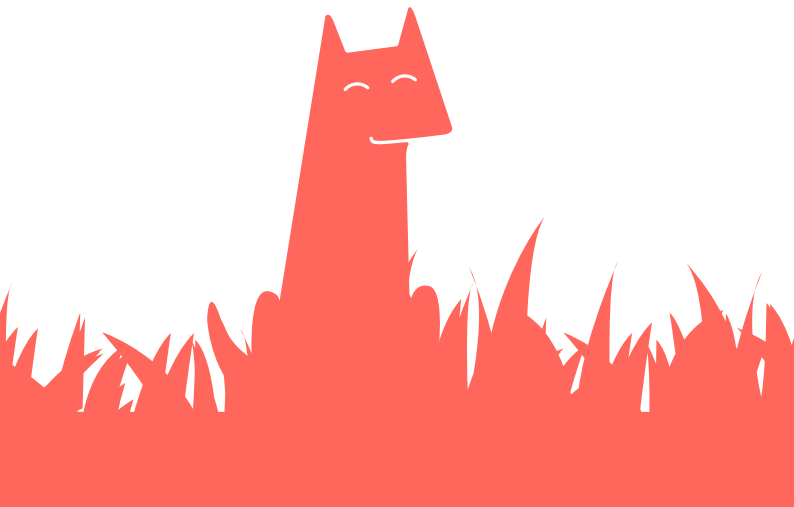
It does not use many facial expressions to communicate and leaves a scent profile to mark its territory. Scent marking serves as a way to communicate with other cats without having to come into contact with them – reducing the risk of fighting and injuries.

When faced with a stressful situation, it prefers to make an escape, after which its stress levels return to normal ie flight rather than fight.

The African wildcat needs a lot of sleep because of the energy used during hunting. It will usually choose a safe, elevated sleeping spot within its core territory. The cat rotates its sleeping area – this is most likely a means of parasite control – and will often scratch to maintain its claws when it wakes up.

A wildcat learns to dig and bury the evidence from toileting at a young age. It will choose a safe, quiet and private area towards the edge of its territory, away from sites of eating and drinking to avoid contamination. Where possible, it avoids drinking from stagnant pools and will choose a drinking source separate from where it eats and toilets – although most of a wildcat's fluid intake comes from eating rodents, which have a high water content.

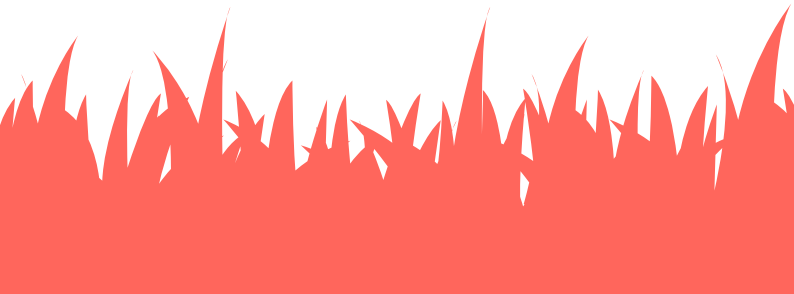
Females call when in season and because they have large territories, males will often travel long distances to find receptive females. The number of kittens born in a litter reflects the food availability, so when food sources are low, few kittens are born. Following birth, kittens need to quickly learn what is safe and normal in their environment. Surviving kittens will find their own territory with sufficient resources once old enough.



## Domestic cats

With its common ancestry, the domestic cat species shares many similarities with the African wildcat. Each cat is an individual and while all cats share some inherent needs, both genetics and previous experience will play a great part in shaping their behaviour.

Perhaps one of the most striking differences between individual cats is their sociability to people. There are two recognised groups: those that are feral – wild – and those that are non-feral – pet cats, depending on their level of fear towards people. The domestic cat needs to learn to like people during its early weeks. Positive, gentle interactions and handling by humans when kittens are between two to eight weeks of age leads to cats which usually enjoy human interaction and are friendly pets. Kittens which have not been socialised during their early weeks will generally remain fearful of people and the domestic environment and become feral cats.



## Feral cats

While some feral cats retain their solitary nature, in certain situations, feral cats can live in groups called colonies. Feral cats within a colony live in harmony with one another if they recognise the shared group scent and they are able to find sufficient resources such as food, water, toileting and sleeping areas.

They engage in social interactions such as mutual grooming and rubbing. These activities keep the 'group scent' topped up, allowing recognition. Despite living as a group, they will continue to hunt, eat and toilet alone. Feral cats within a colony tend to see off any 'stranger' cats intruding in the territory. For more information on feral cats, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Feral cats*.

## Cats as companion animals

It is important to remember that a cat's requirements are not human-based, so understanding their needs can enhance our own relationship with them. It is very rewarding to see things from their point of view to make a positive change in their welfare. Ensure you provide a stimulating and safe environment and provide your cat with opportunities to express their natural behaviour.



## Solitary

Like the African wildcat, pet cats have an inherent desire to maintain a territory as solitary hunters. However, they can live well together in some circumstances, as long as the cats perceive each other to be in the same social group and they have sufficient resources provided so there is no competition.

Many groups of cats living in the same household have not evolved naturally, but have been introduced as unrelated kittens or adults. Consequently they may not actually perceive each other to be in the same social group, but under stress will tolerate the presence of others, especially for a particularly valued resource such as food or fuss from an owner. Cats are in the same social group if they sleep touching one another and spend time rubbing and grooming each other. Cats in one social group should be provided with separate resources – eg food, water, toilet and resting areas – from those in a different social group, even if they all live in the same house. In fact, it may even be best to feed those in the same social group in different areas to avoid the risk of relationship breakdown.

Introducing a new cat should be done very slowly in the hope that they will ultimately perceive each other to be in the same social group, or at least peacefully cohabit because they have been provided with separate resources to avoid conflict and competition. Each new relationship is dependent on the individual cats and how their early encounters were managed.

Just because a cat has lived happily with a cat before, it does not mean that it will take to a new feline companion. Unfortunately there is no guarantee, even with careful management, that the introduction of unfamiliar cats will work out. There are some cats that are unlikely to ever

perceive other felines as anything but a threat and may prefer to live on their own. For more information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Cats living together*.

Many cats have learned to love the company of people and will often rub up against us for a fuss and a stroke and to place their comforting scent on us. It is a wonderful feeling when a cat chooses to engage with you. For more information on how cats interact with people, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Cats and people*.

## Hunters

Domestic cats are still programmed to hunt and this activity is still not linked to hunger. Each part of the hunting activity – the stalk, pounce, play and kill – releases feel-good hormones called endorphins. Cats need to have frequent successful 'kills' to avoid frustration and are most likely to hunt at dawn and dusk. Some cats are prolific hunters, while others catch nothing at all – it varies from individual to individual. Like their wild ancestors, those which do hunt will often bring their prey back to their home, or core area. For more information on hunting, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Indoor and outdoor cats*.

Play is an excellent outlet for cats to exhibit this natural behaviour. Younger cats will be happy to play 10 times a day or more. You can learn more in Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat*.

Older cats will love playing three or four times a day, but the type of play may need to be adapted to suit their needs and level of mobility. For more information see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Elderly cats*.



Eating can be a vulnerable activity. Try placing food bowls slightly away from the wall, so that your cat can eat with its back to it when they eat. Being able to view their surroundings can help them feel safer.

Cats in the wild spend a lot of their time on frequent hunting expeditions, catching up to 12 small rodents per day. In comparison, our pet cats are given bowls of food, so a meal doesn't take long to eat or make use of their great senses. Create interest at meal times by hiding food around the house for your cat to search out. Make a pyramid out of cardboard toilet roll tubes and hide food in the tubes, or use a puzzle ball or feeder. For more information see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Feeding and obesity*.



## Communication systems

The cat has limited visual social signals and facial expressions and so can be difficult to 'read.' Instead, it still relies on scent communication, marking its territory and leaving distant scent signals that last for some time. This allows it to communicate to other cats as well as leave signals and warnings for itself.

Cats will rub against items in the home to lay their scent which helps them feel safe and secure. It is worth bearing in mind that modern cleaning means we may be constantly removing this scent from the cat's environment, which can cause some anxiety and disorientation. Modern lifestyles also mean we bring new scents into the environment.

Cats will often spray the edges of their territory. Usually this is outdoors, but they may spray indoors – often at entry or exit points, such as windows or doorways. A cat that sprays indoors is leaving itself a warning reminder – it is indicating that something is wrong. This behaviour can be seen in any cat – male or female, whether neutered or not.

Domestic cats scratch to keep their claws in good condition and to mark their territory. A scratching post will provide exercise, claw maintenance and a focal point for your cat to express this natural behaviour – it will help protect your furniture too. Cats like to stretch and scratch after they wake up, so try placing the scratch post near their bed. A good scratching post has the following features:

- a strong sturdy base so the cat can lean against the post without it wobbling
- tall enough that the cat can stretch fully
- a vertical thread that allows the cat to scratch downwards

## Avoidance of stress and conflict

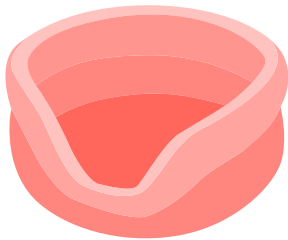
Cats are all individuals and some may be more affected by stress than others. The domestic cat still needs the opportunity to run, hide and climb when stressed. Pet cats will often find appropriate places at home – such as in a cupboard or underneath the bed – and are best not disturbed when in these sanctuaries to allow their stress levels to come down. They will only fight if there is no other option available, or they have learned from previous experiences that this has a positive outcome for them. Cats will use scent to try to avoid conflict.

It is important to always provide your cat with an easily accessible place to hide which will help to make them feel safe and secure. There are many things that can cause a cat to feel anxious or fearful: fireworks, building work in the house, unfamiliar visitors, or conflict with other cats. A hiding place can be something as simple as a cardboard box on its side, or upside down, with large holes for access. Or you could purchase an igloo style cat bed. Try not to overly fuss a cat which is showing signs of fear, as it may reinforce the fearfulness.

Cats feel safer if they can view their surroundings from a height. Provide some higher spaces for your cat to relax, such as shelves or the top of a wardrobe. Ensure the cat can access these, for example by placing a stool nearby. Extra consideration should be given to elderly cats. For more information see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Elderly cats*.

## Sleep

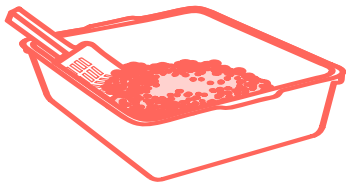
Cats usually sleep for about 16 hours a day, on and off, and often prefer to rotate their chosen sleeping area. When a cat falls asleep on our lap, we often don't realise they've drifted off and continue to stroke them. Most cats that are woken suddenly by their owner stroking them will realise what is happening. However, others can feel understandably sleepy and disorientated and may react defensively to a perceived threat. If your cat is resting on your lap, it's best to stop stroking them so that they can sleep peacefully.



## Toileting

Cats learn to associate toileting with the material used when they were a kitten and generally still prefer to use a fine grain litter. If they were only exposed to one type as a kitten, they are less likely to want to use a different litter consistency as an adult. They will dig and bury deposits and prefer to use a site away from where they eat and drink, in quiet, private areas away from other cats.

Your cat may prefer to go inside in a litter tray or outside in the garden – it varies between individuals. Even if your cat toilets outside, it's a good idea to keep a litter tray indoors for those moments when they are caught short!



It's best to have one litter tray per cat, plus one extra if possible, all in different quiet locations – especially if your cats are kept indoors. Cats don't like using dirty or soiled trays so make sure the litter tray is cleaned at least once a day.

If your cat toilets outside, provide them with their own desirable toilet area in your garden, in a secluded, sheltered area of well-dug, fine soil. Add some cat litter to encourage them to toilet there. Make sure it's dug over regularly to remain hygienic and allow the soiled material to decompose naturally.

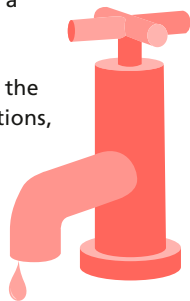
Being creatures of habit, once a cat has a preferred toileting site, they will continue to use it unless something causes them to become averse to it. A lack of privacy and problems with access or cleanliness will cause them to look for another place.

For more information, see Cat's Protection's *Essential Guide: Managing your cat's behaviour*.

## Water

Cats tend to avoid stagnant pools and often prefer a moving water source away from food bowls and litter trays.

They also like wide brimmed containers with a reflective surface. Some cats choose to drink from a natural water source outside because they dislike the taste of chlorinated water or the taint from a plastic bowl. Even in these situations, fresh water should still always be available indoors in case their outdoor source dries up or becomes inaccessible. Others prefer a dripping tap, or to dip their paw into the water and drink off their paw.



# Reproduction

Cats can become sexually active from four months of age. Females will call when in season and with large territory sizes, males will travel long distances to find receptive females. With the provision of food and shelter and other key resources, cats can be prolific breeders and one female cat – queen – and her offspring can be responsible for 20,000 kittens in just five years.

Any kittens born need to experience as many positive experiences as possible during their first two to eight weeks of age for them to consider these safe and normal in future, enabling them to become happy pets. Cats Protection recommends neutering by around four months of age to prevent unwanted litters.

# Individuals

Individual cats have different characters and this contributes to their appeal. Their differences are due to a variety of different factors and are influenced by:

- genetics
- stress levels of the mother when pregnant
- learning during the early part of life, including:
  - experiences during their socialisation period
  - behaviour learned from siblings – such as how to play
  - behaviour learned from the mother – eg how to deal with frustration, such as during weaning
- later learning experiences, including:
  - a cat developing an association between its own behaviour and the consequence of that behaviour. For example, miaowing leads to my owner letting me in, so I will miaow when I want to be let in

- a cat developing an association between something that originally meant nothing to it and associating it with meaning something new. For example, a cat learns that the sound of a tin opener means they are about to be fed, so will come running when they hear the tin opener being taken out of a drawer
- medical conditions
- current environment

## The indoor life

Many cats will enjoy going outside for part of the day and this gives them the opportunity to investigate new things and make use of their fantastic senses. It also provides mental stimulation and reduces stress. If you are keeping cats indoors, extra care is needed to avoid boredom, frustration or the development of behaviour problems – see Cats Protection’s *Essential Guide: Indoor and outdoor cats*.

## Interacting with your cat and body language

Cats like quite brief, low intensity but frequent interactions. When cats that get along greet each other, it tends to be a brief head rub. Unfortunately, humans are the opposite! Our interactions are generally less frequent, but when we have them, they are generally of high intensity and prolonged. This can sometimes be a source of confusion between cats and their owners.

Cats can get quite stimulated or excited when they are playing or in ‘hunting mode’ and it’s generally not advisable to touch any cat in this state. Even when touching a calm, relaxed cat,

there are many places on the body that are quite vulnerable or sensitive. While there are always exceptions, as a general rule, many cats don't like to be touched in these places:

- belly – which for some cats can include their sides and chest
- paws
- under legs – ie armpits
- legs – trousers – back legs
- stroking the fur against the normal direction
- bottom half of back – particularly if stiff or painful
- base of tail
- genital area

Learning to understand your cat by reading their body language is a fascinating part of owning a cat and it can improve the relationship between you. Cats can be very subtle in their body language and can be difficult to 'read' as they have not evolved the many visual communication signals that are seen in social species, like dogs. Spend time watching your cat – see how they move and interact with their environment, their facial expressions, body postures and vocalisations in different situations – and you can start to build a picture of how your cat is feeling. Here are a few common body postures to give you clues about your cat's mood:

**Remember, owners have a legal duty of care to provide for their cat's needs, which includes the need to express normal behaviour – see *Cats Protection's Essential Guide: Cats and the law*.**



Body language	Cat's mood	How to interact with your cat
<p>Tail up and relaxed, ears facing forwards, often walking towards you.</p>	<p>Relaxed, friendly cat showing greeting behaviour.</p>	<p>Let them sniff your hand and if you are familiar with the cat, you may want to stroke their head and along their back.</p>
<p>Often starts with a tail up greeting, rubs its head and side of their body around your legs and sometimes may roll over onto their side to show their belly.</p>	<p>Relaxed, friendly cat showing greeting behaviour, often seen after a period of separation.</p>	<p>Cats that roll on to their side or back and expose their belly are communicating that they feel relaxed enough in the person's presence to expose such a vulnerable area. The best response is to verbally acknowledge the cat's greeting, rather than stroke or tickle their tummy.</p>

Body language	Cat's mood	How to interact with your cat
<p>Lying outstretched on their side with their paws stretched out in front of them, often with a sleepy look on their face as their eyes may be half closed or blinking.</p>	<p>Relaxed and contented cat. Some cats may sleep in this position, especially if they have found a sunny spot!</p>	<p>If they are awake, let them sniff your hand and then give them a brief rub on the head. If they look sleepy, then leave them to get some rest.</p>
<p>In a crouched position with tail tucked around or under their body and muscles tense. Their eyes may be darting about and ears back or moving listening to sounds around them.</p>	<p>Cat is anxious and may be looking for a place to hide, to run away and get up high.</p>	<p>Make sure they have an escape route and somewhere that they can hide and get up high if they want to. It is best to leave them alone and not try to interact with them.</p>

Body language	Cat's mood	How to interact with your cat
<p>In the 'Halloween cat' stance with an arched back, bushy tail and fur standing up to make themselves look bigger. Their eyes look huge as their pupils are dilated and ears are flattened against their head.</p>	<p>Very fearful cat that feels threatened or cannot escape. They may hiss or spit as a warning to stay back. Be careful as they may attack defensively as a last resort.</p>	<p>Make sure they have an escape route and a hiding place or a high spot to retreat to. Do not approach or touch a cat that is feeling fearful.</p>

For further information, please see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Managing your cat's behaviour*.

### Learn more about your cat online!

Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats' origins and their behaviour within our homes. <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo>

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit [www.cats.org.uk](http://www.cats.org.uk) or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

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