



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor

Can kitty kleptomaniacs go straight? **Vicky Halls** investigates...

Three gardening gloves, a seed packet and a gentleman's toupee." Not the sort of thing you expect to find under the bed when you are spring cleaning but, apparently, it does happen.

Sarah was revealing this unexpected find when I visited her to discuss her Siamese cat, Bertrand. He was a lively and inquisitive three year old who lived with her in a small, first-floor flat in London. He had outdoor access through a cat flap in the back door during the day when Sarah was at work and everything seemed fine until one day when she found him playing with something odd. When she managed to wrestle it from him she found a rather battered and chewed *Barbie* doll. She dismissed the incident at the time as a bizarre one off, but became increasingly alarmed when, after a particularly vigorous session with the vacuum cleaner, she found the aforementioned stash of assorted gardening paraphernalia – and a wig – under her bed. It was only when Bertrand came into the kitchen one day from the garden with a small makeup brush in his mouth that the penny began to drop.

Secret stash

It appeared that Bertrand was 'stealing' random objects and returning them to his 'den' – the flat – to hoard them in his secret place. The drive to stash was the key as he never returned to retrieve any of the items that he was storing. I explained to Sarah that this is a relatively common problem and the culprits are often referred to as burglars, magpies or even kleptomaniacs in the popular press when specific extreme cases come to light. The items brought back to the home vary enormously but soft toys, socks and underwear are common. Other objects including jewellery, leather items, pens, rubber bands, leaves, twigs and worms, acquired

from adjoining gardens and houses, are often hoarded in special places or left beside food bowls. Some cats will call out as they come into the house with their booty; others may be far more secretive.

The motivation is generally considered to be an example of predatory behaviour, albeit misdirected, that reflects the individual's idiosyncratic preferences. It is easy to forget sometimes that our beloved, cuddly cats are actually highly evolved predators. Their feral cousins, with a very different lifestyle, give us a better insight into the natural behaviour of the species. They hunt to survive, working at it for up to half of a 24-hour period, eating the spoils of their labour little and often. Cats will eat prey as small as insects or as large as young rabbits, depending on what's available and what they can catch, the feral always choosing the option that produces the maximum calories for the minimum effort. An opportunistic approach to feeding is an essential strategy when hunting for survival as the next meal is never certain.

Cats hunt using two basic strategies. The first, referred to as 'mobile' or 'stalk, run, pounce' requires the cat to actively search and detect prey visually. The second strategy, referred to as 'stationary, sit, wait' or 'ambush' involves waiting motionless adjacent to a burrow – or place where prey has previously been sighted – ready to pounce when it appears. The cat will often 'play' with the prey, once caught and toss it from paw to paw to ensure it is stunned, afterwards killing it instantly with a bite to the back of the neck. The cat then consumes it immediately, caches it in a safe spot to eat later or carries it back to its den, particularly if it is female with young to feed. If you now imagine a *Barbie* doll being mistaken for a young rabbit you are beginning to understand Bertrand's motivation.

Predatory behaviour

The success of predatory behaviour in adulthood in the feral cat is influenced by skills acquired by observing the mother and having access to plenty of prey at a young age. Most ferals grow to become competent predators, albeit with particular preferences for the type of prey they kill. In the case of the average domestic cat, even without such significant early experiences, he too will instinctively hunt with varying success. My own hand-reared cat, Annie, with no maternal tutor, became a prolific

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hunter of small rodents. Bink, on the other hand, acquired as a young semi-feral kitten, has never caught anything in all her 16 years despite her best efforts. Bertrand lies somewhere in between the two; he hunts successfully yet has a preference for an eclectic mix of objects with no nutritional value!

Once we had established that Bertrand was hunting and caching his inedible treasures, it was time to decide whether or not this was actually a behaviour that needed to stop. We both fully accepted that it had potential to cause conflict with the neighbours, but was it a problem otherwise? The Siamese is particularly prone to developing a habit referred to as 'wool eating'. This is a form of pica – the consumption of non-nutritious material – that usually involves the cat chewing and swallowing wool and often extending the habit to other substances over time. Sufferers can be highly motivated to consume these materials and, if deprived of them at home, can look elsewhere to satisfy their cravings. Fortunately, there had never been any evidence that Bertrand was affected in this way so we were able to rule that out.

We discussed at some length the need to enrich his home environment but it was quite apparent that the act of searching for objects in his territory was part of the motivation and providing similar items at home did not have the same attraction. Sarah did, however, introduce some measures in and around the home that proved successful – see tips to the right. She was also keen to return the items to their respective owners so she posted a leaflet to everyone nearby explaining Bertrand's unusual inclination and encouraging her neighbours to come forward to collect their lost property. As far as I am aware, only *Barbie* and the makeup brush – which turned out to be a 'high tech' dust remover for electronic equipment – were ever claimed.

Tips for kitty kleptomaniacs

- Carry out a little detective work: speak to neighbours and establish the area that constitutes your cat's territory. This will enable you to target leaflets regarding 'found' items
- If your cat wears a collar, ensure it has a safe, quick-release buckle – put a bell on it or anything noisy that will signal to your neighbours that he's nearby and on the lookout
- Have regular short but frequent play sessions at home to maintain his interest
- Feed cat biscuits in puzzle feeders at home to introduce some challenge to the acquisition of his meals. Feeding devices can now be purchased that are suitable for wet food too!
- Place random small objects in your own garden at some distance from the home, ideally near his regular routes and pathways, to encourage him to satisfy his habit in a controlled way
- Seek veterinary advice and a referral to a pet behaviour counsellor if your cat is consuming the inedible objects that he finds
- If his behaviour is particularly evident at a specific time of day, for example dusk, then it may be useful to confine him during this period and provide extra stimulation and entertainment indoors ●

Photos: Gloves – 123rf.com/Chris Hayer; Cat – 123rf.com/Anton Hlushchenko

