

Blind faith

Petra Coghlin gets a glimpse into the joy that blind cats can bring

Caring for a blind cat can be a particularly rewarding and mutually beneficial experience. Many owners find a disability creates a special relationship built on trust and results in a stronger bond between human and cat.

Blindness does not have to mean a cat has a reduced quality of life: cats are adaptable and can still lead happy, fulfilling lives despite visual impairment. They learn to cope by memorising their territory and by honing their other senses of smell, hearing and touch. The latter sense is particularly well-developed in cats as their whiskers are sensitive enough to sense tiny movements in the air.

Staff at our branches and adoption centres are used to dealing with blind cats and kittens. Louise Bradbury from Exeter Axhayes Adoption Centre says: "It's often the case that people don't notice their cats losing their sight as they adapt

so well." Sue Dobbs from Bridgend Adoption Centre recalls a blind kitten in their care. "Sarah was a little sweetie, she adapted really well to being blind. We used to talk to her a lot and move slowly around her so we didn't startle her but her other senses must have been very well developed because she was always up and out of the bed before we even spoke to her."

Causes of blindness

Blindness can come on suddenly or slowly and the latter is easier for cat to cope with as he can acclimatise gradually.

Causes of blindness are varied and include feline herpesvirus, high blood pressure, cataracts, trauma, glaucoma, corneal ulceration, tumours, retinal degeneration, insufficient oxygen and birth defects. Tain Branch volunteer, Jean Jardine adopted a cat whose sight was affected by the latter cause. "Gemma doesn't have a right eye as it never fully formed in the womb," Jean explains, "The vets thought that inbreeding could have led to her deformity."

Tell-tale signs

Certain changes to your cat's normal behaviour and appearance may indicate they have lost their eyesight. The cat may vocalise more and appear disorientated or just seem quieter and sleep more. He may start to move differently, crouching close to the ground, walking cautiously with a lowered head, or moving his head up and down to judge distance. You might notice him walking around rather than through rooms, bumping into newly-moved objects and jumping less frequently or more slowly.

There may also be visible changes to the eyes: they may look unusually reflective and shiny and take on a white or red appearance, and the pupils may remain large irrespective of light.

Heather Watt from the Shetland Branch describes the changes she observed in her rescued Turkish Van Cookie when she lost her sight. "I initially noticed she had a problem with her vision as she seemed to misjudge height when jumping up on things and her pupils reacted very slowly and at different rates to light and stimuli.

"The eye specialist said she had a compressed optic nerve which prevents information from her eyes transmitting to her brain properly. He described it as akin to seeing through frosted glass."

Sarah of Bridgend exuding the ahhh factor





Cookie enjoying an alfresco activity

Helping the cat to adjust and cope

It is crucial to get the cat checked by a vet, both initially and regularly, to see whether treatment is appropriate and to monitor changes. It is particularly important to microchip a blind cat as they are more likely to get lost than a sighted cat. You could also put a quick release collar on with a tag reading 'I am blind' to alert people to the condition.

Initial confinement to one room and gradually increasing the space available can help the cat to get his bearings. Liz Grant from Outer Aberdeen & District Branch took in an extremely underweight stray blind cat and her vet advised her to confine him for a while in a cage so he couldn't get disorientated and scared. Liz says: "The first three days he just slept and slept, would eat from my fingers then go back to sleep. Very quickly Beau, as we named him, started to gain weight and blossom. What a charmer! He chatted to you, purred and wanted to be fussed over."

As blind cats rely heavily on sound, they should not be placed in a noisy environment. Avoid loud noises such as shouting and parties, and move the cat to a quiet room if vacuuming. It is also important to be mindful of potential dangers such as toilet seats which are left up, fireplaces, windows, doors and balconies.

Stability spells security

As the owner of a blind cat, Mandy Risino notes how important it is to avoid moving furniture around and to keep food, water, litter trays and scratching posts in the same place so the cat knows where to find essential resources. Mandy adopted Willow from Downham Market Adoption Centre a few years ago. Willow is blind from a deteriorative genetic disease and can only see very bright light.

"Initially Willow was very focused in orienting herself in her new surroundings. But once she had the house 'mapped' on her internal sat nav she became a very chilled cat, very happy to climb onto – and make hair-raising leaps off – furniture and beds.

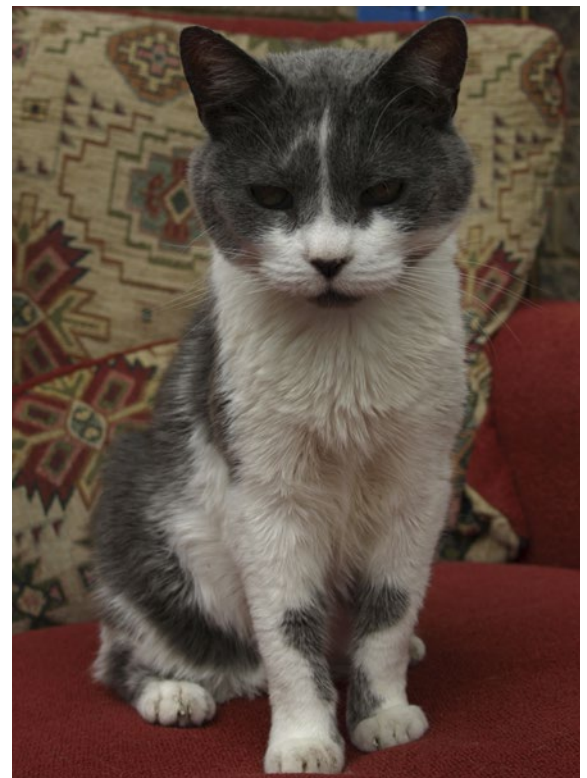
"She knows exactly where lunch will be served and where the litter trays are and doesn't like it at all if these things alter – especially if this leaves her standing in her water bowl in deep surprise! She knows all the footpaths through the house and gets fed up if forgetful

The stately Willow

people leave shopping bags in the way as she crashes into them unexpectedly.

"It is a privilege to have Willow with us; she brightens every day and is a very trusting and loving cat."

A litter tray should be provided inside, even if the cat can go outside, so he has a safe place to toilet. The smell also provides a useful point of reference for the cat; if he gets disorientated it can be helpful to place him next to the tray so he can work out his location from the familiar smell. Naturally, it should be kept clean so as not to discourage use. ▶



Environmental enrichment

Mental and physical stimulation is beneficial to the cat's well-being. Inside the house, ramps or low stools could be provided to enable a cat to access a favourite place like a sofa or bed, and a cat activity centre could be available to climb. Cat nip is also a great favourite with many cats.

Mandy's cat Willow especially likes to play with jingly toys, and sticks run along the floor so she can hear where they are and judge when and where to pounce.

It can also be enjoyable for cats to go outside in a safe, enclosed garden without any hazards such as open water. Cynthia Worman from the Northampton Branch has two stunning young rescue cats, Daisy and Poppy, who lost their sight due to progressive retinal atrophy.

Cynthia describes how much the two love the great outdoors: "We took them out in harnesses in the garden – it was such a joy to watch their little faces taking in all the noises and movements. Then we bought them collars with bells on so we could hear them. They only go

in the garden when we are at home and they are checked on regularly. The garden is cat proof so they don't get out. They jump, climb, run around and play just like sighted cats."

Poppy (left) and Daisy enjoying the garden



Photo: Keng-Hay Wong photography

Perfect indoor pets

As visually-impaired felines need to have an indoor-only home or access to a completely secure garden, they can make perfect pets for people who don't have access to outside space.

Starling and Kingfisher are a pair of gorgeous kittens that came to the National Cat Adoption Centre from a multi-cat household in which cat flu resulted in irreparable damage to their eyes. Kingfisher lost the sight in one eye, while Starling can now only make out shadows.

Despite their disabilities, they are extremely affectionate and just as lively and playful as fully sighted kittens. As Deputy Manager Tania Marsh says: "Blind kittens would be ideal for people looking for younger indoor-only pets without the likelihood of ongoing vet costs".

Despite the reduction or total loss of one of their main senses, visually impaired cats are incredibly resilient and able to live happy, fulfilling lives. So whether you're already learning to cope with your cat losing his sight, or perhaps debating about whether to adopt one, these cats can bring just as much joy as sighted felines and are likely to develop a particularly strong bond with a considerate owner which can be hugely satisfying and rewarding. ●

Kingfisher and Starling waiting to find their forever home



Photo: Martin Dewhurst photography