

The cat that walked by himself



Gemma Lovegrove investigates just how independent cats are

As typified in Kipling's *Just So Stories*, cats are often considered to be independent and able to look after themselves. While cats are pretty good at surviving without us, they do have needs. If these aren't met, it can lead to stress and behavioural problems. By looking at the domestic cat's ancestry, all should become clear!

Solitary

Domestic cats share common ancestry with the African Wildcat – a species still found today. The African Wildcat lives in the savannah with a sparse concentration of prey, so individuals are well-dispersed and solitary to avoid competition for the small amounts of available food.

Like their ancestors, domestic cats want to maintain an independent territory and are generally happy to live without other cats for company. In fact, many cats living together under the same roof only tolerate the presence of others to

gain access to resources such as food, water, toileting areas and outdoor access. This can result in anxiety and chronic stress, which is not always obvious – especially as cats often spend time together to access the resource.

The introduction of a new cat to existing cats can cause stress for both parties, and if an appropriate, gradual scent-sharing integration programme is not followed, may lead to a behavioural problem such as spraying or inappropriate toileting.

Multi-cat households can be harmonious. If the cats are carefully introduced and each one has the ability to access separate and sufficient resources without having to interact with any other cat, or face other potentially stressful situation – such as children, dogs, noisy household appliances – in other words they are able to choose to an independent life if they wish. Cats which sleep touching and spend time grooming or rubbing against each other are likely to be in the same social group. ▶

Photo: istockphoto.com/Angelika



Spotting prey

Hunter

African Wildcats hunt alone for several hours a day and eat many small rodent-sized prey items. Not every attempt is successful so they will hunt before they are hungry to ensure they catch enough food. They are mostly active at dawn and dusk when their prey is most active.

Because hunting is not hunger driven, domestic cats are still highly motivated to hunt and need to perform successful 'kills' to avoid frustration and release endorphins. They are drawn to movement, so interactive play with toys that mimic their prey helps cats to exhibit this natural behaviour and may reduce the desire to seek out such behaviour elsewhere.

The domestic cat's digestive system is also suited to frequent small meals. Dry food provided in feeding balls or scattered around the house provides cats with the opportunity to spend more of their day seeking out their meal.

Unfortunately for their owners, domestic cats, like their descendants, are still most active at dawn and dusk!

Communication

Cats are often thought of as aloof, but because solitary species don't need to communicate with others on a regular basis, cats haven't developed the complex muscles required to make a variety of facial expressions. Instead, they use long-lasting scent messages, allowing them to communicate with other cats remotely. These messages, left by rubbing, spraying urine and scratching, enable them to maintain a territory without coming into direct conflict with other cats.

Domestic cats often rub facial pheromones around the house to indicate a familiar 'safe zone' and spray or scratch the edges of their territory. They may spray indoors if they feel they need to indicate an area of caution. Cats that live in the same social group will maintain their bond by keeping

Territory marking

a common scent profile through frequent rubbing sessions. Household cleaning and new scents, such as shopping or new furniture, may cause anxiety.

African Wildcats rarely communicate vocally, but many domestic cats quickly learn that maiows, trills and chirrups lead to feeding or attention so learn to 'talk' more regularly!

Avoidance of stress and conflict

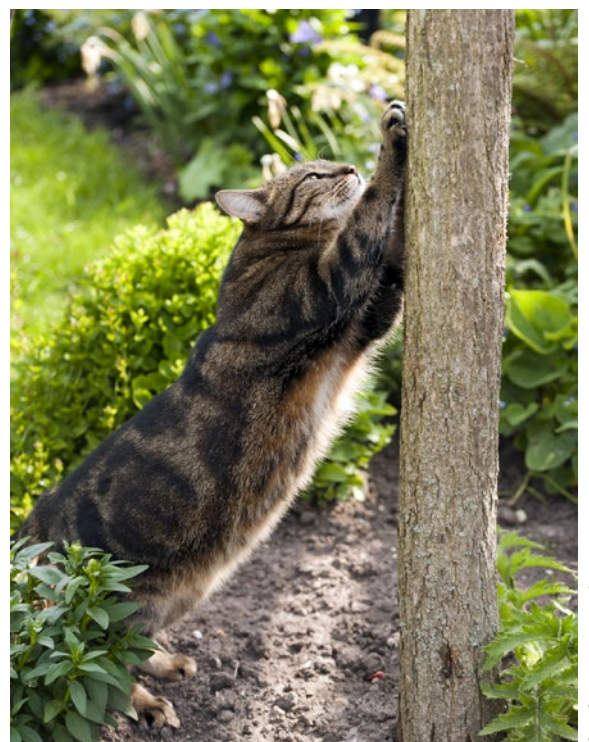
African Wildcats are small predators and rely on staying fit for survival. As a solitary animal, they cannot rely on others in their group to hunt for them if they are injured. They would much rather avoid conflict by running, climbing or hiding than staying to fight.

Providing domestic cats with places to hide or get up high can help them to cope with stressful situations. When cats are aggressive, it is sometimes because they are anxious or fearful but do not have the option to run away.

Sleep

African Wildcats need plenty of sleep to replenish their energy reserves, enabling them to hunt whenever they detect prey. They will look for a safe place within their territory and rotate the spot to help keep parasite levels low. They often scratch when they wake up to stretch their muscles and to maintain their claws.

Although domestic cats have food provided for them, instinct still tells them to conserve energy to ensure survival. It is a good idea to provide cats with a scratching post next to their sleeping area. If it is tall enough for cats to stretch to full height, sturdy enough for them to lean into and in the correct location, it is likely they will use this for scratching, rather than furniture or carpet!





Toileting

Toileting is a vulnerable activity for an African Wildcat, so they choose a safe and private location within their territory. They steer clear of toileting near to areas in which they eat and drink to avoid contamination of their food and water and they bury their deposits in the sand, maybe to elude detection by prey or predators.

Domestic cats also prefer to toilet in a safe and private location, away from their food and water source. Cats generally like a fine sandy substrate with enough depth to be able to bury their deposits. A kitten which always used the same litter is more likely to refuse to use a different litter material later in life, than one that is used to a variety of substrates as a kitten.

Water

African Wildcats prefer to drink from a moving water source than a stagnant pool. They will drink in an alternative location to their sites of eating and toileting to avoid contamination from gut contents of prey, or their own faeces.

Domestic cats often also prefer moving water, and will often drink more if their water source is away from their food source and toileting area. Cats generally prefer wide brimmed ceramic or glass containers that don't touch the whiskers. Plastic or metal bowls can sometimes taint the water.

Cats in a rescue environment

Although a cat in a pen may look content, being in care can actually be very stressful. Cats are surrounded by the sights, scents and sounds of strange cats and are unable to exhibit their natural hunting behaviour. Cats lose all of their familiar scents when entering the new environment and cleaning and disinfection regimes which are essential for disease control remove their scent on a daily basis. Cats in care often don't have the option to rotate their

A safe place to toilet

sleeping area, or to eat, drink and toilet in different locations.

Cats Protection provides barriers between pens so cats do not come face to face, provides places to hide, climb and rest up high, and uses two beds in the pen, allowing alternate beds with a familiar scent to be left behind while the other is washed. Cats are also provided with interactive toys to allow them to exhibit some hunting behaviour.

However, the best way to help unwanted cats is to stop them coming into rescue care in the first place. There are too many cats in the UK for the number of homes available, so please consider rehoming a rescue cat and encourage neutering before puberty at about four months old to prevent unplanned litters.

From the Savannah to the sofa, the cat remains true to its ancestral roots. Despite our domestic cat's show of aloofness and independence, if his basic needs are carefully noted and adjusted for this will allow for greater confidence and contentment. ●



Waiting for a home