

## The Natural Behavior of Cats

Our topics for this week include cat:

- **Body language**
- **Vocalizations**
- **Behavior modifications caused by odors**

Feral and domesticated cats are highly social, nocturnal, territorial, semi-arboreal, solitary predators. They prefer to sleep 16-18 hours a day. Females are more social than males.

### **Body Language**

A relaxed attitude is demonstrated by the cat lying on one side or sitting while its tail moves slowly. A cat's tail hangs down if walking with a relaxed attitude. Kneading of soft surfaces is a sign of contentment. Kneading is also one of the methods that cats mark their territory or possessions. When inquisitive or greeting an unthreatening animal or human, a cat's tail is carried up.

A cat on alert is characterized by assuming a frozen sitting or lying posture, rapid flicking of the tail, and dilated pupils. Walking tiptoe with head down is aggressive posture. Aggressive body language also includes slight piloerection on back and ears erect but swiveled to the side or back against the cat's neck.

Fear is exemplified by attempts to hide, flattened ears, crouching, arching the back, salivation, and spitting, and dilated pupils.

Cats will play fight to determine social rank. A common technique is to lay on a side with their abdomen exposed and head up. An approach may trigger a scratch or bite.

This type of aggression may be directed toward a handler when he tries to pet a cat's abdomen. Efforts to pet a strange cat's abdomen should be avoided even if the cat seems to be inviting it.

### **Vocalizations**

Purring is a sign of contentment. Cats will often chatter their teeth, also called chirrup, if they are excited by the sight of prey. Meows are to call the attention of other cats or their handler.

### **Marking Territory**

Cats instinctively scratch objects in their territory to mark their territory, stretch their muscles, and clean and sharpen their nails. Soft wood is preferred. Scratch marks are a visual marker, but pheromones from the cat's paws also provide an olfactory marker.

Both males and females will mark territory by spraying urine. Males spray to mark territory; females spray while in heat to attract males.

Urine spraying of territorial objects is intensified with the introduction of a rival cat, and territorial aggression is often triggered by another cat's odor.

Clean (deodorized) cat handling jackets should be worn when handling an aggressive cat to avoid a territorial aggression response.

Cats rub with their cheeks (called bunting) when objects stimulate a gape or when a subordinate greets a dominant cat. Scent glands next to their mouths produce chemicals that are smeared on objects, and handlers, that the cat claims as its own by facial marking.

### **Cat Aggressiveness**

Most domestic cats are inherently friendly. A few cats are always ill-tempered. If they are in good health, all are agile, extremely quick, and capable of causing serious injuries to handlers. Minimal restraint for the procedure to be done is the best means of handling cats.

The most frequently reported behavior problem of cats is aggression toward its owner. Most often, the cause is poor socialization of the cat as a kitten and poor handling techniques of owners, in particular, excessive restraint and rough play.

Cat bites are more common in veterinarians and veterinary technicians than dog bites. Aggressively defensive cats do not pose a risk to human life; however, they can inflict serious injuries that may lead to impaired use of hands or loss of vision.

Their first line of defense is their front claws. Besides causing painful injuries to arms and hands, cats will use their claws to strike at an opponent's eyes.

Even superficial scratches can introduce bacteria, such as the bacteria for Cat Scratch Disease or a subcutaneous fungus called *Sporotrichum*.

Lab or clinic coats with long sleeves should be worn when handling cats as a means of protecting against cat scratches. Back claws are a source of injury to handlers when holding a cat near the handler's body if the cat attempts to escape.

Cats bite very quickly and let go quickly. They then will bite quickly again if the threat does not retreat. The bites are deep penetrating wounds that can injure and infect joint capsules, tendon sheaths, and bones, particularly of the hands. Permanent disabilities of the hand can result from cat bites. Socialization with humans involves handling and playing with cats but play should not involve using hands as simulated prey. "Fishing" play with cats using a rod, string, and feathered object is much safer.

Domestic cats are very independent, especially if threatened. Their first reaction to a threat is to run and hide with no regard to where other cats are running or to other potentially dangerous things going on in the same area. In other words, cats run first and think later. Once hidden as well as they can, they often will issue warnings (low rumbling growls, hisses, and rapid strike and retreat) to threats that continue to approach.

Cats telegraph their aggression more consistently than do dogs. A dominance aggressive cat may do little cowering or hissing before striking, but they will have a fixed stare toward their opponent, dilated eyes, and their ears will be pulled back. They will stand confidently. Their

tail will move back and forth to the sides with a flicking movement at the end of the tail. Their hair on the back will be raised, and their whiskers are elevated to a position where they stick straight out to the sides.

Fearful aggressive cats are more vocal and will flattened their ears and arch their back before striking usually from a crouching position. They do not stare directly at the opponent and may present their side to what they perceive as danger.

### **Socialization**

Cats that are socialized to people have less resistance to being handled and restrained. As a result, they are safer from self-inflicted or inadvertent injury from attempted escapes when being handled.

Kittens should be socialized to other animals and humans outside the immediate family during the sensitive period for cats of two to seven weeks of age.

Inter-cat socialization is particularly important during 9 to 14 weeks of age. It is during this period that their focus shifts from social play to predatory hunting practice.

Adult social maturity occurs by 36 to 48 months of age.

### **Indoors Should be the Primary Containment of Cats**

Cats should be confined indoors or in appropriate outdoor containments, such as catios/screened porches or mesh exercise tunnels.

Disadvantages of Cats Free-Roaming Outdoors:

- Exposure to infectious diseases, including rabies, feline leukemia virus, feline immunodeficiency virus, feline rhinotracheitis virus, etc.
- External and internal parasites
- Being stolen
- Accidental or malicious injury from cars or trucks, other cats, dogs, and wildlife, including coyotes, foxes, alligators, cougars, and large raptors.

### **Seque**

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Cats demonstrate their mental state using body language**
- 2. Their first line of defense if fleeing or hiding are not options is striking with their claws**
- 3. Kittens should be socialized by gentle handling during the first 2 to 7 weeks**

More information on animal handling can be found in my recent books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 150 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.