



Paw Prints

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Columnist

Unraveling the mysterious behavior of felines

Cats are the world's most popular pets, outnumbering dogs by as many as three to one according to the Humane Society of the United States.

This popularity can be attributed to the fact that cats are affectionate and pretty self-reliant.

Many people still consider felines a mystery. To others, understanding a cat is simply a matter of paying attention, watching her body language and responding accordingly.

As you already know, communication is the key to a healthy relationship.

For first-time cat pet parents, understanding your kitty's needs may seem as puzzling as the Great Sphinx. Cats lack the facial expressiveness of dogs, they're generally quieter, and their behaviors can be harder to interpret.

Cats and humans go back

a long way, and according to cat behaviorist John Bradshaw, director of the Anthrozoology Institute at the University Of Bristol School Of Clinical Veterinary Science in Britain, DNA evidence identifies the pet cat's ancestor as the Arabian wildcat *Felis silvestris lybica* and places its origins between 10,000 and 15,000 years ago in the Middle East.

It is likely that the first people to tame wildcats were the Natufians, who inhabited the Levant, a region in the Eastern Mediterranean where Lebanon now lies, from 13,000 to 10,000 years ago and are widely regarded as the inventors of agriculture. People who harvest grain usually end up with a pest: a grain-loving mouse. The Natufians most probably encouraged the wildcats to hang around. So they were able to adapt to a human environment while retaining their essential wildness.

Cats' appealing features, like soft fur and the ability to become affectionate toward humans, led them to domestication, but with three paws still firmly planted in the wild. In contrast to almost every other domestic animal, cats retain remarkable control over their own lives.

Cats can be very affectionate, but they are choosy. This stems from their evolutionary past: Wildcats are largely solitary and regard most other cats as rivals. However, domestication forced the cat into becoming more of a social creature forming bonds with people



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Good communication may show your cat actually does care about you. Maybe.

and other cats, although retaining much of their independent nature.

At the earliest stages of domestication, cats needed humans to protect and feed them when mice were in short supply. The cats that thrived were those that were able to reward people with their company; yet cats are not born attached to people.

If you've been a pet parent to a cat, you know how special these animals are and how well they bond with people, but they don't like just anyone and everyone. Usually they choose one person to bond with.

Whether you have a chatty catty or a strong, silent type, learning to decipher your cat's signals will lead to a much better understanding of Kitty's emotions and needs. Start by paying attention to her vocalizations, body postures and daily routines.

Here are a few examples of cat vocalizations and body language explained:

- If Kitty is growling, hissing, and spitting that she's annoyed — but it can also mean that she is in a defense mode and very frightened or in pain.

- If your feline is healthy, most likely when she is purring it means she really enjoys your company; it is a display of affection. And if Kitty starts licking or grooming you, that is an added bonus display of affection!

- Watching the position of your cat's tail is a great way to decipher how a cat is feeling.

According to certified cat behaviorist consultant Marilyn Krieger, when your feline friend's tail is up, it is a sign of a happy, cheerful cat that is most likely approachable. If you see your cat's tail down, it may indicate that she is scared or threatened.

And unlike a dog, when you see your cat wagging her tail, watch out because she is agitated and should be left alone.

- If you notice your cat slowly blinking her eyes while you are petting her or just near her, it indicates that your feline friend feels safe, comfortable, and trusts you.

Whether your cat talks all day or is a feline of few words, becoming more in tune with Kitty can enhance your relationship with her and give you a glimpse of life from another perspective. And since domestic cats have spent thousands of years cultivating the meow to better communicate with their human friends, it's only fair that we pay attention.

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