

Hey You, Get Off of My Cloud!

Keeping the peace in a multi-cat household

BY ARNA COHEN

For 11 years, everything was copacetic in Marrakech and Samsara's world. Together from kittenhood, the sisters loved cuddling, playing with mouse toys, and "singing" in typical Siamese style.

But two years ago, their lives changed dramatically when their owner committed a crime, at least in their eyes: She brought home another cat.

"When I adopted Colette, I would say I adopted a good year's worth of hell," says Carol Zytnek of the then 4-year-old ragdoll mix's uneasy transition into her New York City apartment. The sisters blocked access to the litter box and relentlessly stalked the younger, larger feline. It's not that Colette wasn't a nice cat. But she'd intruded upon their territory—a violation of kitty law.

Turf battles in the feline universe are legendary. Internet videos showcase cats with the moxie to face down animals many times their size—dogs, bears, even alligators (we won't talk about the wimpy kitty terrorized by a turtle).

In spite of this reputation, Zytnek was undeterred. After several months of patience, intensive play sessions, and cat calming sprays, she negotiated a peace treaty. A year after Colette's arrival, the Siamese extended the ultimate olive branch—they allowed her into their kingdom, the bedroom.

Attaining that type of kitty contentment involves more than just plunking cats down into your domain and hoping for the best. Whether you're thinking about adopting another feline or already have a kitty crowd, understanding how cats see the world will help you prevent mild skirmishes from escalating into all-out war.

Give Me Some Space

Cats who feel at home send a strong statement—"I own this place"—by walking into a room and rubbing up against people, scratch-



ing a post, or heading to the litter box, says Redondo Beach, Calif.-based feline behavior consultant Jackson Galaxy. Less confident kitties have another way of spreading the message, he says: "If they walk into a room surrounded by other cats and go, 'I own this, right? Right? Right?,' then they'll pee on stuff, because they're saying the same thing in an anxious way."

To provide elbow room, says Galaxy, spread out territorial identifiers such as bowls, litter boxes, beds, and scratching posts—things that cats "can walk by, look at, smell, and say, 'This belongs to me.'" Clustering these items may be more convenient, but it squeezes territorial significance into small areas, Galaxy explains, causing competition that can trigger aggression and anxiety.

Higher Ground

A TV personality (he hosts the show *My Cat From Hell* on Animal Planet) and celebrity among feline aficionados, Galaxy classifies cats as "tree dwellers" or "bush dwellers,"

Beyond the Shelter will present stories for animal lovers outside of brick-and-mortar facilities—great stuff for rescuers, foster folks, and the general pet lover. This piece on making cohabiting kitties play nice should be great for shelters too; pass it on to adopters who are taking home a cat to befriend their longtime feline friend, or to those who are adopting more than one kitty.

roles they play in the natural environment. Tree dwellers feel more secure watching the world from on high, while bush dwellers prefer staying close to the ground. With some simple changes, you can offer your cat similar choices within the safety of your home.

"When you have [multiple] cats, there has to be a way for them to make the [territorial] snake dance ... without going nose to nose at every turn," Galaxy says. "... It's like having a one-lane country road with 100,000 people in town. You have to build a freeway."

You Gotta Be Kitten Me!

The importance of interviews and introductions

Adopters looking to add another cat to their feline family often gravitate toward kittens, equating youth with instant acceptance by resident cats.

But the age bias is unfounded. Dominant males can be great with kittens, who are territorially malleable, says feline behavior consultant Jackson Galaxy. Cats with different personalities, however, may be stressed by a lawless kitten who hasn't yet learned the language of cat. "[Your cat] just pops" in that situation, says Galaxy, and may exhibit anxiety, aggression, and litter box problems.

If adopters are looking for a new cat to add to their household, encourage them to focus on a personality who will fit with their team rather than on elements like age or coloring. Lisa Provost of Manchester, N.H., spent several hours at the shelter before choosing a friend for her active young Maine coon. "I was resolved to take my time and find the right one," she says. "I didn't care what kind of cat as long as they got along."

At the top of a cat tree in the shelter's communal room, she found Lacey, a longhair described by staff as a sweet, playful animal who never fought. Following recommendations for gradual introductions, Provost installed her in a bedroom; within minutes, the two cats were batting paws under the door. Provost opened the door a crack to let them sniff each other, closing it again after Finnegan hissed.

The next day she took a chance and carefully let Lacey out; much to her surprise, it was love at first sight, just what Finnegan—and his matchmaker—needed.



After a little hissing and paw-batting, Lacey and Finnegan have settled into a peaceful friendship—thanks to the smart introduction owner Lisa Provost provided.

John Pollack of Taneytown, Md., lets his kitties get comfy with each other over time and at paw's length, keeping the new addition separated in the bathroom at night until he has a sense that peaceful relations are certain.

"We'll do this for about a week," he says. "When I see the cat out, walking around, not concerned, not shaking every time they move, not appearing to be afraid of the others, then I'll leave the door open at night one time to see what happens. If it's good that night, then I'll leave the door open during the day. If everything's good that day, then we know we've got it licked."

Vertical space is frequently at a premium in cat-owning households. The tree dweller, lacking a tree, will patrol the countertop, while the bush dweller, without a bush, may retreat behind furniture. Multi-level cat trees, window perches, ledges, even collections of cardboard boxes can provide more options.

Social Climbing

Cats also establish verticality in their group status, usually with one topping the social ladder and the rest scattered along the lower rungs. Dominance has nothing to do with size, age, or gender, but rather is determined by confidence. Galaxy has seen 20-pound males get pushed around by 6-pound females. And the cat who hisses, stalks, and picks fights is just putting on a show. "He's totally not the alpha cat. ... He's the one who's got the complex, who would love to be at the top, but he's not," says Galaxy. Surprisingly, the top cat is a "benevolent dictator," as Galaxy puts

it, "the one ... who expends the least amount of energy keeping things under control."

An 8-year-old tortoiseshell with five feline housemates, Gypsy doesn't chase; strategic hisses and well-timed smacks have trained the others to respect her rule. "What Gypsy says, goes," says owner John Pollack of Taneytown, Md. "When I put the food down in the evening, she puts her head in the first bowl to hit the floor." Even Blizzard, an enormous white cat to whom the rest defer, won't risk mixing it up with the tortie.

A favorite in Gypsy's kingdom is the court jester who challenges the queen's authority, a stray laughingly described by Pollack as having "a few screws missing." A ball of energy, Kringle never learned to stay away, even after Gypsy "whopped [him] so hard she knocked him across the kitchen," recalls Pollack. The young cat persisted in "pestering ... and head-butting her and trying to give her a bath," charming his way into being Gypsy's BFF.

Letting Off Steam

While we humans have no say in our kitties' pecking order, we can activate a powerful tool for maintaining calm—play. By focusing the cats on something besides each other, intensive play sessions relieve tension and help smooth relationships.

Galaxy likens cats to balloons slowly expanding while they wait for us to come home; by the time we do, they're ready to pop. "It's mealtime; they go hunt," he says. "If there's nothing to hunt, they will hunt each other; they will hunt you. ... Your job, before something happens, is to drain the energy, to let the air out of the balloon." Fishing pole-type toys and laser pointers are excellent for engaging several cats at once. In every multi-cat household, shyer cats hang back and watch the action. Make an effort to play with them by themselves, Galaxy advises; having the opportunity to kill that toy will build confidence and ensure no cat gets left behind. **AS**