DEMYSTIFYING CATS

COMMONPLACE, YET commonly misun-derstood, the do-mestic cat is now the most popular companion animal in America. More than 57 million cats are kept in more than 29 million households, accord-ing to a 1992 sur-vey conducted by the American Veterinary Medical Associa-tion. Dogs number approximately 52.5 million, and although still considered “man’s best friend,” they have lost their longtime status as top pet. How does one explain the recent surge in cat popularity?

When asked, cat owners are apt to describe their pets as mysterious, clever, graceful, yet impossible to comprehend. They love cats, but they don’t know cats.

That is why 1993 has been designated “The Year of the Cat” (see the Winter 1993 HSUS News). Four of the nation’s largest animal-protection organizations—The HSUS, the American Humane Asso-ciation, the American Society for the Pre-vention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—have joined forces to help demystify the cat. “Our goal is to celebrate cats, to teach people about their physical and psychological needs, and, most importantly, to encourage owner re-sponsibility,” said HSUS President Paul G. Irwin. “We are asking our members and thousands of local humane groups and ani-mal-control agencies to participate in ‘Year of the Cat’ activities.”

People tend to like or dislike cats for the same reasons. An admirer may cherish their pets as mysterious, clever, graceful, yet impossible to comprehend. They love cats, but they don’t know cats.

In ancient Egypt cats protected vast grain stores from hordes of rodents. No one knows whether cats were acquired for that purpose or wild cats opportunistically moved in to feast on an abundant supply of prey, but it is clear cats were highly regarded for their pest-control services. The wild cat, Felis sylvestris, was first tamed, then domesticated and selectively bred. Eventually, cats in Egypt became the objects of fervent religious worship, with temples erected to the cat goddess, Bastet. Anyone who killed a cat could be punished by death. The corpses of cats were mummi-fied, bound with colorful wrappings, and either wrapped in woven straw or placed in cat-shaped coffins. They were then buried in enormous cemeteries, each of which might preserve the remains of countless thousands of sacred felines.

But the earliest records documenting the domestication of cats date back a mere 4,000 years. In contrast, cave paintings prove that dogs had been domesticated by Stone Age humans some 20,000 years ear-lier; horses, reindeer, and ferrets were also domesticated by hunting and gathering tribes millennia before cats. These animals helped to find or provide food for nomadic cultures; dogs provided protection as well.

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Though ancient Egyptians strictly pro-hibited the export of their cats, some were nonetheless smuggled out by merchants.

By Marc Philiips

Flowers in the Winter 1993 HSUS News.

Happily, domestic cats are once again widely beloved. In developed countries, their traditional role as mousers has been almost totally superseded by their growing appeal as household pets. We keep cats be-cause of their beauty, perfection of form, individuality, and sometimes-comic antics. Above all, we keep them for companion-ship. More and more of us have come to learn that cats are fascinating and complex beings, with a wide range of behaviors.
emotions, and needs.

Only during the past fifty years have we seriously begun to unravel the mysteries of the cat. Through the relatively new science of animal behavior, we have finally learned, for example, why cats purr. Purring is not simply a sign of contentment, as cat lovers have assumed for ages. Cats will sometimes purr loudly if they are even dying. In the relatively new science of feline vocalizations, a cat's body language may be easier to interpret. Cats communicate visually by using tail movements, facial expressions, ear positions, and body postures to share information and communicate visually by using tail movements, facial expressions, ear positions, and body postures to share information and body postures to share information

The social tolerance of our cats reflects one important component of the domestication process, a condition called neoteny, defined as the retention of juvenile characteristics into adulthood. All kittens, wild or domestic, display dependency, playfulness, curiosity, sociability, and an ability to bond with their mothers and litters. These qualities mark wild cats as nurtured, persistent, and other familiar cats are viewed as littersmaters.

Domestic cats resemble their wild counterparts in other ways. They appear more wild when they engage in predatory behavior. Studies have shown that each pet cat allowed access to the outdoors may hunt and kill several hundred small mammals and birds every year. Contrary to popular belief, well-fed cats are among the most efficient feline predators because they can afford to be more patient and deliberate than hunger cats. Due to the advent of modern pest-control methods, rats and mice are no longer the usual prey of outdoor cats. Instead, at least several hundred million rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, and songbirds are killed each year by tens of millions of free-roaming cats in America. It's no surprise that conflicts frequently arise between owners of outdoor cats and people who enjoy feeding and watching wildlife.

Cats, in particular, are at the heart of the controversy between those who would like to see cats hunted to control predator problems and those who feel that the practice is cruel or unnecessary. The truth is that, through the process of domestication, we have changed them from reclusive creatures to individuals who are usually quite tolerant of others. Often they're downright sociable. A European wild cat may stake out, through scent markings, a personal territory of between 50 and 160 acres, depending on his/her sex and available food supply. Domestic cats can peacefully coexist at much higher densities; several dozen cats per acre, provided they're spayed or neutered to help prevent pet overpopulation. Keep the inoculation schedule current and always make sure your cat wears an identification tag in case he/she is lost or injured. Only a tiny fraction (2 to 4 percent) of stray cats in animal shelters are ever reunited with their owners because they lack proper identification.

During "The Year of the Cat," help us spread the news that cats are expressive and highly individual creatures.

Marc Paulhus is HSUS vice president, Companion Animals.

Feline Fables

1. Cats are no-maintenance pets. Humans can train cats to be litter-trained, some people think that simply feeding and giving them food and water is enough. Not so. Cats require regular veterinary care and just as important, lots of love and attention.
2. Cats always land on their feet. While cats can often land on their feet after a short fall, falling from higher heights is another story. Upper-level porches and windows, unless securely screened, should be off-limits to cats, particularly in highrise buildings.
3. Cats can't be trusted. Cats will, of course, do things their way if left to their own devices. But most cats can be taught simple rules like not scratching the couch, eating plants, or jumping up on the refrigerator—before it's too late.
4. Cats are masters of double-talk, since different parts of the body may be signaling simultaneous conflicting messages.

Perhaps, for now, we are incapable of comprehending the nuances of "catSpeak." However, if you live with a cat long enough, he/she may choose to adapt to your limited abilities. Owners have found that most cats will eventually pantomime or mimic gestures for your entertainment. While they may not be able to communicate visually by using tail movements, facial expressions, ear positions, and body postures to share information, they engage in predatory behavior. Studies have shown that each pet cat allowed access to the outdoors may hunt and kill several hundred small mammals and birds every year. Contrary to popular belief, well-fed cats are among the most efficient feline predators because they can afford to be more patient and deliberate than hunger cats. Due to the advent of modern pest-control methods, rats and mice are no longer the usual prey of outdoor cats. Instead, at least several hundred million rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, and songbirds are killed each year by tens of millions of free-roaming cats in America. It's no surprise that conflicts frequently arise between owners of outdoor cats and people who enjoy feeding and watching wildlife.

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