

7 Favorite Feline Mysteries



Cats have long been regarded as mysterious creatures, but that's mostly because we have not been giving them the right kind and amount of attention. If we would only pay closer attention to their needs and wants, we might notice that they aren't as mysterious as thought. Still, they have some traits that are either impossible or difficult to explain at this time.

1. Why and how do cats purr?

One of the most comforting sounds and sensations we can experience is the purr of the cat. But it is also one of the most mysterious of all feline traits.

With all the advances in technology in the last 100 years, one might think it odd that we have yet to solve this one. But the problem is we can't study the purr under ordinary circumstances. For instance, we can't take a cat apart to watch the process. Once disassembled, no purring is possible! Nor can we perform any tests that are painful, confusing or irritating, because that would upset the cat and purring will be the last thing on her mind. Usually they only purr when they are happy and content. (There are exceptions to this, explained below.)

While some scientists and investigators have managed to catalog certain traits of the purr itself, and have even come up with some plausible conclusions, they just haven't been able to prove them yet.

One theory is that the mechanics of the purr involves a secondary set of membranes situated near the vocal cords. Others feel it is a vibration of a particular network of blood vessels in the throat and chest.

Another plausible thought is that the vibrational frequency may be related to a cat's ability to heal more quickly than other species.

The reasons behind purring are as varied as the theories for the mechanics of the process. Obviously, contentment and happiness must be one of the reasons for a cat to purr, but observations from others, as well as from personal experience at our cat shelter, prove that

purring often accompanies times of extreme stress - even just prior to death. Perhaps they are trying to comfort themselves, or even to "speed heal" themselves.



Mother cats purr during the birth process and certainly during the nursing period for the benefit of her kittens. Since kittens are blind and deaf at birth, and for at least the first week or more, the vibration from the purr may assist the babies in finding and staying close to mom. Kittens also purr, perhaps to let mom know they are near, too, and to encourage her to relax to facilitate the nursing process.

Of course, these are all theories, but they are based on many thousands of observations over the centuries.

2. How do cats find their way home over great distances?

It's always been a mystery how a cat can find its way back home, even when its family has moved several states away. They obviously have some kind of a homing instinct, such as that found in homing pigeons. Dogs may perform the same feat, but it seems more cats than dogs have been known to return to a previous location – often against some very stiff odds.



These outdoor cats may locate their homes by odor trails left by familiar visitors in their neighborhoods.

3. How do some cats detect (and thus predict) seizures in people?

Now this is a real mystery. It's possible that both dogs and cats are able to detect illness in humans at the same levels, but people generally do not pay attention to cats and their more subtle changes in behavior. So the signals from cats may be missed.

If it comes to pass someday that someone decides to study this, and finds that cats are far superior to dogs in detecting illnesses and seizures, it will be our responsibility as humans to learn how to notice their signals.

One theory about seizure detection involves the superb sense of smell shared by many animals. Since most can detect smells at about 50 times better than humans, maybe they are simply smelling some change in the ill person's body odor. If they regard this as "normal" or unremarkable, they may not try to communicate anything about it. It may be this ability to detect, and then communicate, that receives the focus from those who know how to train animals for this kind of service. And since dogs are more in tune with a human style of communication, that may be why dogs have been more suited to this task.

People who are in tune with their cats, however, are more likely to notice behavior changes and thus, be able to make use of those "signals." Indeed, there are stories of cats saving their owners' lives during an emergency. They have awakened household members for gas leaks, smoke, and the presence of intruders. But those stories usually involve an owner who paid attention to what the cat was trying to "say."



Even kittens may be seen eating grass occasionally.

4. Why do cats eat grass?

Many animals seem to think that grass tastes great, and they eat it because they like it. Others vomit after eating grass, so some authorities think they eat it to cleanse their digestive tracts. Actually, it's difficult to find any studies done on this subject, so the explanations behind it remain within the realms of conjecture.

5. Why do cats tread on things - and on you?

When kittens are still nursing, they rhythmically and alternately press their front paws on their mother's belly. This appears to help release the flow of milk. But it seems to have other effects as well, such as a comforting sensation to both kitten and mother. This motion is called treading. Later, perhaps as a response to a memory of a more soothing and secure time, cats may continue to tread. Maybe they do it to elicit that old feeling of a happier time. It may be somewhat like an older child who sucks a thumb and curls up when feeling a little depressed or left out.

Even senior cats will tread, however. Maybe they never outgrow their need to feel secure. Or perhaps they are just letting you know they feel at ease with you, and are just expressing an overall contentment.



Contented cats will tread on each other, as well as on their owner's laps.

Where they get into big trouble with this is when they tread on the family infant. Through the ages, this behavior has been misinterpreted as “stealing a baby’s breath.” It’s a ludicrous belief, of course, and educated people nowadays know very well that this is an unfortunate myth that has cost millions of cats their lives. Can you imagine being executed just for expressing a feeling of love and contentment?

6. Why do cats' eyes glow in the dark?

First, let’s get one thing straight: Cats cannot see in the dark. They can, however, see better than we can in very low light that may appear to be total darkness to us. Cats have a reflective membrane within their eyes, called the *tapetum*, that appears to fluoresce when light hits it at a certain angle. In fact, the “fluorescence” is a method by which a cat’s eyes are able to maximize whatever light is available by reflecting it back to the retina.

Light reflecting off the tapetum also creates the appearance of “glowing.” Some of the light bounces forward and gives the red, green or gold glow from the cat’s eyes. It’s a little like having a tiny mirror inside the eye.



These cats display different colors from the reflecting tapetum in their eyes: green, gold and red.

7. Why do cats grimace at certain smells?

They aren't really grimacing. The look on their faces after smelling something may give the impression of having encountered a really awful odor, but in fact, they are savoring it. Rather than breathe an odor completely into the lungs, they inhale the molecules just far enough to capture them in a small chamber at the back of the nasal cavity, where the molecules interact with the endings of a nerve complex called Jacobson's organ.

This behavior is called "flehmen."

This enables their brains to fully analyze the intricacies of the odor – allowing the cat to gather information about the source of the smell. That information may include the gender of the other animal, whether that animal is mature, ready to mate, just moving on by, or if there is a potential threat of taking over the territory. Or maybe they're investigating a food residue, some chemical, a potential predator threat, or a new human in the area. Often, it's something we think is terrible, like the urine of another cat, so it's easy to think of the facial expression as a grimace.



And the contented kittens relax at the close of another busy day.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions or suggestions or just want to tell me about your cat. You may email me at **mskitty @ theproblemcat.com**. Be sure to visit my web site, too, for more information on dozens of other topics, and to sign up for my newsletter, The Kitty Times. <http://www.theproblemcat.com>. See you there!



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