

Introduction to Cats

INTRODUCTION

Mythology and History

Of all animals, domestic or wild, none have fascinated us as much as the cat. Historically, we've admired and feared cats. At times, we've worshipped them. At other times, we've persecuted them to near extinction.

Egyptians worshipped cats, and were the first people to welcome cats into their homes. They viewed cats as mysterious, and believed that a cat's eyes could protect people from evil. Egyptians thought the cat's glow-in-the-dark eyes mirrored the sun and saved the world from eternal darkness. Egyptian women imitated the cat's eyes by outlining their own eyes with makeup. The way that a cat curls up to sleep, with its head touching its tail to form a circle, came to symbolize eternity.

Eastern cultures welcomed cats and treated them with love and respect. The Japanese had a goddess for cats. The Chinese had a cat god named Li Shou to whom they offered sacrifices. They associated this cat god with rainfall and the success of crops.

The Anglo-Saxons believed that anyone who had a tortoiseshell cat was extremely fortunate. They believed that these cats could see into the future. They also believed that cats could pass this gift onto a lucky child in the household.

During the Middle Ages, many Europeans believed that the cat may be a good creature at heart. They thought the cat had magical healing powers that could help people. They sometimes gave cats as healing tools to people who were suspected of being mentally insane.

During the Dark Ages, however, cats were believed to be the servants of devils and witches. Cats were hunted down and destroyed, and almost became extinct in Europe. Thousands of cats were cruelly burned at the stake with accused witches.

The Black Plague reached its peak in the 1400s. By this time, there were few cats left to destroy the rats that carried the fleas that transmitted the disease. Two-thirds of the population of Europe died in the Plague.

Sailors predicted the kind of voyage they would have by the behavior of the ship's cat. A cat meowing loudly foretold of a difficult voyage ahead. A playful cat told the sailors that good and gusty winds were ahead.

Cats first came to America in the early 1600s to help control the rodent population. The pioneers may not have been able to grow enough crops to survive if cats hadn't controlled the rodents. Also, New England settlers believed that rain was on the way when a cat looked out of a window continuously.

Many modern people believe that if a family cat washes its paws and face in the parlor, visitors will soon arrive. Some people also believe that cats have nine lives. This belief may stem from a cat's ability to fall from significant heights and land upright, and then to walk away as if the feat occurred everyday.

Environ

Cats are independent, lively, poised, and coy. People often mistake their independent nature to mean that they need no attention. Just the opposite is true. However, they want the attention on their terms. Lack of attention can result in emotional problems. Cats are neither self-centered nor selfish. Rather, they're self-reliant, dignified, and resourceful. Cats share their lives with people either as outdoor cats, indoor cats, or combinations of both types.

Indoor Cats

Indoor cats, also called house cats, live primarily inside the house. They rarely go outside unattended. Though some owners treat their indoor cats to outdoor walks on leashes, the most many cats see of the outside is what they see through a window. However, they seem quite happy with this arrangement. Domestic cats have adapted themselves to living with humans. Using cats' natural instincts, people have trained indoor cats to eliminate in litter boxes. These boxes are filled with absorbent material.

Although cats in the wild are usually solitary animals, some domestic cats show a need for attention from other cats. For this reason, many households have several indoor cats.

Outdoor Cats

Outdoor cats live almost completely outdoors. They roam their possibly extensive territory and come home to feed. During severe weather, they may come into a cellar, garage, or porch. They live a more wild existence than other cats and face many dangers, such as cat fights, cars, and the elements.

Combination Cats

Combination cats have the best of both worlds. They roam their outdoor territories freely, and live indoors with human families. Combination cats use litter boxes indoors, and grass or gardens outdoors. Many cats are given small cat doors that enable them to come and go as they please.

Breeds

Mixed-breed Cats

Most cats are plain, ordinary, domestic, shorthaired cats. These are commonly, but incorrectly, referred to as alley cats. These mixed-breed, or mongrel, cats compose the largest portion of the cat population.

Purebred Cats

There are approximately 50 breeds of purebred cats, and members of these breeds are regarded as either pet quality or show quality. As with the dog world, the cat world also shows off its most prized animals to the world and the breeding community in the show ring.

The different breeds of purebred cats can be separated into two types: the longhaired cats and the shorthaired cats. Longhaired cats include the Persian, Himalayan, Turkish Angora, Maine coon, and Balinese breeds. Shorthaired cats include the Siamese, American domestic shorthair, Burmese, Abyssinian, Russian blue, and Manx breeds.

Persian cats may have developed from the ancient Angoras of Turkey. The majority of modern longhaired cat breeds originate from the Persian, or have been mixed with the Persian at one time or another. The Persian cat is the most popular of the longhaired cats. The Persian has a long, full coat, and its glossy fur fluffs up all over its body, including the tail. The undercoat is woolly and dense, and the outer coat is long and full. The coat may be several different colors. The eyes of a Persian are round and wide open. The head is massive, with a short snub nose, small ears, a short tail, and large paws. The Persian is the standard by which cat fanciers compare longhaired breeds (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1—The Persian has a long, full coat, and its glossy fur fluffs up all over its body, including the tail. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

The Himalayan, also known as the Colourpoint longhair or the Colourpoint Persian, has the beauty of a Persian and the markings of a Siamese. The Himalayan's eyes are large, round, blue, and full. Although now a purebred cat, they've been crossed back to Persians. Their coats are long and silky, and require meticulous daily grooming (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2—*The Himalayan resembles both the Persian and the Siamese.* (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

The Turkish Angora has a long body and a tapering tail. The fur is of a medium length and is fine and silky. The Angora is intelligent and affectionate (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3—The Turkish Angora has fine, silky fur of medium length. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

The Maine coon is big cat with medium length fur. As its name suggests, it's particularly popular in the state of Maine (Figure 4).



FIGURE 4—This young Maine coon will grow into a large cat. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

The Balinese is basically a longhaired Siamese cat. Though a purebred cat, it's a hybrid of the Persian and Siamese breeds, and has long, silky fur (Figure 5).



FIGURE 5—The *Balinese* cat is a mix between *Persian* and *Siamese*. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

The Siamese breed was developed in the Far East. They're the most popular of the purebred shorthairs. They have blue eyes and pale fawn or gray coats, with darker faces, ears, tails, and feet (Figure 6).



FIGURE 6—Siamese cats are strikingly handsome and extremely intelligent. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

American domestic shorthairs make good mousers and probably arrived in America with the Pilgrims. Their coats are soft, short, and thick. Their heads are round, and their eyes are medium sized. They're powerful and graceful (Figure 7).



FIGURE 7—The fierce mousing instincts of the American domestic shorthair may have saved the crops of early American settlers. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

The Burmese is a sturdy, stocky breed. Burmese cats are usually rich sable brown. They're often more gentle than the Siamese, and not as demanding of attention (Figure 8).



FIGURE 8—The Burmese cat has a pleasant disposition. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

The Abyssinian is a medium-sized cat with a lithe body, medium-length tail, large eyes, and alert ears. In looks, Abyssinians (Figure 9) resemble ancient Egyptian cats.

FIGURE 9—Abyssinians have reddish-brown coats tipped with small black markings. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)



The Russian blue is finely boned, with a long, graceful body and legs. A Russian blue cat has large ears. The coat is thick and short (Figure 10).



FIGURE 10—The Russian blue has a thick, plush coat. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

The Manx is from the Isle of Man. The Manx has strong back legs, which cause it to “bunny hop” when running. It’s a tailless cat (Figure 11).



FIGURE 11—The Manx cat has powerful legs and no external tail. (Photo courtesy of TFH Publications, Inc.)

Grooming

Extensive brushing and combing are necessary to maintain the long-haired cat's coat. Owners must brush and comb longhaired cats often, once or twice daily, to avoid matting. Shorthaired cats need to be brushed a couple of times a week.

Grooming helps to keep a shine and a healthy glisten to the fur. Brushing and combing distribute natural oils by stimulating the circulation. Grooming assists in the detection of fleas, ticks, skin problems, and any other abnormalities. It also helps to remove dead fur and dirt from the coat.

The hair on a cat differs from that of a dog in that a cat's hair is like a fur coat. Cats have thick coats of fine, woolly hairs beneath their soft outer coats. All cats, longhaired and shorthaired, require human aid in grooming. Even though cats are experts in the field of grooming themselves and each other, they still need help. Cats usually won't agree with that statement, so owners should teach cats to accept help even while they're kittens.

Some cat literature recommends infrequent bathing, while other literature recommends dry baths, in which baby powder or a commercially purchased substance is substituted for water. These aren't as effective as wet baths. You'll find the majority of owners bring cats in for professional grooming because of flea problems, matting, or deshedding. It isn't harmful to most cats to bathe frequently, if needed.

However, you need to remember that, as a whole, many cats don't like water. They seem to feel quite insulted that you, a stranger, think they can't handle the job of grooming themselves, and are trying to interfere. A docile cat can become wild in a moment when faced with the bathing experience. At the same time, you'll find other cats that will seem to resign themselves to getting the bath over with.

Before reading on about cats' personality types, take time to complete *Pause to Reflect 1*.



Pause to Reflect 1

At the end of each section of *Introduction to Cats*, you'll be asked to pause and check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "Pause to Reflect." Writing the answers to these questions will help you review what you've studied so far. Please complete *Pause to Reflect 1* now.

1. What are the two types of cat coats that are used to classify breeds?

2. Which shorthaired urebred is the most popular breed?

3. About how many breeds of cats are considered to be purebred?

Check your answers with those on page 23.

PERSONALITY TYPES

More people own cats than own dogs, because the responsibilities of owning a cat are fewer. The basic care, house training, independent nature, and grooming habits of cats help their human masters with their care. Dogs need to rely on human masters for most of their needs. Cats are more independent.

Many dogs act much like themselves in the grooming shop, due to the frequency of grooming and the fact that their owners sometimes take them places other than veterinarians or grooming shops. However, most cats never leave the territories of their homes, except to go to veterinarians or grooming shops. Owners usually don't take cats for rides to see the scenery. Therefore, most cats start out their grooming experiences by being shoved into a crate and driven in a strange vehicle to a strange territory that they aren't allowed to explore or mark. When they arrive, the real horrors begin: dogs everywhere . . . the bath water . . . the dryer!

Most cats will come to you not knowing what to expect and scared to death. This uncertainty is an unusual and uncomfortable state for a cat, as it's used to being in control. So, when an owner says that a cat is wonderful and loves everyone, remember that the cat's behavior may differ because of the circumstances.

Cats are very adaptable. If abandoned, the most pampered and domesticated cat can become feral and street-smart for survival. They seem to know how to scratch out an existence for themselves. They seem to straddle the fence between being domestic and wild just in case their situations change and they have to go back into the wild.