

# Safety in the Eyes of the Cat

**S**he eyes the bird with sharp vision. The robin's movement as it tugs a worm from the earth is too enticing to ignore. Her body lowers, her ears perk forward, though she's unaware of it. Instinct drives her now as she slinks slowly onward, her belly almost dragging on the lush, green grass. She is not hungry, for those who care for her feed her well, yet still this desire moves her forward, slowly so as not to frighten the bird into flight before she can reach it. Precise timing is imperative: If she bolts too soon the bird will take flight; too late and she might not be able to stop in time for the catch. These thoughts don't run consciously through her mind, only through her blood and adrenaline. She does not know why she does this, only that the desire is strong, it is everything, it is her entire focus. The world around her has disappeared. All that matters is the bird.

She is now within striking distance. She takes off, ready, all her focus sharp on the robin. She is not aware of the car coming quickly toward her until the squealing of the brakes snaps her concentration and sends the robin soaring away into the sky. Confusion ensues and

she's not sure what to do, but it doesn't matter. There's no avoiding the large tires heading straight for her.

## Understanding Danger

As time moves along and cats become increasingly integrated into our society and families, more and more people are keeping their precious felines strictly indoors. Yet many still believe cats are aloof and free-natured and need to be allowed their "freedom."

As the story above details, cats do indeed possess many of the instincts passed to them through thousands of years of feline heritage. They still love the chase and the catch. Instincts can also lead them to shelter when the weather is poor or to water when they are thirsty, and often, with very advanced olfactory nerves, to food when they need it. Yet most of these are basic instincts just about every animal possesses, whether wild or domesticated. Even humans possess them to some degree.

But those very instincts that were meant to save and aid cats in the wild can prove deadly under certain circumstances. The cats who evolved into our domesticated feline did not have cars to contend with or antifreeze left on driveways that can poison them. Their instincts help them avoid natural dangers, not the ones we make, and despite their seemingly aloof nature, most cats in the wild do not live alone. Even feral cats live in colonies; there's safety in numbers and cats instinctively know this.

However, when you let Puss out to go and roam the neighborhood, she is alone. Other cats who were not raised in her territory are seen as a threat. Fights can cause terrible wounds and infection. Most cats have little or no awareness of the peril of a moving vehicle. And though cars are the most common reason outdoor cats lose their lives, other dangers exist as well. Even in rural areas where there are few cars, potential peril dwells.

At one time it was unheard of to even so much as mention keeping a cat strictly indoors. People mumbled that it was cruel or inhumane to keep an animal with such a wild nature "locked away."

Fortunately, this outlook is waning in popularity. According to a 1996 national survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, two-thirds of all cat owners keep their cats indoors all the time. The number of cats kept exclusively indoors has grown throughout the years, and as the population rises and lifestyles become faster, this number should continue to rise.

But are cats happy staying indoors? That is the question posed most often. And the answer is that it depends on the cat and her circumstance and surroundings, as well as other factors such as her upbringing, personality, and acclimation to the world within walls.

I won't lie to you. I have seen cats whose lives benefit from living outdoors. For example, Yappy is a beautiful tabby-and-white cat who lives at the stable where I board my horse. The stable is well off the street, and hundreds of acres of land surround it. Yet Yappy rarely strays far from the barn. He has learned to avoid horses' hooves (just as, yes, some cats do learn to avoid cars) and he loves all the people and attention he receives. He reminds me quite a bit of Gillie, whose story I told in the Introduction of this book. Yappy spends most of his time sleeping on hay bales inside the indoor riding ring, but he also craves attention. Anyone who sits to watch the riders invariably finds Yappy in their lap, purring and kneading. With all that land and freedom, he prefers indoors, the people, and particularly, the laps. But cats who live with such freedom and remain safe are the exception rather than the rule.

There's a wide misconception that keeping a cat inside is ludicrous, even cruel. This belief leads to the notion that the quality of an indoor cat's life is diminished. But the truth is that if a cat is raised in a proper indoor environment, she can very well enjoy both quality and quantity of life.

A comfortable indoor environment can be created for just about any cat. There is little the outdoors has to offer a cat that cannot be satisfactorily simulated indoors. Sunshine can be brought in through windows, window perches, and outdoor enclosures (see chapter 7). Cats can be just as happy chasing catnip mice and interactive cat toys as they can real mice and birds (and they cannot contract parasites

and diseases from toys). Cat trees are just as satisfying to a cat as real trees, and cats don't need the kind of room to run that dogs do. Being short-distance sprinters by design, cats get plenty of exercise running from room to room.

The notion that an indoor cat is “locked up,” as if the animal were kept in a prison, is completely false. The cat does not see it this way, particularly a cat who has been raised indoors her entire life. The



*Napping on a pillow is far more comfortable than napping on the pavement.*

belief that an indoor cat “suffers” likens the complexity of a cat’s mind to the complexity of a human’s—and it’s not an accurate comparison. Watch your indoor cat gazing outside at the birds and squirrels, tail flicking, eyes wide. It

may seem as if the cat is frustrated at not being allowed out. But to the cat, the window is like a television screen where she can sit and watch a fascinating “movie.”

Cats spend three-quarters of their lives asleep, and often owners of outdoor cats confuse the contentment of an indoor cat’s slumber with boredom. Because they do not see their outdoor cat’s activities as often, they do not realize their outdoor cat is most likely curled up under a tree somewhere, taking the same catnap she would if she were indoors.

Our cats are no longer wild animals. Humans domesticated cats thousands of years ago. Despite their independence, cats need humans to protect them from dangers. Most of these dangers were created by humans, and now that cats live with us in our world, it’s our responsibility to see to their safety.

## Outdoor Dangers

A cat’s ability to reason and protect herself in the outdoors is not much more complex than that of a 2- or 3-year-old child’s. They know enough to be fearful of certain circumstances, but do not always know where to look or what to do.

## **Bringing Kitty In**

Shelter workers and those individuals who handle and work with stray, abandoned, and ill cats know firsthand the dangers that face an outdoor cat. Most breeders and shelters allow their cats to leave their facility only under the strict condition that the cat remains indoors. Even adoption centers are requiring adopters to keep their cats strictly indoors.

Of course, there are indoor dangers that may befall cats, but those are, for the most part, controllable. As soon as your cat walks out the door, she is no longer under your supervision and is exposed to any danger that may await. The choice, ultimately, is up to you, but consider these dangers that are faced by cats that roam outdoors.

### **Cars**

The number-one cause of death and injury to cats allowed outside is cars. Think of everyone you know whose cats are allowed free access to the outdoors and, chances are, at least one of them will have had the horrifying experience of losing a cat, or at least of their cat being injured by a car. If all those people had simply not allowed their cats to roam, they would have been spared that particular agony.

But being hit by a car is not the only car-related threat posed to a free-roaming cat. Cats love warmth, and there's no better place to find it on a cold winter's night than under the hood of a warmed engine. If the car is started while the cat is curled up inside, the cat could very well be maimed or killed. I will never forget the Buick I owned about fifteen years ago. One day the car was running poorly, so my father, a mechanic, checked under the hood. To my horror he found the long-dead carcass of a kitten securely attached to the engine. It had been there since before I bought the car.

Other potential dangers can come from inside the car. An open window can be a great enticement to an outdoor cat. Midnight, an outdoor cat from birth, was extremely fond of the comforts found inside a car. She had been inadvertently taken on many trips by climbing into an open car window and curling up in the back seat. One time she disappeared after taking an unplanned trip to work with her caretaker. Midnight had curled up in the back of his pickup truck, and he drove off unaware that she was there. When he arrived at work, the cat jumped out and disappeared into the woods behind the building. Fortunately, she was recovered four days later.

That trip could have been fatal to Midnight. She could have leaped from the back of the truck while it moved along on the highway or been hit by a car in the unfamiliar area where she hid those four days until she was enticed out with food and caught.

Riding loose in a car, to the vet or wherever you might be bringing your cat, is another danger I have heard stories about all too often. The cat can get under your feet, causing an accident, or out an open window. In the summer, the temperature inside a car can reach deadly highs, even in the shade—which is why you should never leave a cat in a parked car in the heat, not even for a moment.

## Falls

When people think of a cat falling, they always picture the graceful feline landing gently on her feet. But the reality is that many cats have died from falling off fences, balconies, roofs, and even out of trees. The most common injury to cats who have fallen is a split palate. What surprises most people is that cats are often injured worse from shorter falls than longer ones. This is because of the way the cat twists her body as she falls and readies herself to land. A shorter distance leaves less time for the motions necessary to land with no or minimal injury.

## Diseases

There are many diseases cats can contract from other cats or wild animals (see chapter 8), most of which can be fatal to your cat. Some

of these include rabies, toxoplasmosis, feline infectious peritonitis (FIP), feline leukemia virus (FeLV), feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), and feline t-lymphocytic virus (FTLV or Feline AIDS). Some of these diseases, such as rabies and toxoplasmosis, may also be passed from your cat to you. Although vaccinations are available for rabies, FeLV, and now FIP (an intranasal vaccine), they are not always a 100-percent guarantee that your cat will not contract these illnesses. And for other illnesses there are no vaccines. Some vaccinations, as Gillie's story in the introduction illustrates, may also cause vaccination-site fibrosarcoma—a rare form of cancer. This problem is currently being researched, but is still an issue. Whether or not your indoor cat needs some or any of these vaccines will be discussed in chapter 8.

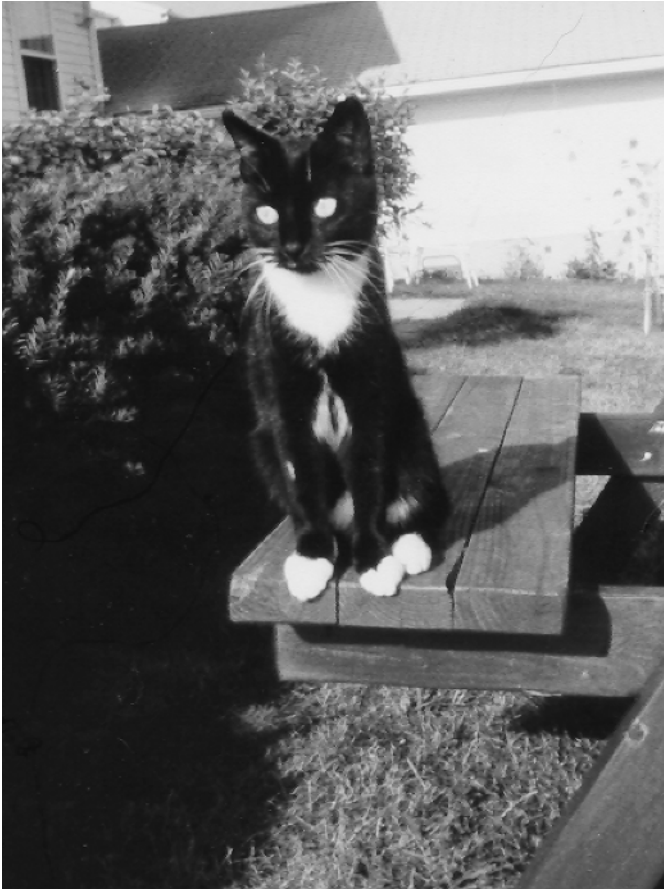
## Parasites

Parasites may be a problem for any cat, indoors or out, but free-roaming cats have a much higher risk of picking up fleas, ticks, worms, lice, and mites than cats who are kept indoors. Parasites may also be contracted if your cat eats a rodent or wild animal, which is less likely if your cat is kept strictly indoors.

In addition to the damage parasites do all by themselves, they carry many serious diseases. For example, any cat with access to wooded areas may pick up ticks infected with Lyme disease, particularly in the northeastern region of the United States. If not caught and treated early, Lyme disease may cause serious health problems for your cat, and for you. Parasites can also cause worms, which feed on the nutrients that enter the cat's digestive tract, causing the cat to slowly starve.

## Other Animals

Cats allowed outdoors are subject to the attacks of wild animals, venomous snakes, insects, dogs, and other cats. Wild animals, often forced from their homes due to building projects, are increasingly stealing household pets for food. Coyotes have been known to easily carry off cats. Eagles do not know the difference between your kitten and a rabbit to feed their young hatchlings. Do you live in an area



*A cat outside is at ten times the risk of death or injury than an indoor cat.*

with rattlesnakes, scorpions, poisonous spiders? You cannot watch your cat when she is outdoors to keep her safe from these threats.

## Humans

Humans can be another source of danger for cats allowed to roam free. As much as we love our cats, there are people who don't share the same feelings, and cats allowed outdoors are subject to dangerously cruel pranks.



Cats might also get into a neighbor's garbage, which could be dangerous to the cat if she swallows bones or a poisonous substance such as a cleaning chemical. Bad relations and squabbles between neighbors can be born from a cat howling at night, tearing apart garbage bags, planting muddy paws all over a precious car, spraying urine on prize roses, digging up vegetation, or any other instinctive yet destructive acts.

Not long ago, the Humane Society Adoption Center had a cat in its care, and the card on the animal's cage, which gives the cat's information and why it was given up, stated: "Reason for surrender: Accused of scratching neighbor's car." There have been many lawsuits brought against people whose cats have destroyed property and livestock. Even in the country, cats are at tremendous risk when allowed outside.

## Poisons

Cats allowed outdoors can crawl under cars and may get oil, gasoline, or antifreeze on their coats. As they clean their coats, the toxins enter their bloodstream. Antifreeze is particularly dangerous to your cat, since it has a sweet taste and cats may lick it from a driveway or their paws.

Pesticides or chemical treatments on lawns and gardens can also poison your cat, if she walks on a treated lawn and then lick her paws.

## Hunting, Trapping, and Fishing

Bajor was a beautiful shorthaired black-and-white feral cat who lived his life in comfort at Kitty Angels Humane Society in Coventry, Connecticut. But this was not always the case. Caught in a leg-hold trap before being found and brought to the shelter, Bajor had lost a leg.

Areas with hunting and trapping seasons are dangerous to free-roaming cats, because they are no better than a wild animal at seeing where a trap is set. Many cats have been killed or have lost limbs after being caught in leg-hold traps. A cat may also be mistaken for a game animal and shot.

Areas where fishing is a prevalent sport or business can hold dangers for cats as well. Cats can become tangled in fishing lines or be injured by a hook.

## Getting Lost

As keen as are cats' senses and abilities to find their way, they may still get lost, particularly if you have just moved to a new area or if the weather is bad and the cat gets disoriented (see chapter 9 for what to do if your cat gets lost). Unlike dogs, lost cats are not usually recovered. In areas where there are no leash or licensing laws for cats, free-roaming cats are not often picked up by shelter wardens and taken back to the shelter, where their owners can easily find them. And people who see unfamiliar cats roaming may not be as quick to take them in and search for their owners, simply assuming they are "outdoor" cats.

## Overpopulation

The overpopulation of cats is a major concern. Millions of cats each year are put to death just because there are not enough homes for them



all. If your cat is unaltered (not spayed or neutered) and is allowed to run free, chances are good that you're adding to the numbers. Even if you find a "good home" for all your female cat's kittens, you really can't be sure those kittens are not going to produce more kittens who will end up in a shelter or in the street—unless you know for a fact that they are all altered and remain with their families for their entire lives. I've heard people say, "I did my part and found good homes; it's not my problem." Actually, it is. It's everyone's

problem. The cats or kittens killed in a shelter or starving on the street could have been spared if everyone's pet cats were altered.

## Weather and Natural Disasters

Severe fires have struck Southern California, Colorado, and other parts of the United States, ravaging neighborhoods and destroying thousands of homes. In some cases, people were evacuated so quickly they had little time to pack or think of what to take with them. Many cats were lost, killed, maimed, and injured, particularly outdoor cats whose owners could not find them when it was time to leave.

In severe weather, cats tend to hide and to become disoriented or lost. If a natural disaster such as a hurricane, flood, tornado, earthquake, fire, or mudslide strikes your area, it is much more difficult to find a free-roaming cat in the event of evacuation or finding shelter. An outdoor cat may disappear and later return home to find no one there, or worse, no home there. She may get hurt or lost in her attempt to find food, shelter, water, or her owners (see chapter 9 for what to do in an emergency). Even a cat hiding from a severe thunderstorm can get hurt, disoriented, or lost.

## Sickness

If your cat develops a medical problem, symptoms are much easier to notice if your cat is home all the time. It may be difficult to detect

### **For Your Cat's Safety**

Unaltered cats, male and female, are at a much higher risk of injury and danger, as they tend to roam farther and more frequently than altered cats. It is just as important to have your male cat altered as it is your female. Males are extremely relentless in their search for a mate and will continue to add to the overpopulation problem throughout their entire lives.

Even indoor-only cats should be altered, as they may get out accidentally. In addition, a female in heat will drive you crazy with her caterwauling and attempts to get out to find a mate. A male cat may spray a foul-smelling urine all over your house, and this odor is almost impossible to remove, particularly from carpets and upholstery.

the early signs of an illness in a cat who is outdoors most or all of the time. With certain conditions, early diagnosis is essential to successful treatment, so your outdoor cat's health is at risk that way, too.

## More Points to Ponder

In addition to the specific dangers lurking outdoors, there are other factors to consider when you weigh the merits of an indoor life for your cat.

Even if an outdoor cat manages to escape falling victim to one or more of the tragedies I've just described, life for the average outdoor cat, even that of a pampered pet, is much more stressful than the indoor-only lifestyle. Cats on the street, or even in the country, are faced every day with territorial disputes and threats from other animals, cats, and even people. Outdoors, cats must learn to sleep with one eye open, so to speak, to protect themselves from dangers that may creep up on them in their slumber. Indoor cats, however, are usually the epitome of relaxation.

## Better Pets

Just tonight I was in the grocery store browsing through the cat food aisle. Two women walked past me, talking about a cat. "Does your cat come in much?" one of the women asked. "No," the other replied, "he stays out most of the time now that the weather is warmer."

Indoor cats generally make much better pets than cats allowed outdoors whenever they wish. Since indoor cats are in your company most or all the time when you are home, you can both appreciate each other's company a lot more.

Cats can be wonderful animals to observe, and what better place to observe their playful leaps and chases than in the comfort of home? Also, because they do not have the distraction of wanting to go out all the time, indoor cats turn their attention to loving their owners instead of the neighborhood. A domestic cat is a companion animal, and she should be allowed to be just that—a companion.

## Longer Life Span

The average life span of an outdoor cat is three to five years, while the average life span of a cat kept strictly indoors is between fourteen and twenty years. This age has risen in recent years. This is due not only to the lack of danger, but also to the advancement of veterinary care. Studies have shown that outdoor cats, on average, do not receive the same medical attention as indoor cats.



*Candy lived to be 20 years old as an indoor cat.*

## A Healthy Coat

It's only when I pet an outdoor cat that I realize just how much cleaner and softer my indoor cats are. Not only do indoor cats have a lower incidence of parasites, but unless they develop an illness or allergy, their coats are healthier overall as well. Indoor cats rarely get into anything that soils their coats. They're not exposed to the smog

and pollution outdoor cats are exposed to, either, and it usually shows in their fur with a healthy, luxurious sheen.

## Environmental Issues

I will never forget the time I was watching a bright red cardinal feeding in our yard when suddenly, seemingly from out of nowhere, the neighbor's cat leaped into the tree and captured the bird before it had a chance to fly away. The cat ran away, the frightened bird screeching loudly from within her jaws.

Many people enjoy watching wildlife, and particularly birds. They embellish their lawns with bird feeders and baths to attract these winged wonders in all their glorious beauty. These people may not appreciate the natural instincts a cat has to chase and kill birds, thus hindering bird-watching for the whole neighborhood. As author Cleveland Amory said in his book *The Cat Who Came for Christmas*, "I feel that no cat owner has the right to jeopardize the right of his neighbor who may enjoy his birds just as the cat owner enjoys his cat."

Roaming cats may also kill endangered species of birds and wildlife. While our pets are descended from predators, the cats who live in our homes are domesticated animals, meaning their numbers are not limited in a natural way, as with wild species. It is up to us, as those who domesticated cats, to make sure our pets do not upset nature's delicate balance by allowing our cats to roam and kill.

## Legal Issues

In some areas leash laws exist not only for dogs, but for cats as well. These laws vary from community to community, and the term "leash law" means different things, depending on the law. For example, some ordinances say a cat must be confined to the owner's premises, and others say cats must be kept leashed or caged when out of the house. Bowling Green, Ohio, enacted a cat confinement law in 1984. According to this law, cats should be confined to the owner's property or under the owner's physical control at all times. Also, cats who are leash-trained are not to be walked on a leash longer than 10 feet.

These laws are created as a service not only to the cat and cat owner, but as a courtesy to the public. Free-roaming cats can be an annoyance to neighbors, destroying property and trespassing in areas where they are not wanted, and they can become injured.

Rabies is another issue that has recently been addressed by many laws. In areas with a high incidence of rabies, laws requiring that all cats have vaccines are common. In Connecticut, if a cat is picked up outdoors and the owner cannot furnish proof that the cat has been vaccinated for rabies, a fine is imposed.

## Making the Decision

Many cats who have spent a good deal of their time outdoors, such as strays and barn cats, may seem as if they simply cannot adjust to life indoors. They can become lonely, bored, and destructive. For someone who is unaccustomed to training a cat to stay indoors or someone who is gone most of the time, this task may seem nearly impossible. These cat owners may become frustrated and feel that although the cat's life may be shortened, the cat will be happier in the long run being allowed outside. However, with patience and proper strategy, almost any cat, no matter how accustomed to the outdoor life, can be acclimated to a life indoors (see chapter 2).

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and at times, no matter what the owner does, the cat just insists on having things her own way. I have known of such cats—but very few—and feel, in many of the cases, that the owners did not try hard enough and gave up too soon.

My cat Taffy (who passed away in September 2001) always longed for the outdoors, eyeing the door but respecting the fact that she was not able to go out. About a year before she passed away, I was able to grant her wish. Arthritic and going blind, she could safely wander my large fenced yard and the garden at last. She could not get under the fence, and her frailty kept her from climbing over. She never showed any desire to leave that yard. Her favorite place was the garden on a nice sunny day, and I am grateful I was able to give her that in her golden years.



*Fencing and other enclosures enable even indoor cats to enjoy the sunshine outside.*

The most effective way of providing your cat with an appropriately appealing indoor environment is to know what your cat, and all cats, would enjoy in an outdoor setting. Cats, by instinct, have certain needs and desires, such as scratching, marking territorial boundaries, eating grass, chasing prey, and playing. By providing your cat with the proper equipment, toys, space, attention, and love (all of which will be discussed in this book), your cat will have at her disposal a complete environment—indoors.

The decision to keep your cat indoors is yours. But remember that owning a cat is a privilege that should not be taken lightly. A cat is not a toy; she is a living animal with feelings and needs. All cats, even ones who spend time outdoors, need and enjoy affection and playtime with their owners. They benefit from interaction, and it will benefit you as well. Cats are wonderful stress reducers, and that's been proven scientifically.

As you read this book, you will have a better perspective of what it will take to keep your indoor cat happy and make your feline friend the ultimate companion. And you will discover that an indoor cat, if given the proper environment, can truly be a happy cat.