

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Explaining the popularity of cats
- » Debunking some common misconceptions
- » Living with cats and allergies
- » Considerations of the indoor cat

# Chapter **1**

# Together, Forever: A History of Cats and People

**F**orget ancient Egypt, where the cat was honored as a god. The Golden Age of the Cat is now. More is written about cats, shared online about cats, and said about cats today than in all the generations before. Cats are the subject of musicals and movies, of research into their diseases, and of business reports that tally the billions of dollars spent worldwide to keep them healthy, clean, and amused. In the technology-heavy and time-short societies of developed countries, more people are discovering what poets, artists, and cat worshippers have known all along: Cats are much more than dog lite, they are cats: affectionate, beautiful, companions in their own right.

The cat is civilized — but never fully. As the velvety paws of a cat hide her razor-sharp claws, the sleek body, purring in contentment, conceals the wild spirit that lives in every cat ever born. The cat gave her companionship to us so that we may caress the tiger, as the saying goes, and on some level, that must surely be part of the charm. Our lives today are so far from what we were once — a people involved in the daily struggle for survival, hunters and seekers, both predator and prey. If we're haunted by our primeval memories still, our cats are not. They live theirs every day. And we share those memories a little whenever we welcome cats into our homes.

The idea is both exhilarating and reassuring.

The feline body is a perfect package of grace and symmetry, of function creating a form that has inspired humankind for generations. For a look at the feline body — and how to tell whether things aren't as they should be — see Chapter 16.

Although dogs and horses, cattle, pigs, and poultry — and even tomato plants and roses — have changed enormously in our hands, the cat has not. The cat has recently expanded in physical variety — different coat colors and types, different ear shapes and body types — but all such variations are relatively rare and still quite definitely cats, more alike than different. Look at the tabby-striped African Wild Cat — thought to be the ancestor of our domestic cats — and you see an animal much like the one purring in your lap.

The cat chose domestication on her own terms and chose our companionship the same way. We're only now starting to understand fully what a wonderful gift we've been offered.

## From Humble Beginnings: How Cats Became So Popular

As with the cats of ancient Egypt, changes in the way we live have prompted the cat's boom in popularity. Early humans found the pack instincts of dogs useful from the beginning — both for hunting and, later, for tending flocks — but the cat was of little use to humankind until our ancestors started cultivating and storing grain. The earliest evidence of domesticated cats dates from about 6,000 years ago — as opposed to 12,000 for dogs — but the most telling indications of the presence of domestic cats are about 4,000 years old.

The cat then became honored — even worshipped — for a skill we sometimes wish today had been lost along the way: hunting. Before the cat stepped in, rodents had a fine, fat time in the grain storage bins. The cat's hunting prowess evened the score a great deal and opened the door for small cats from Africa to take over the entire world, carried as useful workers on grain-laden ships throughout the ancient world. Farmers everywhere were grateful for their aid. Interesting fact: Experts believe “Hemingway cats,” also known as *polydactyls*, or cats with extra toes, were spread around the world this way.

Although you still find cats plying their trade as rodent-killers on farms all around the world (see Figure 1-1), the cat's greater role today is strictly as a companion. And in this, too, the cat excels.

As important as the cat's hunting skills were to our ancestors, today the sight of a half-eaten mouse brought in as a gift is appreciated by few. In Chapter 19, we set the record straight regarding a popular myth about cats and hunting.



**FIGURE 1-1:**  
The cat chose to be domesticated, but the hint of the wild always remains.

*Ilario/Photo by Gina Spadafori*

Two things have changed in developed countries to make the cat's rise in popularity inevitable.

First, more of us are living in smaller quarters — in apartments, in condominiums, in houses on smaller lots — than ever before. Although such conditions aren't so conducive to the keeping of dogs — even though many people make it work anyway — such living conditions are in no way a deterrent to keeping a cat, especially an indoors-only one. Cats quite happily share the same environments people choose, living in city apartments and on farms, in cold climates and in warm ones, in small houses and in mansions. Marvelously adaptable, most cats handle being alone better than many dogs do.

Second, many of us have little time or money for a pet — but a greater need for companionship than ever before. As children, we need someone to listen to us. As young adults, we delay starting a family — or choose never to start one at all,

choosing pets to be family instead. In our middle years, we're nearly pulled apart by the demands of job and family. Our older years may be more active than ever before but can also be lonely, spent far from our children.

Nonjudgmental listener and ever-affectionate companion, the cat makes a difference in many lives — and with relatively little investment of time and money. Truly, the cat has found a niche again — this time, to stay.



COOL CAT  
FACTS

Frances and Richard Lockridge knew how important cats can be to children when they observed in *The Quotable Cat* (Contemporary Books): “No cat has ever said, ‘I love you,’ except to the sensitive ears of children.” We think many cats have expressed their love — but sometimes adults aren’t listening well enough to hear them.



COOL CAT  
FACTS

## THANK YOU, EDWARD LOWE

One other thing made the transition of the cat from pest control to pet possible — or, rather, one person: Edward Lowe, the inventor of Kitty Litter.

Prior to Lowe’s brainstorm, cats either went outside to relieve themselves — as many still do, to the unhappiness of many a neighboring gardener — or went in boxes filled with sand, soil, or sawdust, none of them a very practical solution for easy clean-up and smell control.

In 1947, cat lover Kaye Draper of Cassopolis, Michigan, sought sawdust for her cat’s box from a local business. The firm also sold kiln-dried, granulated clay for cleaning up grease spills. Edward Lowe, son of the shop’s owner, suggested that the woman take home some of the absorbent clay instead, and an industry was born.

After she came back for more, Lowe decided he was on to something. He put the clay in five-pound bags, wrote “Kitty Litter” on the front, and suggested to a local store owner that he sell the bags of clay for 65 cents — at a time when sand went for a penny a pound. The owner laughed, so Lowe then changed strategies: “Give it away,” he said, “and see how it does.”

Kitty Litter made Lowe, who died in 1995, a millionaire many times over. The name of Kaye Draper’s cat somehow escaped being recorded for posterity. We think a little credit is due to him (or her), too.

(For more on cat-box fillers — how to choose them and how to use them — see Chapter 11.)

# Some Common Misconceptions about Cats — and the Facts

Even as cats reign supreme near the top of the pet popularity charts, a lot of people still harbor misconceptions about them. Many of these people would probably enjoy having a cat in their lives if they'd only open their minds and their hearts.

Most of the ideas about what cats *aren't* come from comparisons to what dogs *are*, and, of course, that's not the right way to look at things. Other ideas about cats apply to those who're mostly outdoor, or semi-wild. A cat who is well-socialized from birth and closely bonded with his human companions is another animal entirely.

Remember, too, that what's a fault in the eyes of some is a virtue in the eyes of others. The overexuberant affection of a bouncy big dog isn't for everyone, believe us. We hasten to add that while most cats aren't as overtly interactive as dogs, some really are happiest when in your face, and it's not unheard of to have a cat who likes to play fetch.

For more cat myths — and the truth — see Chapter 19.

And now, let us happily set matters straight.

## “All cats are cold fish”

No doubt about it — cats pick their moments. As they have from the first, cats choose the companionship of humans on their own terms.

Although some cat critics claim that the animals are in it only for the food, any cat lover knows otherwise. Cats are “in it” for the warmth, too. Laps, beds, and even the tops of TVs and computer monitors offer many opportunities for taking nice long naps, which cats spend most of their time doing (see Figure 1-2).

Oh, but it's more than that. Cats consider the people in their life as family and show it in many ways. If they bring you prey, they're providing for you. If they gently knead you with their paws while purring, they're treating you as they did their mothers. If they play with you, they're treating you as littermates or other cat pals. If they kiss you, don't kid yourself — it's legit!

**FIGURE 1-2:**  
A clean-smelling  
pile of warm  
laundry is heaven  
to many cats.



*Lightning/Photo by Lisa Wolff*

Cats need their contemplative moments (see Figure 1-3), of course, as do we all. A cat needs time to think — about how much she loves you . . . or how tasty that little mousy would be. But anyone who has lived with a cat will vouch for the sincerity and constancy of a cat’s affection.

People who don’t like cats often complain that a cat chooses a cat hater’s lap out of a whole room full of cat lovers who’d love to offer theirs. This behavior is often given as an example of the independent — or even malicious — nature of the cat. The truth is that something else is at work: Cats feel threatened by direct stares and avoid strangers who take such liberties. In a room full of cat lovers and one cat hater, probably only one person isn’t looking invitingly at the cat — and that’s the one who gets the cat’s vote.

## **“Cats love places, not people”**

Well-documented stories abound of cats traveling hundreds — even thousands — of miles to return to an old home after moving. This amazing behavior leads many people to believe that cats prefer places to people. Sadly, the same belief prompts some to leave their cats behind if they move, figuring that the animals are happier at the old house and hoping the new residents take them in.

Most of these abandoned cats join the sorry ranks of the free-roaming unowned — or are taken to the shelter to be euthanized.

**FIGURE 1-3:** Although cats can seem distant at times, they crave companionship.



*Grayheart/Photo by Randy Anderson*

That cats are very territorial and mark their own property certainly is true — they even mark you with their scent, as they rub against your legs, hands, or face. Their territorial behaviors don't mean they prefer places to people, but they do suggest that cats need time to realize the humans they love are in their new home — and may try to find you in your old house until they're settled.

Your cat loves you just as much in your new home as in your old one — but he needs time to adapt.

Moving a cat to a new home requires planning, patience, and care. For information on how to make the move work for you both, see Chapter 12.

## **“Cats can take care of themselves”**

Unquestionably, cats are easy-keepers. But anyone who adopts a cat thinking that cats are like houseplants, just more furry, is in for a big surprise. Kittens and cats seek and need attention and affection. They also need both preventive and routine care for any number of common ailments. Behavior problems such as litter-box avoidance are more common than most people think. To care for your cat well, you need a few basic supplies, a high-quality diet, and a veterinarian you know well enough to ask the questions you need answers to if problems arise, and who can help you establish a preventive-care plan to catch and prevent disease.

Although cats do need care, they are still low maintenance compared to a lot of other pets. Cats are wonderful pets for people who work, people who travel, and people who just want the easygoing companionship a cat can provide. Your cat always keeps up his end of the bargain — make sure that you keep up yours.



REMEMBER

Cats are among the most easy-going and adaptable pets to choose, but they do have needs that must be addressed to be happy and healthy. Your responsibility is to protect your cat and provide him with the care and love he needs. In return, you have a beautiful, loving companion for many, many years.

## Can You Have a Cat If You Have Allergies?

Even as more people than ever before have come to appreciate cats, one group of cat lovers keeps its distance — and wishes they didn't have to. That's because one of the biggest barriers to keeping a cat is allergies. More people are allergic to cats than to dogs, and cat allergies are oftentimes more severe as well. For people — and especially children — with asthma, cat allergies can be life-threatening.

The first thing you need to know about allergies is that the fur isn't what causes the problem; it's primarily an element called Fel D1 found in cat saliva and anal gland secretions and deposited on skin and fur when a cat grooms. This allergen becomes part of the dander — flakes of skin and secretions and saliva that a cat spreads wherever he wanders and that become airborne as he's petted or when he jumps or shakes.

The second thing you need to know relates to the first: Because the allergen-laden skin flakes are what cause the problems, it's unlikely you'll find a cat who doesn't trigger someone's allergies. Cats with little or no fur can't help you, allergists say — even though some breeders of cats such as the hairless Sphinx or the lightly furred Cornish and Devon Rexes insist otherwise, and some Siberian cats seem to be less likely to trigger allergy attacks. Different people react differently to each individual cat, though, and you may luck out with the cat you choose.

Still, some people live with both cats and allergies, and if you're considering doing so — or struggling with the situation already — find an allergist who doesn't greet you with, "First, find new homes for your pets." In some cases, for some people, that unfortunately becomes the ultimate — and only — resolution of the problem. But giving up your cat needn't be the starting point for attacking animal allergies. It's your life, after all.

Here are some other tips for living with cats and allergies:

- » **Don't neglect your other allergies.** Working with an allergist to get them under control may give you enough “breathing room” to make life with a cat bearable. Remember always that allergies and asthma are serious health problems, not to be taken lightly.
- » **Establish your bedroom as an “allergy-free zone.”** More than one-third of our life is spent sleeping, and so making that time less stressful for the body is very important. Close off your bedroom and reduce dust-collecting surfaces by removing carpets and rugs, wall hangings, stuffed animals, and collectibles from the room. Invest in an air cleaner and keep air ducts and ceiling fans clean. Banish feather pillows and down comforters. Use zippered, dustproof covers on the mattress and pillows. Combat dust mites by washing bedding frequently in hot water.

Make the bedroom completely off-limits to pets at all times. Although there's not a pet lover alive who doesn't enjoy a purring cat on the bed, keeping the bedroom “allergy-free” is probably a necessary compromise for allergy sufferers.
- » **Try to limit exposure to other allergens.** Avoid cleaning solutions, aerosol products, cigarette smoke, and strong perfumes and consider using a mask while doing yard work and housework, especially at the height of the pollen season. Better yet: Get someone else to mow the lawn, do the vacuuming, and clean the litter box. Again, keeping all allergies under control can help your body handle your cat more easily.
- » **Keep your pets clean and well groomed.** The best situation is for a member of the family who doesn't suffer from allergies to take over these pet-care chores. A weekly wipe-down with unscented baby-wipes helps keep the dander down and is just as effective as bathing a cat.
- » **Pay attention to new developments.** At the time of this writing, there was some promising news regarding a cat food that lowers allergy triggers. While this and other advances may or may not pan out in the long run, there is always a chance for a game-changer just around the corner.

## The Indoor versus Outdoor Controversy

With the evolution of the cat from semiwild hunter to loving companion animal has come a change not only in how cats are loved but also where cats are kept. Increasingly, more cats are living indoors (see Figure 1-4).

Still, even though litter boxes can be easy to care for and odor-free, some people refuse to deal with them. Add to these folks the ones who can't believe a cat can be happy unless he runs free, and you've got half of one of the hottest controversies among cat owners: Should cats be kept exclusively indoors, or should cats be permitted outside?



**FIGURE 1-4:**  
You must decide whether your cat will live indoors or out — or have access to both!

*Kelsey and Tim/Photo by Linda Stark*

The subject is so hot that almost all reputable breeders and an increasing number of shelters and rescue groups refuse to place a cat with someone who does not promise — in writing — to keep the animal exclusively indoors. With some breeds, this restriction is imperative: Imagine the tiny, nearly furless Devon Rex or the naked Sphynx trying to survive in the outdoors!

Outdoor cats are also far more prone to skin cancer called squamous cell carcinoma. It's a horrible disease that often results in the loss of their ears, or nose, and is often incurable, even with radical surgeries. Dr. Lauren, who went to veterinary school in Australia, notes that she saw more of this horrible disease there, since cats in other countries are far more likely to roam freely than pets in the United States.



WARNING

The truth, however, is that all cats are living dangerously if you allow them to go in and out at will. With correct diet and preventive care, an indoor cat can easily live for 15 to 20 years — or more. A cat with outdoor privileges is lucky to live a fraction as long, although many exceptions do exist, of course. Here's a list of the things that can “do in” the outdoor kitty:

- » **Cars:** Cats can be hit, of course, but cars also present a danger even when parked. Heat-loving kitties crawl up into the warm engine and can be seriously injured — or killed — if someone starts the car again while the cat is still there.
- » **Dogs:** Some dogs are gleeful cat killers, and woe to the cat who wanders into the territory of one of them. Some mean-spirited people even encourage their dogs to attack cats — and let the animals off the leash to do it!
- » **Coyotes:** A well-fed cat is a tasty temptation to wild predators such as coyotes. And you don't need to live in a rural area: Coyotes have been found even in Manhattan and are common in many other urban areas.
- » **Poisons:** From antifreeze puddles to garden chemicals to rat poison (in baits or the stomach of dead vermin) to plants, an outdoor cat can easily get a lethal dose of something he wouldn't be as easily exposed to indoors.
- » **Disease:** Feline leukemia and feline immunodeficiency virus are two of the contagious and often lethal diseases your cat can pick up from other cats — through close contact, including fighting. And speaking of fighting, outdoor cats spend a lot of their time defending their turf — and you spend a lot of your time and money taking them to the veterinarian to patch up their bite wounds and abscesses.
- » **People:** Some people hate cats and go out of their way to hurt them. Others — such as gardeners — feel justified taking action against cats who foul flower beds and vegetable gardens. These people all pose a grave danger to your pet.

Enough accidental and deliberate threats are out there to make keeping your cat inside seem like a very good idea. But consider things, too, from the angle of your responsibility. Are you really being fair to your neighbors if you let your cat relieve himself in their yards because you don't want to deal with a litter box? If your cat carries a disease such as feline leukemia, is letting him out to infect other pets the right thing for you to do? And if you haven't spayed or neutered your pet, doesn't allowing her (or him) out to breed make you partially responsible for the surplus kittens and cats killed by the millions each year?

We leave the answers up to you and to your conscience.

As for the other question of whether cats can be happy living an indoors-only life, the answer is a resounding “Yes!” Kittens raised indoors become cats who don’t miss the outdoors, and with patience, you can convert even grown cats. Toys, scratching posts, indoor gardens, and screened patios or balconies all make the indoor cat’s life special — as may the addition of a second cat (or even a dog) for companionship.

For more on what you need to keep a cat happy indoors, see Chapter 9.