

LET US PREY

Pat Miller

My cat's favorite television programs are documentaries about Africa. When zebras, warthogs and wildebeest gallop across the screen, Gewürztraminer's attention is riveted – he crouches low, his body tenses, his tail twitches – for all the world resembling his big cat cousins who hunt on the vast plains of the Masai Mara. He has even made an occasional grab with his paw for the careless zebra who strolls too near the front of the tube. Woe to the wayward mouse who wanders through our house – Gewurtz does not hesitate to put his Lion King dreams into action if given the opportunity.

The Call of the Wild

Hunting is an instinctive behavior for our cats, harking back to pre-domestication days before dinner came in a can. A wild cat's survival depends on her hunting prowess, as does the survival of her kittens and future generations of cats. Although our housecats are now far more dependent on the can opener than they are on their skills as a predator, the hunting instincts, in some, remain strong.

Most cat owners are well aware that some cats hunt and others don't. Dr. Solveig Pflueger is a human geneticist at Bayside Medical Center in Springfield, Massachusetts, a breeder of rare cat breeds, Chair of the Genetics Committee for The International Cat Association (TICA) and an all-breed judge for that organization. Pflueger has no doubt that genetics play a strong role in hunting instincts. Breeds that are more active and have a shorter history as housepets, such as the Siamese, Abyssinian, Munchkin and LaPerm, are far more likely to engage in actual hunting versus innocuous play behavior. The Siamese cat, until a century ago, was kept and prized for her skills at guarding granaries from marauding rodents. The Munchkin and LaPerm breeds are products of barn cats a scant three or four generations back, where the ability to hunt increased their chances of survival and procreation through natural selection, and increased their value to their barn owners. In contrast, the Persian cat has been bred for centuries to sit on laps and look elegant. Human selection for a lap-cat disposition is contrary to good hunting skills, and the average Persian wouldn't deign to lower herself to kill a mouse.

Instinct alone is not enough, however. According to Pflueger, in addition to instinct there is a learned component to hunting that accounts for some cats' success – and others' failure – in the larder-stocking department.

“Cats don't need to be taught to play,” says Pflueger, “virtually every kitten will chase a toy on a string. But the act of catching and killing prey is a learned behavior, a skill. Mother cats must *teach* their kittens to hunt and kill.”

There is a learning window that Pflueger estimates to be between the ages of five or six weeks until four to six months, during which time the kitten must receive tutoring in order to become a top-notch hunter. After that, it may be possible for her to learn through association with other cats – but it may not. The ability to learn hunting skills certainly diminishes with age.

Don't Play With Your Food

Feline critics often point to a cat's predilection to catch, play with and kill small animals without actually eating them as proof of feline decadence. Without dwelling on the point that some humans regularly engage in somewhat similar behaviors, there are two answers to the age-old question of why cats don't always eat what they kill: hunger,

and instinct. Hunger is one factor in a cat's prey drive, and if food were in short supply she would undoubtedly consume her kill. Cats also hunt simply because they know how, and because the opportunity presents itself. When something rustles in the grass, or a bird hops past on a nearby driveway, the mighty hunter switches into autopilot mode; crouch, tense, tail twitch, wriggle and *pounce*. Only after the unfortunate victim has ceased struggling does the cat perhaps stop and think – hmmm, I'm not really hungry now, am I? If she knew how to use a freezer, maybe she'd put her kill away for a rainy day. Since she doesn't, she often proudly brings the tiny body home to her owner as a trophy. Many a dismayed owner has punished her cat for bringing home dead songbirds, only to find that punishment does no good whatsoever. Because the punishment is too far removed from the act of catching and killing the bird, the cat has no clue why her owner is upset. If anything, it may decrease the likelihood of Kitty bringing her prey home, but it's not likely to stop the killing itself. Maybe if we mounted the tiny little heads on plaques and hung them on the wall over Kitty's bed?

Keeping a cat well fed also is not an effective way to prevent predatory behavior. A well fed cat is less likely to eat her prey, but not any less likely to kill it.

The Peaceable Kingdom

While some cat owners are quite appreciative of their cats' hunting abilities when it comes to maintaining a mouseless house, others would prefer to have a cat with a "reverence for all life" philosophy. Pflueger offers some tips for those who would like to have a peaceable household where Tweety and Sylvester can be best of friends:

- Start with a young kitten who can grow up thinking of small companion animals as friends rather than prey.
- Look for a kitten whose mother was not a good mouser, and who therefore probably didn't spend any time teaching her babies to hunt.
- Introduce the kitten to the resident hamster or parakeet at as early an age as possible, and frequently. Monitor interactions between them so that Baby Cat's interest in her playmate doesn't escalate from benign to "be breakfast."
- Select a breed (or breed-type) of cat, like the Persian, who has long been domesticated and genetically selected for strong lap instincts.
- Look for a cat who tends toward sedentary, rather than very active and athletic.
- Try a string-toy test. A cat who pounces on the toy with glee won't necessarily make a good mouser, but one who ignores it totally is less likely to be turned on by small feathered and furry things moving around her.

If someone is looking for a cat companion who can do double duty as mouse patrol, she should look for the opposite qualities. In addition, while there are male cats who are good hunters, as a general rule females tend to be better – perhaps because they are programmed to bring food home to the wee ones and teach *them* to hunt.

Another important key to maintaining a peaceable kingdom is keeping your cat indoors, far from the risks of speeding automobiles, anti-freeze, cat diseases, roaming dogs, and humans with evil intentions. Not only is *she* more likely to live a longer, healthier life, but so are the birds and other small prey animals outside your picture window. You can't train a cat not to hunt, but you can prevent her access to small game. You can provide toys and games to keep her amused, occupied and exercised – important qualities of life for an indoor cat – and to give her prey behaviors a more benevolent outlet.

While you're at it, don't forget kitty TV. Some companies produce videos of birds and small rodents being active in natural settings, and some cats love to watch them. Or just see what's on the tube. My cat's second favorite shows are football games – he loves to watch the little figures dart around on the screen. It's a good thing Joe Montana, Steve Young and John Elway are retired – they managed to end their illustrious careers without falling prey to the horrible jaws of the mighty Gewürztraminer.