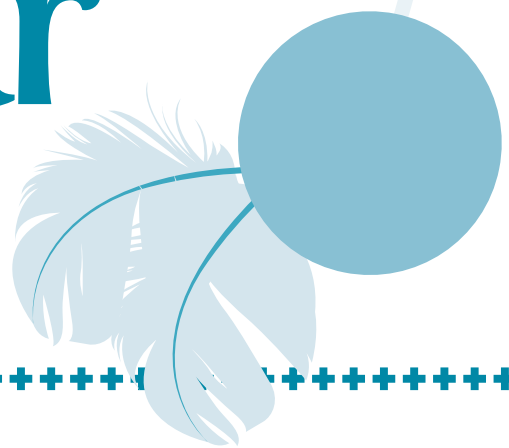


Behaviour matters



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Nicky Trevorrow ponders the question – top cat, boss cat, alpha cat? (part one)

We are constantly bombarded with pet dominance information almost on a daily basis from all kinds of different sources. Once you look for words like 'alpha', you'll start to notice how frequently they come up. Many pet shops sell cat bowls or feeding mats that are labelled 'Boss cat' for example. There are programmes on television promoting the idea of 'being the alpha' in the relationship with your pet. Many owners with two or more cats often attribute one of their cats as being the 'top cat' over the others. These words are ingrained in our common usage, almost subconsciously, without thinking about what they really mean and whether they are a useful way to explain cat behaviour.

Wild at heart

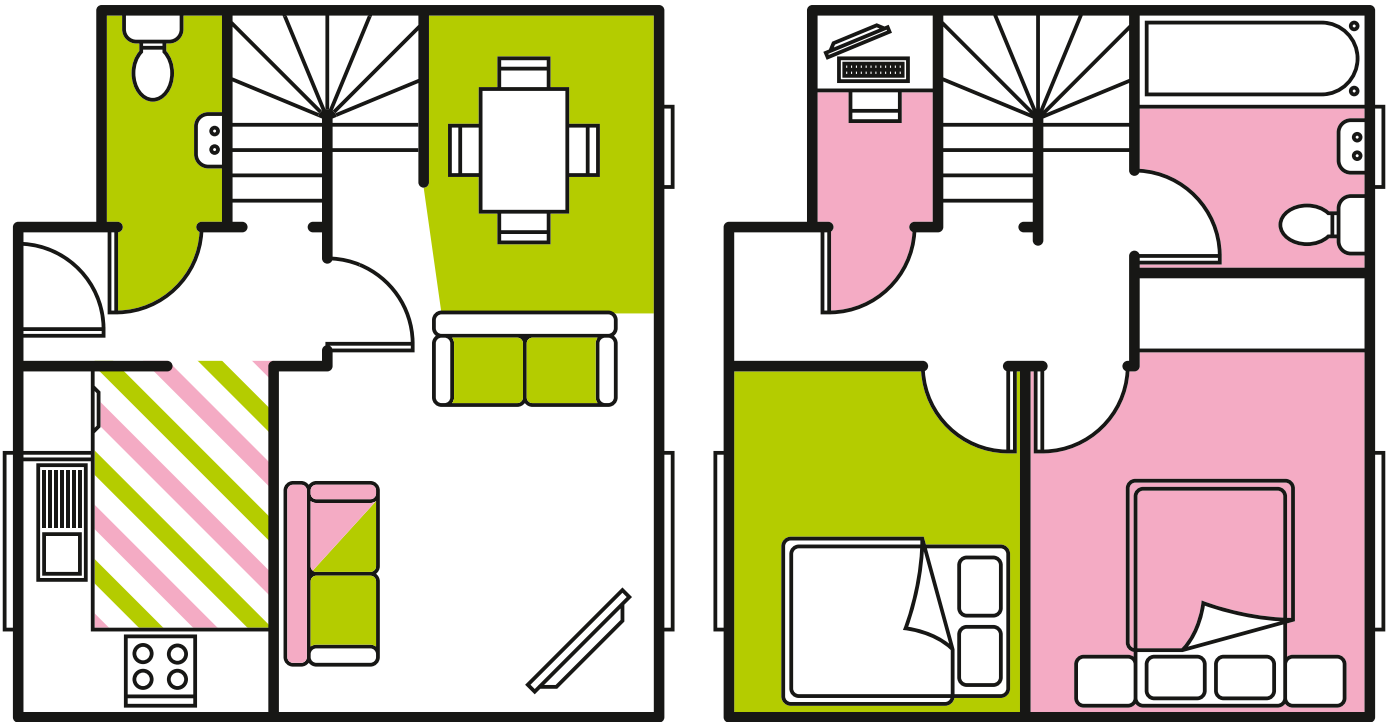
In order to understand our pet cats, it is helpful to appreciate their behaviour in the natural environment, which for domesticated species also includes looking at their ancestry. Domestic cats have a shared ancestry with the African wildcat. People have only been selectively breeding cats for the last 200 years, so genetically and behaviourally they are very similar to their wild ancestors. The underlying 'blueprint' for their behaviour as a species is essentially solitary. We can still see signs of their ancestry in the behaviour of today's pet cat. Their ancestry explains why scent communication is so important to them compared to visual or vocal communication; cats would rather leave a scent message that persists after they have left, in order to avoid conflict with other cats. It is precisely this solitary background which starts to unpick the idea of dominance hierarchies in cats.

Food for thought

On top of their 'baseline' behaviour, there are layers. Cats don't need friends, however some cats may choose a particular cat as a friend. As we've seen in previous issues of *The Cat*, each cat varies in how sociable they are with other cats. It is easy to see how tempting it is to ascribe the 'dominance' label to groups of cats – a common scenario is how cats behave around food. If a cat is not in the food bowl first, or appears to be 'holding back', it is often assumed that this is the submissive cat and that the dominant cat always gets the food first. Given that cats are territorial animals, they merely want all the resources, like food, for themselves. The differences we see in their interactions can be explained by looking at the cats' personalities, such as confident or nervous cats, their motivation, medical conditions and learning from past experiences.

If we look at my previous cats, Alex and Amber, who were siblings in the same social group from my local Cats Protection branch, they are the perfect example. In times past, I used to think that Alex was the 'dominant' cat as he often ate first, while Amber seemed to fit with the 'subordinate' role.

The beauty of science is that new research is regularly reshaping our ideas and progressing our learning. So with this in mind, I can re-evaluate the situation and describe Alex as a bold, food-motivated cat. Amber had a naturally shy disposition since being a kitten and was average in terms of food motivation. However Amber was extremely tuna-motivated! So much so, that she would carefully put her paw in Alex's bowl and pull it towards her. Previous experience told Amber that this had worked in the past with no reaction from her brother. This was a learnt behaviour as it had a successful



In this example, one cat predominantly lives upstairs in the pink areas, while the other cat mostly lives downstairs in the green areas. They 'time share' the sofa by one cat using it in the morning and the other in the afternoon. The kitchen has both colours as they are fed together in the kitchen (like many cats are), however they would prefer to eat in their separate territories.

outcome, so she continued to do it. If Alex had a medical condition that actually put him off his food, that again would explain why Amber might choose to eat all the food available.

My space or yours?

Cats are very subtle in their use of space. It is common for one cat in a multi-cat household to predominately reside upstairs while another cat lives downstairs. Unless owners draw up a house plan to examine their cats' use of space, it can be easily overlooked. However, most owners notice the change in their cats' behaviour if one sadly passes away. Frequently many people will comment that perhaps their 'dominant' cat died and therefore the submissive cat is behaving differently as a result, and often talk of groups of cats 'fighting for the new top spot' or 'reorganising the pecking order'. What people are noticing is that the remaining cat starts to use the rest of the house. Now rather than being suppressed by a so-called dominant cat, the explanation is much simpler: the cat is using more space in the house... because they can! The space is available for the taking, so they spread out. It's similar to a situation in which you have a housemate and you share common areas like the kitchen and lounge but avoid their bedroom, not because they are dominant, but because it is their territory. If they move out, you will naturally spread out your things across the whole house.

This is a fascinating area of behaviour that many owners can relate to when looking at their own multi-cat households. There are a number of ways to look at various interactions between cats and explain them using modern research. In the next issue, we'll be looking in more detail about where the idea of dominance hierarchies originated and why 'alpha' is such a commonly used word in our vocabulary. ●



Photo: Dawn Gibson

Not dominance, just a preference of resources. Libby will sleep on the radiator bed, whereas Willow prefers the floor as it is nice and warm too!