

The Truth About Cats: Are They Really Domesticated? [C1]

A differenza dei cani, i gatti non sono molto diversi dai loro parenti selvatici. Pertanto, sebbene abbiano sviluppato una serie di comportamenti per adattarsi all'uomo, gli etologi hanno scoperto che, dopo 10.000 anni di addomesticamento, si sono evoluti piuttosto poco.



Few people would [mistake](#) a wolf for a dog. But if you saw the ancestor of the domestic cat in your [backyard](#), your first thought would likely be “What a cool-looking house cat!” rather than “What’s an African wildcat doing in Manchester?” That’s how little they’ve changed, earning them the tag “[barely](#)” or “semi-domesticated”. There have been some minor anatomical shifts — domestic cats have longer intestines and smaller brains, for example — but very few genetic ones (and certainly many fewer than separate dogs from their wild ancestors.) What about [behaviour](#), then? Which of the [traits](#) that we commonly associate with our [furry](#) friends are the result of domestication, and which do they share with their wild relatives? Let’s start with the classic cat sound. Anyone who has lived with a cat has experienced their household companion meowing to them, clearly trying to communicate something or other (perhaps “dinner time” or “Help,

I'm locked in the closet"). I had always assumed that cats talked to each other by meowing, and that they were just including us in their social circle. However, detailed behavioural observations of unowned groups of cats living in southern England have revealed that they rarely meow among themselves. Does this finding indicate that cats evolved the ability to meow over the last few thousand years as part of the domestication process? Nope. All small species of wild feline — of which there are many — meow. Instead, the domestic cat has modified this sound, making it shorter, higher-pitched and more pleasing to our ears. Researchers have suggested that humans have an innate preference for high-pitched sounds and that cats adapted accordingly. And it's not just the meow. Scientists at the University of Sussex have shown that when cats want something (usually food), they deploy an insistent, chainsaw-like purr that bears some phonetic resemblance to a human baby's cry. Other small feline species also purr, so this is most likely another example of an existing trait cleverly adapted to manipulate us into getting what they want. However, there is one behaviour that domestic cats exhibit that is nearly unique among felines and thus must be a trait involved during domestication; nonetheless, it is directed to other cats as much as it is to humans. When my cat, Nelson, gets out of our garden, I have to go and find him. As I call to him in my best "Nelson, buddy" voice, he eventually starts walking, or sometimes running, towards me. As he gets closer, his tail springs straight up into the air, a rear-end exclamation point; when he gets to me, he rubs his cheeks and flank against my leg, purring the whole time. Sometimes he behaves similarly inside when he's in a loving mood, approaching with tail held high, then licking my hand or foot in exchange for caresses, sometimes even rolling on his back for bellyrubs. Domestic cats use this same flagpole signal when they interact with each other: the upright tail means "I come in peace" or maybe "Glad to see you!" It's an indication they want to engage in other friendly behaviours such as head- and body-rubbing, nose-touching and sniffing; other cats return the vertical salute to show they're receptive to such an interaction. The fact that cats use their tails to signal amiable intentions to us as well is a great tribute, indicating we've attained honorary cat status. Only one other feline species uses its tail in a similar way. Surprisingly, it's not a similar-sized relative, but, rather, the king

of the jungle. When [greeting](#) each other, members of a lion [pride](#) will raise their [tails](#) — though more in a curved semicircle than straight up. How did two such different felines end up acting in the same way? Well, consider that lions are deservedly known as the only truly social wild feline species, living in [prides](#) of as many as twenty cats. The [core](#) of the [pride](#) is made up of females, all of whom are [related](#). Pride members are famous for their sociability: [grooming](#), playing, [lying](#) on top of one another, even [nursing](#) each other's [cubs](#) and hunting cooperatively. Domestic cats are thought to be like other felines: solitary, [aloof](#) and asocial. But that is not always the case. When [unowned](#) cats occur in large, dense populations — as happens when people provide a lot of food — they do live in groups, composed mainly of [related](#) females. Like lions, the cats are extremely sociable, even serving as [midwives](#) during birth, and again like lions, they are unfriendly to members of other groups. Why a group of cats is called a [clowder](#) and not a [pride is beyond me](#). This similar social structure is what explains the independent evolution of [tail](#)-signalling in cats and lions. When interactions are common, a way of indicating friendly intentions is needed, and what better piece of anatomy to use than a [tail](#) — visible at a distance and not used for other purposes? [dropping](#) Why, then, do we consider domestic cats to be [loners](#)? Remember that the key aspect of lion and domestic cat groups is that they are made up of female relatives. But when multiple cats are brought together in the same house, they often arrive at different times, from different families. Not surprisingly, they frequently don't [get along](#). Although it's not impossible for two [unrelated](#) cats to develop a friendly relationship, a better approach is to bring [littermates](#) into a home together. The domestic cat may not have evolved much from the African wildcat, but the changes that have occurred have produced household companions that are both friendlier and better able to manipulate us. Some [breeds](#) have been selected to be even more attentive [chums](#), essentially dogs in cat's clothing. For example, without any training at all, Nelson announces playtime by bringing his toys and [dropping](#) them at my feet, [fetching](#) them when they're thrown across the room. And as for the disturbing claim that your cat would eat you if you died at home and your body weren't discovered: don't believe it. Research shows that dogs are the [culprit](#) much more frequently. Despite

the still-wild nature of cats, I know which species I prefer to live with.
Published in The Guardian on June 5, 2023. Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **nonetheless** = tuttavia
- **sniffing** = annusare
- **loners** = solitari
- **breeds** = razze
- **chainsaw-like** = come una motosega
- **tail** = coda
- **belly rubs** = massaggi sulla pancia
- **to engage in** = impegnarsi in
- **lying** = giacere
- **littermates** = fratelli di cucciolata
- **is beyond me** = mi sfugge
- **dropping** = depositare, lasciar cadere
- **I'm locked in** = essere chiuso dentro
- **purr** = fare le fusa
- **springs** = saltare
- **rear-end** = parte posteriore
- **flank** = stare di fianco
- **flagpole** = portabandiera
- **fetching** = recuperare
- **mistake** = confondere
- **furry** = pelosi
- **Nope** = no, macché
- **rubs** = strofinare
- **upright** = in verticale
- **chums** = amici, compagni
- **pride** = orgoglio
- **grooming** = pulirsi
- **backyard** = cortile posteriore
- **traits** = caratteristiche
- **accordingly** = adeguatamente
- **thus** = così
- **buddy** = compagno, amico
- **greeting** = salutare

- **aloof** = distante
- **culprit** = colpevole, responsabile
- **barely** = difficilmente
- **caresses** = accarezzare
- **cubs** = cuccioli
- **get along** = andare d'accordo
- **behaviour** = comportamento
- **higher-pitched** = più acuto
- **cleverly** = intelligentemente
- **cheeks** = guance
- **licking** = leccare
- **core** = nucleo
- **clowder** = colonia (di gatti)
- **unowned** = senza padrone
- **deploy** = usare
- **rolling on his back** = rotolarsi sulla schiena
- **related** = imparentate
- **nursing** = prendersi cura
- **midwives** = assistenti al parto