



A domestic house cat, *Felis catus*, at the Hutchinson Zoo in Kansas.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL SARTORE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTO ARK

ANIMALS

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Domestic cat



COMMON NAME: Domestic Cat

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Felis catus*

TYPE: Mammals

DIET: Carnivore

SIZE: 28 inches

WEIGHT: 5 to 20 pounds

SIZE RELATIVE TO A 6-FT MAN:





IUCN RED LIST STATUS: ? **Not evaluated**



CURRENT POPULATION TREND: Unknown

Where do cats come from?

From ancient Egyptians to today's internet users, people have always loved their cats.

In the U.S. alone, cats reign over about 45.3 million households. There are at least 45 domestic breeds, which differ widely in features such as coat color, tail length, hair texture, and temperament, according to the Cat Fancier's Association.

The Maine Coon is the largest, with males reaching an average of 3.5 feet long. The smallest breed is the Singapura, native to Singapore, with adult females weighing as little as four pounds. One of the most unusual-looking cats is the Sphynx, a mostly hairless cat known for being robust and intelligent.

Like their big cat cousins, house cats are obligate carnivores, meaning they have to eat meat to stay healthy. Though they've been domesticated for thousands of years, these predators have maintained a strong hunting instinct, relying on stealth to stalk prey and attack with sharp claws and teeth. (Learn surprising things you never knew about your cat.)

As mostly nocturnal animals, cats have excellent vision and hearing, with ears that can turn like satellite dishes. Their reputation for having nine lives stems in part from their ability to navigate difficult environments, for example using their tail to balance and mostly land their lean, muscular bodies on all fours. Cushioning discs between vertebrae also give cat bodies exceptional flexibility and speed.

Kitty origins

People began to domesticate cats in the Fertile Crescent about 10,000 years ago, according to DNA research. Modern-day cats descended from a subspecies of African wildcat, *Felis silvestris lybica*, which today is the most common and widespread wildcat. (*Read more about little-known small wildcats.*)

Thousands of years ago, these wildcats were likely drawn to human settlements and their plentiful mice and food scraps. People realized these rodent catchers were helpful to have around, and eventually the two species began living together. Later, people began to bring felines aboard ships as they traveled the world. (*Read about house cat ancestors' remains found in Polish caves.*)

Another, independent foray into cat domestication occurred in China about 5,000 years ago with another wildcat species the leopard cat. Since domestic cats today aren't related to leopard cats, the harmony doesn't seem to have lasted.

Reproduction

Females reach sexual maturity at just four months old and go into heat several times a year. Gestation lasts about 64 days, with an average litter size of four kittens. Young are usually weaned at two months old and grow rapidly, reaching adult size by the time they're 10 months to a year old.

One litter of kittens can have multiple fathers, a phenomenon more likely in city cats due to crowding and lower aggression among males.

Speaking feline

Cats are masters at communicating with other cats and their human caregivers. For instance, a quickly swishing tail signals aggression, while a tucked tail means they're nervous.

When relaxed, a cat will move its ears forward and point its tail up in the air or perpendicular to the ground. (*Related: "What is your cat trying to tell you? Vets weigh in."*)

When cats rub their faces on the furniture, other cats, or a person, it may be a behavior called bunting. Cats have scent glands in their face, and

bunting allows them to mark their territory, bond with other cats, or show affection.

Speaking of, if you want to make your cat feel comfortable, look them in the eye and blink your eyes very slowly. They recognize this as a sign of friendliness, and you may notice them returning the slow blink—a sign of contentedness.

And it wouldn't hurt to call them Your Majesty.

DID YOU KNOW

Like humans, cats display a preference for a particular paw, with males more often favoring their left paw and females their right.

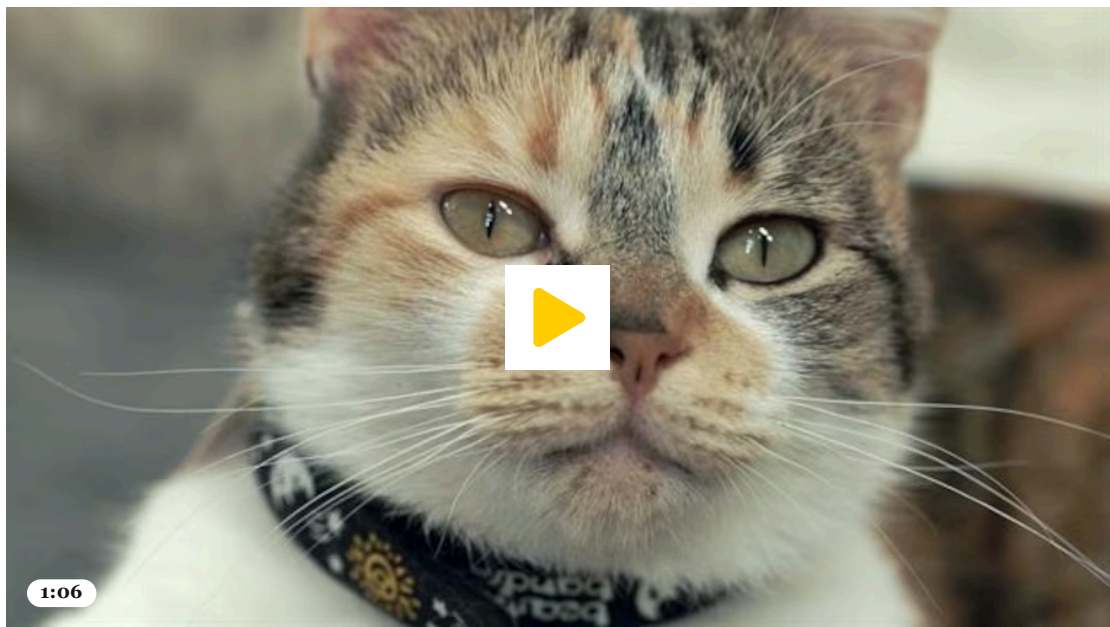
—*Animal Behaviour*

If the family cat died in an ancient Egyptian household, family members might shave their eyebrows as a show of mourning.

—University College London

Domestic cats lack a taste receptor for sweetness.

—*Journal of Nutrition*



THE SCIENCE OF MEOW

Do you know what your cat is saying when it meows at you? Researchers in Sweden are trying to give us a better idea by identifying melodic patterns in cat vocalizations.



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