

Tips for cat owners

Setting limits for the safety of your cat & wildlife

The SPCA receives over 4,000 homeless cats each year. In our efforts to find loving homes for as many animals as possible, we do allow the adoption of outdoor cats. Yet at our Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center, we also care for orphaned and sick wild animals—some of which are injured by cats. As a full-service humane society, we need your help in resolving this conflict.

We encourage all pet owners to honestly evaluate their responsibility to their pet, their neighbors and wildlife.

Depending on your cat's propensity to hunt, the type of outdoor environment around your home, your personal lifestyle and many other factors, it may be best to limit outdoor access to protect your cat from danger and to protect wildlife from your cat. Supervising and confining your feline is the only way to be sure you're protecting wildlife. Bells and declawing are no guarantee against predation, and may be detrimental to your cat.

These tips can help you move your feline indoors, limit your cat's roaming, or simply transform your house into a more cat-friendly environment that your pet can't resist. (*Note: all these suggestions assume that your cat is spayed or neutered. If you allow an unaltered cat to roam unchecked, you are not a responsible pet owner! Please alter your pet to reduce unwanted litters and save wildlife—altered cats are less likely to roam and hunt.*)

To transition a cat indoors or limit roaming

You can make a big difference by keeping your cat inside at night. Most cat predation occurs at dawn and dusk when wildlife is most active. Establish a routine of feeding your animal inside before dark. Confine your cat to one small room (a bathroom or utility room) between dusk and dawn. Provide a litter box with a mix of soil and litter. Visit the room frequently to lavish your cat with attention, and place the cat in the litter box each time. After a few days, allow well-supervised access to the rest of the house and introduce your cat to his permanent litter box. Once he is using the second box regularly you can remove the first one.

The key is to change your cat's routine slowly—they are creatures of habit. Allow supervised outdoor play only during daylight, and gradually reduce the time to fit your schedule or until your cat is exclusively indoors. If your cat will not stay in the yard, you can gradually introduce him to a harness attached to a leash or safety line (never leave the cat unattended). While you may not be able to "walk" your cat like you would a dog, you can then enjoy reading, gardening or interacting with your cat while he roams safely within your view.

While you reduce time spent outdoors, substitute special attention indoors. You must replace the stimuli you're taking away. The myth that cats become fat and lazy indoors is only true when they are fed too much and have a boring environment. Some ideas: leave out open paper bags, cut holes and flaps in cardboard boxes, put a ping-pong ball in the bathtub or just play "chase me." The cheaper toys are often the favorites: non-toxic soap bubbles, a piece of rope, flashlight beams to chase, balls to bat around, an old sock, and the "Cat Dancer" toys on the end of a wire.

Don't give in to complaining during the time of transition. For many cats, going to the door is just another way of asking for something to do, so divert their attention with a favorite toy or activity.

If your cat wakes you up by crying at 3 am, remind yourself why you are making this change: for the safety of your pet and wildlife. Remember that dying animal your cat brought in the house? Don't push the image away! Take a long look to help bolster your conviction. Remind yourself that cat "trophy" represent only a fraction of prey killed. Initially, you may need to confine your cat to another room or a cat kennel while you sleep. Domesticated cats are no longer truly nocturnal and there is no reason why they can't sleep when we do.

Remember that your cat's annoying behavior is only temporary. The more consistent your behavior, the shorter the transition will be. Most cats will settle into the new routine in weeks, and both you and your cat will benefit from the closer relationship that develops.

To enclose outdoor areas

Create an outdoor play space for your cat.

Screen a porch or patio for your cat to use, or enclose the "dead-end" space between your house and a fence. You can adapt a commercially available aviary into a cat "playhouse" with scratching and climbing poles, sunny platform perches at different heights, a potted catnip plant, suspended cat toys, etc., or build your own simple A-frame "condo" of wood and wire. You can then connect the play area to the house via a cat door or window walkway.

Confine your cat to your property by altering an existing fence. Attach aluminum flashing or small gauge chicken wire to the top of the fence and angle it into your property. Aesthetically pleasing, ready-to-install mesh fence add-ons are also commercially available to keep your cat in and other cats out (see side listing).

Protect areas of your yard that attract vulnerable wildlife. If an area of your yard has habitat value, don't let it become a "bait station" for your cat. Enclose the area with a low-cost "floppy" fence made from small-gauge chicken wire or plastic roll-up fencing. Angle the top of the fence slightly outward and felines won't climb the unstable structure. This is a good temporary solution to protect specific nesting sites—even a single bush or tree—during the spring baby season.

For cat fencing and tree barriers:

Cat Fence-In Systems,
P.O. Box 795,
Sparks, NV 89432
702/359-4575

For more information:

American Bird Conservancy's
"Campaign for Safer Birds & Cats"
1250 24th St. NW,
Suite 400,
Washington, DC
20037
202/778-9666
lwinter@abcbirds.org

References:

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Churcher and Lawton, 1987, *Predation by Domestic Cats in an English Village*, *Journal of Zoology* 212:439-455.

George, William, 1974, *Domestic Cats as Predators and Factors in Winter Shortages of Raptor Prey*, *The Wilson Bulletin* 86(4):384-396.

Harrison, George, 1992, *Is There a Killer in Your House?*, *National Wildlife*, 30(6):10-13.

For further reading see: *A bibliography of Feral, Stray, and Free-roaming Domestic Cats in Relation to Wildlife Conservation*, Ronald Jurek, April, 1994, California Department of Fish and Game, Nongame Bird and Mammal Program Report No. 94-5.

If your cat is threatening nests or feeders in trees, wrap a 2-3 foot wide strip of flashing around the trunk about 4-6 feet off the ground to prevent climbing, or use a commercially available barrier (see side listing). Even aluminium foil is enough to deter some cats.

clothes with a towel—in multiple cat households a chest of drawers can be a popular “bunkbed.” Your free lap, while you read or watch TV, may be the favorite spot.

Grow a couple pots of grass, kitty greens or catnip so your greens-loving cat always has a fresh supply in the house.

Provide a compatible companion. While another cat is no substitute for your attention, another feline can greatly enhance the quality of your pet’s life. Most people with multiple cat households wouldn’t think of having only one cat again. When you see cats grooming each other, playing chase, or napping peacefully side by side, you know they are sharing something special. While it usually takes time for cats to bond, the rewards are great. Introduce a new cat when you have the time to introduce them gradually and provide extra attention.

If behavior continues to be a problem, chances are that routines were changed too abruptly, or a lack of stimuli or attention is causing boredom or loneliness. Keep in mind that your cat was not necessarily “happier” before; more likely, increased contact with your pet is allowing you to notice some of his behavioral traits and unmet needs for the first time. Go through this checklist to honestly see what might be lacking. If you feel your case is special, contact a reputable animal behaviorist.

Providing a cat-friendly home

Get a scratching post at least two feet high so your cat can stretch. Cats prefer sisal or wood over carpeting, which catches on claws.

Be sure to clean the litter box every day, especially if your cat is spending more time inside. If accidents happen: change the box more often, make sure the box is in a quiet place away from sleeping and eating areas, try adding a new box (or two) in a new location, or experiment with different litters.

Provide comfortable window perches. Make sure screens are secure so you can open windows for breezes and scents.

Reserve a few inviting spots for cat naps. Felines like to change where they sleep periodically, sometimes in a hidden spot, sometimes sprawled in a sunbeam. Be creative: put a soft blanket on a shelf in the closet or cupboard. Pull out a drawer and cover your

Provide an outdoor play area

- Build an A-frame enclosure or adapt a commercially available aviary for your cat.
- Provide outdoor climbing structures, clawing station and sunbathing perches.
- Connect outdoor enclosures to the house via a window walkway or cat door.

Enclose a section of your home

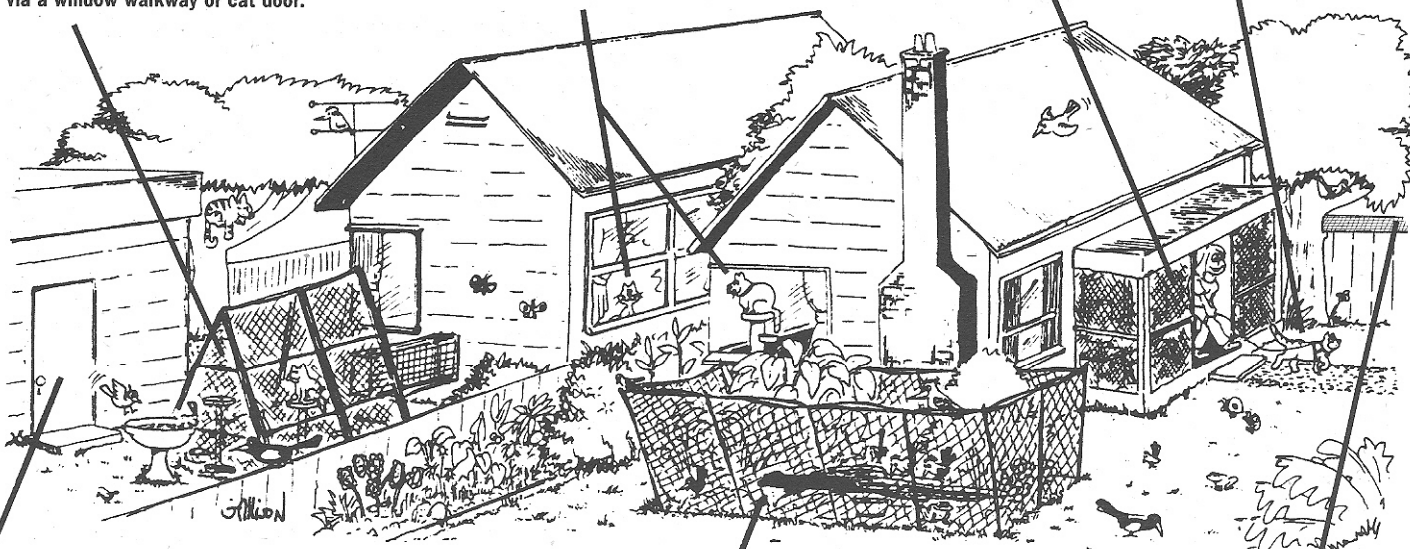
- Enclose a front porch or balcony with chicken wire or invisible fencing (remember to trim or secure any overhanging tree limbs).
- Enclose a “dead-end” section of your yard between your house and a fence, and provide access via a window or cat door.

Keep your cat inside with you

- Enjoy each other’s company all the time!

Allow supervised outdoor play

- Let your cat keep you company while you garden or read.
- Train your cat to a harness and leash if he won’t stay on your property.



Use the garage for overnight confinement

- If you absolutely cannot keep your cat in the house due to allergies, etc. provide a warm, cozy spot (with food and water) for the night. Most cat predation occurs at dawn and dusk when wildlife is most active.

Use low-cost fencing to exclude cats or enclose cats

- Build a floppy wire fence from small gauge chicken wire and angle the top outwards from the center to create a safe haven for nesting birds and other wildlife.
- Build the fence in reverse, angling the top inwards towards the center, to create a temporary or permanent cat play area.

Build a cat-proof boundary fence

- Attach small gauge chicken wire, aluminum flashing or a commercially available system (see sidebar) to the top of your existing fence and angle it into your property.
- Remember to secure tree “escape routes” by erecting a barrier at a suitable height up the tree.