

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

CATS

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NEW TITLE

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

CATS



Vicky Halls



Hammersley House
5-8 Warwick Street
London W1B 5LX
United Kingdom

Email: info@bluffers.com
Website: bluffers.com
Twitter: [@BluffersGuide](https://twitter.com/BluffersGuide)

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CONTENTS

It's a Cat's Life	5
Feline Timeline	9
Domestication and Deification	19
A Day in the Life...	25
Good Breeding	33
Character Reference	47
Feline Bad	59
Cat Whispering	73
Up Close and Personal	87
Cat People	97
The Cat's Got <i>What</i> ...?	105
Glossary	115



‘There is, incidentally, no way of talking about cats that enables one to come off as a sane person.’

Dan Greenberg, writer and humourist

IT'S A CAT'S LIFE

There is one thing you need to know from the beginning. The cat is the most popular pet in the world. There are hundreds of millions of owned cats, not to mention those that choose to live independently, and numbers are continuing to rise as emerging economies discover the delights of the feline companion. Cats have, with a little help from man, adapted to live comfortably in every continent apart from Antarctica, although it is possible that as you read this, they may well be navigating the Southern Ocean, aiming in its general direction. The cat has world domination as its ultimate goal.

Whether you like it or not, cats are here to stay and statistically you are very likely at some stage to want or need to impress a cat lover (or ailurophile, as they are also known, if you want to start establishing your bluffing credentials early on). If you need any more incentive to read on, partners are often chosen based on their response to a beloved cat, and vice versa. It pays to know how to endear yourself to the human object-of-your-affection's pampered puss.

The cat is a very enigmatic creature, which means that over thousands of years of domestication, they have given nothing away about what they are really about. If you ever approach a cat and look deep into its eyes, you can almost hear it saying, 'Yeah? Go on, clever dick, what am I thinking right now?' In fact, this book's first lesson is NEVER to stare deep into their eyes. This is highly challenging behaviour and you may not get away with it.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the 'riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma' that is called a 'cat' is basically laughing at you. Humankind has consistently, and very efficiently, managed to learn very little about the cat as a species, maintaining a persistent state of unconscious incompetence. To quote the now-infamous words of Donald Rumsfeld, 'There are things we don't know we don't know.' What has happened in reality is that cat lovers have made it up as they go along, believing all sorts of myths and fancies about the cat's likes and dislikes, and resisting with great vigour any scientific or well-informed information to the contrary. What they think they know about cats is much more fun ... for most.

Your dilemma therefore is: do you bluff the real stuff and stand up and be counted among the few who actually have an inkling of what's going on, or do you bluff the myths? *The Bluffer's Guide to Cats* will steer you through a winding path of nods to the nonsensical (why spoil a happy delusion?) via a few interesting highways of real facts. You may then choose which road to take.

The true bluffer acknowledges the enigmatic nature

of the cat and is equally enigmatic regarding his or her own knowledge on the subject. True to the bluffer's credo, this is very much a question of not so much what is said but what is left out. If you nod slowly, with a suitably thoughtful expression, for a sufficient period, you may stop a conversation in its tracks before it really gets started. If you feel something still needs to be said, you can use one of the 'feline fillers' listed at the end of each chapter to act as a subject changer. If all else fails, you can always go with the ultimate showstopper: 'But of course, can we ever say the cat is actually domesticated...?'



'I have noticed that what cats
most appreciate in a human being is not
the ability to produce food ...
but his or her entertainment value.'

Geoffrey Household, British thriller writer

Science moves on and facts cease to be facts, replaced by new facts that also have an inevitable shelf life (see Samuel Arbesman's *The Half-Life of Facts: Why Everything We Know Has an Expiration Date*). This guide will inform aspiring bluffers based on the current 'facts' and popular beliefs, always ensuring that you avoid serious full-on debates.

Far better to maintain a dignified silence, interspersed with one or two fairly indisputable observations, to ensure the audience is kept guessing about the true expert in the room. Whatever you do, always speak with confidence and authority – the true key to successful bluffing.

With those basic thoughts in mind, enjoy your journey of discovery.

YOUR FIRST 'FELINE FILLERS'

FAMOUS AILUROPHILES (CAT LOVERS)

Sir Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Charles Dickens, Nostradamus, the Duke of Wellington, Queen Victoria, Sir Isaac Newton, Florence Nightingale, Beatrix Potter, Monet, William Wordsworth, Horatio Nelson and Victor Hugo.

Quote whichever name you feel best suits the audience, for example Horatio Nelson if you are at the Yacht Club, or Nostradamus in the company of conspiracy theorists.

FELINE TIMELINE

It is always useful to show knowledge of taxonomy (classification of species), just in case you find yourself in the kind of situation when the word 'cat' is replaced with 'feline'. Many within the veterinary and cat welfare fields will use the term 'cat' or 'feline' interchangeably, but it generally goes no further than that. You may however wish to impress your peers when visiting natural history museums or zoos, in which case you might need to quote from the following (take a deep breath, and memorise as much as you can): All living organisms are classified into class, order, family, genus and species. The domestic cat is classified as a carnivorous (order = *Carnivora*) mammal (order = *Mammalia*) of the *Felidae* family. This includes the sub-groups (Genera) of *Felinae*, *Pantherinae* and *Acinonychinae*. The *Acinonychinae* has a sole member, the cheetah (so called because its claws do not retract) but the *Pantherinae* family includes the lion, tiger, panther and leopard. The *Felinae* includes all the small cats, for example lynx, serval, ocelot, caracal, jaguarundi, jungle cat and Pallas's cat (a sufficient number to remember to underline

your knowledge). The pet cat is a domesticated subspecies of *Felis silvestris* known as *Felis catus*. You may never need to use this fact but it sets the scene for your further journey into the modern domestic cat and its evolution.

SURVIVAL OF THE *FELIS* FITTEST

The theory of evolution suggests that the type of animals that survive are those that change and develop to take advantage of the varying climates and conditions on Earth. Few have managed this better than the cat. All carnivores evolved from the miacids, small weasel-like carnivorous forest dwellers that might just have had retractable claws, or *protractile* claws to be strictly accurate (because they extend *and* retract), just like the domestic cat we know and love today. Many of them became early versions of 'cat', the most renowned being the sabre-toothed tiger with its massive scythe-shaped upper canines. One thing is for sure, the tabby cat was not once a sabre-toothed tiger – the species became extinct over 13,000 years ago. It is generally agreed that all cats can trace their ancestry back to the *Pseudaelurus*, a medium-sized cat-ish animal that roamed central Asia some 11 million years ago. By 3 million years ago, a variety of felines existed that were similar to those of today but even more diverse. That exhausting yomp through time brings you to the present day.

CATANATOMY

Certain aspects of the domestic cat's anatomy and physiology have modified and adapted through the

process of evolution to best suit its environment and role in nature. Whether a cat lives wild or in pampered luxury with a loving owner attached, it is still built the same and its ability and drive to behave in a particular way does not change. If you really want to get a true insight into cat behaviour (or at least what it should be doing instead of lying on its back in front of the fire), you must start with the basics by exploring how the domestic cat is constructed.



‘In the beginning, God created man, but seeing him so feeble, He gave him the cat.’

Warren Eckstein, leading pet behaviourist

The domestic cat (henceforth referred to as ‘cat’, with no passing reference to lions, tigers, etc.) is a small, furry creature, mostly weighing between 2kg and 5kg as an adult, unless grossly overweight or a member of a larger than normal breed (*see* ‘Good Breeding’). They stand about 12 inches (27cm) tall, on average, at the shoulders and have a long tail and a leg at each corner. There are however exceptions – some cats have three legs, no tail and/or no ears, all due to veterinary intervention to remedy accidental damage or disease. It is best, when confronted with one of these modified versions, that you show no surprise (definitely not amusement or revulsion) but acknowledge to the owner the incredible adaptability

of the species and inquire politely as to the cause of the loss. (Whatever you do, don't wonder out loud if it answers to the name of 'Lucky'). Mostly you will not notice the loss of limb or tail when the cat is moving at speed, and the 'no ears' thing just makes a cat look like an angry otter. It has no impact on their ability to hear.

They also come in a variety of colours and patterns, the most common being black, ginger, tabby (stripes, usually light brown on dark brown but can also be grey or ginger), black and white, and tortoiseshell. Some fancy pedigrees have dark faces, tails and feet in contrast to the colour of their body, referred to as 'points' – more of that to come in a later chapter when you can immerse yourself in the glamorous world of the 'pure breeds'. Eyes are green, blue, amber or odd (coloured, not peculiar), and always enigmatic. Coat length can vary from long and high-maintenance to short and curly; most cats have perfectly manageable short and soft fur.

In comparison to their human companions, cats are super-sensory: they smell things we can't, like the scent of another cat on your trousers (you have been warned) or small traces of faecal matter on the front door mat where you have wiped your shoes. It is virtually impossible to eat cheese (a particular favourite for many) within a 50-metre radius of a cat without the aroma attracting its attention. Cats hear ultrasonic sounds beyond the range of our own hearing; they feel vibration through their feet and whiskers that is so faint we remain oblivious. If you are ever in San Francisco or any other earthquake zone and a nearby cat

starts to look agitated you would be right to be very afraid and would be well advised to dive under a sturdy table. It is this heightened sensory ability that leads many people to believe the myth that cats have a supernatural sixth sense. You will earn your bluffing credentials by pointing out that, in reality, cats are just so much more tuned in to their surroundings than humans are.

The cat is such a uniquely assembled creature that its features are worthy of referencing to confound and amaze those around you. Feel free to quote the following at any social function where the subject of ‘cat’ comes up (if only because you have brought it up). In some circles it is never further away than ‘What line are you in?’ or ‘Where do your children go to school?’

Nose

- A cat’s sense of smell is estimated to be 14 times more powerful than that of a human. If this isn’t astonishing enough, you can always resort to ‘Did you know that they have 200 million cells in their noses that are sensitive to odour?’
- A cat has a second organ of scent in the roof of its mouth called the vomeronasal or Jacobson’s Organ, enabling them to ‘taste’ extremely significant smells (usually urine, but you can leave that part out if you like).

Eyes

- Cats can’t see objects clearly that are less than 20cm away. Strange, but true.

- Cats have a reflective membrane (*tapetum lucidum*) at the back of their eyes which enables them to make maximum use of low light conditions, hence the 'see in the dark' belief.

Whiskers

- Whiskers are called vibrissae. Cats have 24 of them on each side of the nose, over the eyes, on the chin and, surprisingly, on the back of each foreleg.
- Whiskers aid hunting, moving forward to accurately detect the position of prey when they are close (being so long-sighted, this is pretty essential).

Teeth

- The adult cat has a total of 30 teeth: 12 incisors (the little stumpy ones at the front), 4 canines (the long 'fangs' at the top and bottom, but don't call them fangs if you want to retain any credibility), 10 premolars and 4 molars.
- Cats lose their baby teeth (call them 'milk' or 'deciduous') between five and six months of age when they are replaced with the adult set.

Tongue

- A cat's tongue is very rough, almost like sandpaper (be prepared for this if you plan to get up close and personal). It is covered with over a thousand tiny tooth-like spines called papillae.
- These hook-shaped spines are used for keeping the cat's coat groomed and for removing fur and feathers from prey.

Brain

- The cerebellum in the hindbrain, coordinating balance, posture and movement, is comparatively large in the cat. This may be a useful thing to know next time you see a cat fall from a garden fence and land on its feet.
- Cats are emotional creatures, feeling a complex range of negative and positive emotions beyond primitive fear and aggression (you can quote advances in neuroscience here as your proof). If you feel that you are likely to be asked to expand on this, you might want to use as an alternative, 'Did you know that the brain of the average cat is 5cm long and weighs 30g?' This is unlikely to stimulate further discussion.

Ears

- The cat's outer ears are called the pinnae (those parts that get removed from time to time, *see* above), each controlled by 32 separate muscles to enable 180-degree independent rotation to turn towards the direction of a sound. Amazing.
- The angle of the cat's ear is an important indicator of mood. Never ever approach a cat if its pinnae are flattened, rotated backwards or impossible to see. Admittedly this will be a shame for the warm and friendly pinnectomized* cat mentioned previously, but why take the chance?

* If you are struggling with the word pinnectomized, break it down and you get pinn = ear and ectomized = chopped off surgically.

Skeleton

- The skeleton is supported by long, lean muscles giving great flexibility (can you lick your own bottom? Or even want to?) and jumping prowess.
- The cat has no collarbone; it has instead 'free-floating' clavicles which give it the ability to spatchcock itself and get through impossibly small gaps. Useful for survival and tough on small mammals taking refuge under a loose floorboard or gap behind the cooker.

Paws

- A cat walks on its toes. Refer to this as 'digitigrade', but practise the word first in front of a mirror before uttering it in public as it's a tricky one and tends to result in involuntary dribbling.
- Cats have a small pad on their wrists called the stopper pad, used as an anti-skid device, allegedly, while jumping. (Cool quote for petrolheads).

Tail

- The cat uses its tail as a balance (bad news for the surgically or congenitally tail-less version).
- The cat is the only feline species able to hold its tail vertically while walking – a very good sign if you are approached in this way as it means it's happy and has no intention of taking your face off.

As a final word on evolution: if you find yourself in

the company of creationists, you may want to adapt the quotation on page 11 to ‘God created cat; everything else was downhill from there.’ It might well meet resistance from your audience, but where’s the fun in not living dangerously from time to time?

FELINE FILLERS

FAMOUS AILUROPHOBES (CAT HATERS)

Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler and Genghis Khan.