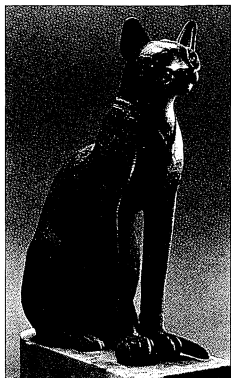




DEMYSTIFYING CATS



COMMONPLACE, YET commonly misunderstood, the domestic cat is now the most popular companion animal in America. More than 57 million cats are kept in more than 29 million households, according to a 1992 survey conducted by

the American Veterinary Medical Association. Dogs number approximately 52.5 million, and although still considered "man's best friend," they have lost their longtime status as top pet. How does one explain the recent surge in cat popularity? When asked, cat owners are apt to describe their pets as mysterious, clever, graceful, yet impossible to comprehend. They *love* cats, but they don't *know* cats.

That is why 1993 has been designated "The Year of the Cat" (see the Winter 1993 *HSUS News*). Four of the nation's largest animal-protection organizations—The HSUS, the American Humane Association, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—have joined forces to help demystify the cat. "Our goal is to celebrate cats, to teach people about their physical and psychological needs, and, most importantly, to encourage owner responsibility," said HSUS President Paul G. Irwin. "We are asking our members and thousands of local humane groups and animal-control agencies to participate in 'Year of the Cat' activities."

People tend to like or dislike cats for the same reasons. An admirer may cherish a cat's seeming independence, but someone else might interpret that very trait as aloofness. To one, the cat is quiet and dignified; to the other, secretive. "The good thing about cats is they need little train-

ing." "The problem with cats is they can't be trained." People too often label cats in absolute terms, as "enigmatic" or "unpredictable," "self-reliant" or "solitary." But cats are nothing if not flexible and adaptable. They can, by turns, be solitary or sociable, independent or demanding. That is the true nature of cats: they may appear to be contradictory creatures, but they are not. Cats are, uniquely, cats.

The earliest records documenting the domestication of cats date back a mere 4,000 years. In contrast, cave paintings prove that dogs had been domesticated by Stone Age humans some 20,000 years earlier; horses, reindeer, and ferrets were also domesticated by hunting and gathering tribes millennia before cats. These animals helped to find or provide food for nomadic cultures; dogs provided protection as well. Much later, as an agricultural society developed in Egypt, the gradual domestication of cats began.

In ancient Egypt cats protected vast grain stores from hordes of rodents. No one knows whether cats were acquired for that purpose or wild cats opportunistically moved in to feast on an abundant supply of prey, but it is clear cats were highly regarded for their pest-control services. The wild cat, *Felis sylvestris*, was first tamed, then domesticated and selectively bred. Eventually, cats in Egypt became the objects of fervent religious worship, with temples erected to the cat goddess, Bastet. Anyone who killed a cat could be punished by death. The corpses of cats were mummified, bound with colorful wrappings, and either wrapped in woven straw or placed in cat-shaped coffins. They were then buried in enormous cemeteries, each of which might preserve the remains of countless thousands of sacred felines.

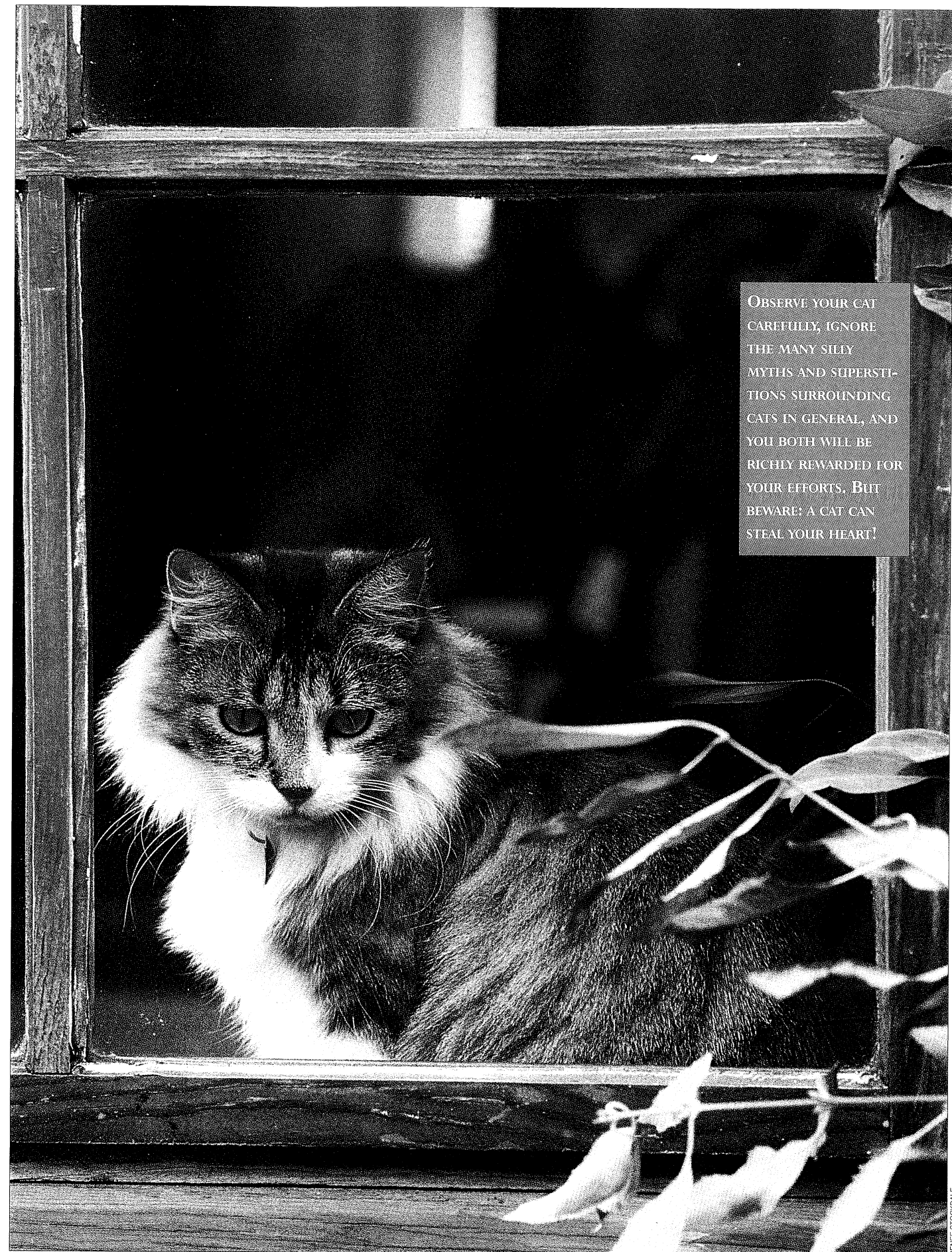
Though ancient Egyptians strictly prohibited the export of their cats, some were nonetheless smuggled out by merchant

Phoenicians and later by conquering Romans. In time cats spread throughout North Africa, Europe, and Asia, where they were generally well treated for their essential services as mousers and occasionally kept as high-status pets by the rich. Some cultures, most notably in Greece and India, bestowed upon cats some degree of religious significance and treated them with reverence.

The darkest chapter in the history of the domestic cat occurred in Europe during the Middle Ages. Misguided Christians associated cats with demon worship and witchcraft and so identified them as enemies of the Church. Preposterous stories were concocted that witches could transform themselves into cats to escape detection. Cats were said to have a pact with the devil; they could portend the future, steal the breath of babies, and bestow bad luck. Black cats in particular were reviled since they were the color of darkness and therefore the most evil. These hysterical beliefs reached fever pitch at the time of the Inquisition and provided justification for the wholesale persecution of cats. Such treatment occurred principally in Europe but also, to a certain degree, in colonial New England. Cats were tortured, drowned, dismembered, or burned to death by religious zealots. Countless thousands—perhaps millions—perished. The hysteria had mostly ended by the eighteenth century, but we are left with some of the foolish myths and superstitions about cats that date from that dreadful period.

Happily, domestic cats are once again widely beloved. In developed countries, their traditional role as mousers has been almost totally superseded by their growing appeal as household pets. We keep cats because of their beauty, perfection of form, individuality, and sometimes-comic antics. Above all, we keep them for companionship. More and more of us have come to learn that cats are fascinating and complex beings, with a wide range of behaviors,

BY MARC PAULHIUS



OBSERVE YOUR CAT CAREFULLY, IGNORE THE MANY SILLY MYTHS AND SUPERSTITIONS SURROUNDING CATS IN GENERAL, AND YOU BOTH WILL BE RICHLY REWARDED FOR YOUR EFFORTS. BUT BEWARE: A CAT CAN STEAL YOUR HEART!

emotions, and needs.

Only during the past fifty years have we seriously begun to unravel the mysteries of the cat. Through the relatively new science of animal behavior, we have finally learned, for example, why cats purr. Purring is not simply a sign of contentment, as cat lovers have assumed for ages. Cats will sometimes purr loudly if they are submissive, fearful, in extreme pain, or even dying. Purring is more accurately described as a form of communication signaling a desire for friendship or the need for help.

Cats employ a rich repertoire of sounds and body postures to share information among themselves and with us. While they undoubtedly understand one another quite clearly, we have not yet grasped the precise meaning of more than a small proportion of feline vocalizations. A cat's body language may be easier to interpret. Cats communicate visually by using tail movements, facial expressions, ear positions, and whole-body postures. We generally recognize visual displays of friendliness, submission, fear, playfulness, or aggression. But as HSUS animal behaviorist Randall Lockwood, Ph.D., points out, "Cats are masters of double-talk, since different parts of the body may be signaling simultaneous conflicting messages."

Perhaps, for now, we are incapable of comprehending the nuances of "catspeak." However, if you live with a cat long enough, he/she may choose to adapt to your limited abilities. Owners have found that most cats will eventually pantomime their demands through simple and original gestures for "clean the litterbox," "scratch here," or "bring home the catnip."

It has been said that domestic cats are solitary creatures, like their wild ancestors. The truth is that, through the process of domestication, we have changed them from reclusive creatures to individuals who are usually quite tolerant of others. Often they're downright sociable. A European wild cat may stake out, through scent markings, a personal territory of between 50 and 160 acres, depending on his/her sex and available food supply. Domestic cats can peacefully coexist at much higher densities, several dozen cats per acre, provided that competition for food is eliminated through ample daily feedings. Domestic cats often engage in mutual grooming and

may play, eat, and sleep together, unlike their wild ancestors.

The social tolerance of our cats reflects one important component of the domestication process, a condition called neoteny, defined as the retention of juvenile characteristics into adulthood. All kittens, wild or domestic, display dependence, playfulness, curiosity, sociability, and an ability to bond with their mothers and littermates. These qualities markedly diminish as the wild cat matures but persist in the domesticated cat. The owner fills the role of "pseudoparent," and other familiar cats are viewed as littermates.

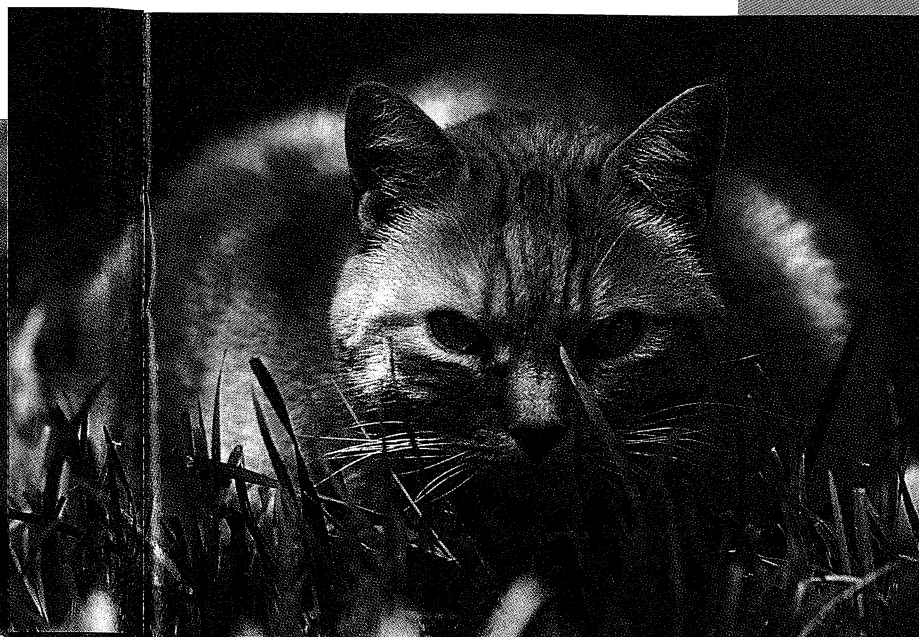
Domestic cats resemble their wild counterparts in other ways. They appear most wild when they engage in predatory behavior. Studies have shown that each pet cat allowed access to the outdoors may stalk and kill several hundred small mammals and birds every year. Contrary to popular belief, well-fed cats are among the most efficient of feline predators because they can afford to be more patient and deliberate than hungrier cats. Due to the advent of modern pest-control methods, rats and mice are no longer the usual prey of outdoor cats. Instead, at least several hundred million rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, and songbirds are killed each year by tens of millions of free-roaming cats in America. It's no surprise that conflicts frequently arise between owners of outdoor cats and people who enjoy feeding and watching wildlife.

The most responsible choice is to keep cats indoors. Caring owners must realize that the price of a domestic cat's so-called freedom is paid in many innocent lives. If you feel your older cat *cannot* adapt to life indoors, be sure to let him/her out for short daytime periods only, and under close supervision. Many cats will quickly adjust to exercising on a leash—including the president's cat, Socks. Other responsible pet owners choose to construct escape-proof outdoor pens for their cats.

DESPITE THEIR LOVING NATURES, DOMESTIC CATS ARE CONSIDERED A PRINCIPAL CAUSE OF DECLINE IN SOME SPECIES OF SMALL MAMMALS AND BIRDS (AND EVEN HAWKS AND OWLS, WITH WHOM THEY COMPETE FOR FOOD).



TERRY WILD STUDIO, ABOVE: HAYDENALSTOCK



TERRY WILD STUDIO

Indoor cats live longer, healthier lives. The average life span of a well-kept cat is thirteen years; some live as long as twenty years. By keeping your cat indoors, you protect him/her from the dangers of automobiles, environmental poisons, internal and external parasites, fatal diseases (such as feline leukemia or rabies), frostbite, and dog attacks. You also avoid unnecessary heartbreak and veterinary expense.

Be good to your cat. See to it that she is spayed or he is neutered to help prevent pet overpopulation. Keep the inoculation schedule current and always make sure your cat wears an identification tag in case he/she is lost or injured. Only a tiny fraction (2 to 4 percent) of stray cats in animal

shelters are ever reunited with their owners because they lack proper identification.

During "The Year of the Cat," help us spread the news that cats are expressive and highly individual creatures. ■

Marc Paulhus is HSUS vice president, Companion Animals.

1. *Cats are no-maintenance pets.* Because cats are litter-trained, some people think that simply giving their cat food and water is enough. Not so. Cats also need regular veterinary care and, just as important, lots of love and attention.

2. *Cats always land on their feet.* While cats can often land on their feet after a short fall, falling from heights is another story. Upper-level porches and windows, unless securely screened, should be off-limits to cats, particularly in high-rise buildings.

3. *Cats can't be trained.* Cats will, of course, do things their way if left to their own devices. But most cats can be taught to obey simple rules like not scratching the couch, eating plants, or jumping up on the kitchen counter. Repeated, gentle, and consistent training gets results. Also, if a cat understands the rules and has an approved outlet for her scratching impulses, such as a sturdy scratching post, there will be no need for declawing, a painful and unnecessary operation.

4. *Cats aren't happy unless they can go outside to roam and hunt.* Cats like to play, prowl, and pounce, and they can do all those activities indoors with you and a few toys—without being exposed to predators, disease, traps, poison, and traffic. Indoor cats are healthier, happier—and safer!

5. *Cats become fat and lazy after they are spayed or neutered.* Cats, just like people, become fat because they eat too much and don't get enough exercise. Cats who

are spayed or neutered live longer lives and make better companions. And they don't contribute to the pet-overpopulation problem in this country, where millions of unwanted cats and dogs are destroyed every year. There's no need to wait until a female cat has had a litter to have her spayed; it can be done before her first heat cycle.

6. *Cats can see in the dark.* Cats cannot see in total darkness any better than a person can. They can see better than other animals in semidarkness, however, because of their eyes' anatomy.

7. *Cats don't need to wear a collar and tags.* An identification tag is a lost cat's ticket home. Every cat, even an indoor cat, should wear a collar with an ID tag to help him come home if he is lost. A breakaway collar lets a cat escape if the collar becomes snagged.

8. *Cats who disappear for a couple of days are just out hunting; there's no need to worry.* The prolonged disappearance of any pet is cause for alarm. Cats are no exception, and as domestic animals, they cannot cope with the dangers posed by the outdoors. For their own safety and well-being, cats should always be kept indoors, but if your cat does somehow become lost, he needs to be looked for immediately—before it's too late.

9. *Cats will suck the breath from sleeping infants.* Curious by nature, a cat may want to climb into the crib to see what new manner of squalling creature her family has brought home. But she won't suck the baby's breath. She may feel a little jealous, however, so introductions should be gradual. Lots of lavish attention will also help reassure her that she's still an important member of the family. Cats can suffer from sibling rivalry, too!

10. *Cats are aloof, independent animals and don't really want a lot of attention from humans.* Cats are domestic animals because they live in the home. They crave human companionship and establish loving bonds with their human families. If you toss the cat outdoors, or spend little time with him, you'll never know the very special relationship that comes from making a cat a true member of the family. ■

Reprinted from *How Well Do You Know Your Cat Facts?*, published by The HSUS for "The Year of the Cat."