

Animal Friends Presents

Transitioning an Outdoor Cat to Indoor Life

Mother Nature created the great outdoors specifically to satisfy a cat's natural instincts...at least that's what the cats would like us to believe! Trees to climb, prey to chase and capture, patches of warm sun in which to lie, the freedom to choose any of the above opportunities, or nap on his own schedule. Ahhh, livin' the dream!

But the great outdoors is also fraught with risks that include predators, both two- and four-legged, diseases, parasites, moving vehicles, lack of food and water, and a myriad of other hazards that can turn the good life into one of peril for even the most outdoor-savvy feline.

Transitioning an outdoor cat into an indoor cat requires patience and a good understanding of the needs and desires of your feline friend. Let's face it, our homes are designed around human comfort, not necessarily creature comforts. So let's look at our home through a cat's eyes and devise ways of satisfying those natural feline instincts.

- **Climbing Trees:** Cats love heights! Observing the world from a predator-free pinnacle provides kitty with a feeling of security and confidence. There is a fantastic variety of kitty furniture available that fits in with any décor and provides kitty with a high place to perch as well as enclosed places to hide and retreat from frightening activities. These items also provide irresistible scratching surfaces (like trees!) that satisfy the kitty's natural scratching instincts.
- **Multiple Vertical Levels:** Nature also provides a myriad of activity-inducing obstacles for our vertical-loving felines. Outside, cats will jump from stumps to branches to fences to walls to mounds of dirt and back, and love every minute of it! Look at your living areas and see if that opportunity abounds. If not, check out that empty vertical space and fill it with multi-level opportunities for cat activity. Window perches, tables in front of a window, cat tunnels (very much fun!!), different sized cardboard boxes—providing this sort of variety doesn't have to cost a lot, and in many cases rearranging your furniture just a little can satisfy your cat's need for multi-level vertical space.
- **Chasing, Hunting, Capturing Prey:** Hunting is one of the strongest feline instincts, and one that has endured throughout centuries of domestication. Luckily for us, the availability of prey-like toys is endless, from inexpensive, tiny stuffed mice to interactive battery-operated toys like the Undercover Mouse. Interactive play with humans (and/or other pets) is essential for a cat transitioning to an indoor life. The Cat Catcher, Cat Dancer, and other wand-type interactive toys are fun for both human and feline. Not many kitties can resist those laser lights, either! Interactive play for twenty minutes or more a day is a great way to bond with your cat, give him the exercise he needs, and make him forget about those pesky outdoor creatures he used to chase.
- **Nighttime Naughties:** Although cats gradually adapt to human schedules, many cats transitioning to indoor life initially maintain a nocturnal schedule. To avoid sleep deprivation, providing a portion of your kitty's dinner right before bedtime will encourage a long nap. A rousing game of chase-the-laser right before lights-out will also lead to sweet dreams for kitty. If his predator instincts are well-honed, "hiding" his prey-like toys on windowsills, between couch cushions, on his cat furniture, and in other creative nooks and crannies will give him nocturnal excitement that does not include pouncing on your toes at 3 AM.

- Extras: Bird feeders outside of sunny windows will keep kitty entertained for hours! Cat grass (available in seed kits or already growing) will give him a taste of the outdoors. A Catnip Party every few days will liven up his life. A soft and cushy bed near a sunny window will be irresistible. During this transition you may run into a few issues. Two of the most common are:

Meowing, Howling, Scratching at the Door

First, you need to make sure you have satisfied your cat's instinctive needs (see above). If kitty still insists that she cannot live without being outside, you need to ignore the yowling, scratching, and howling. "Whaaaat? She's driving me crazy," you say! Remedying this sort of behavior requires a "distraction plan" that redirects the behavior before it begins.

Cats are creatures of habit, and their behaviors can be observed and modified. What does kitty do BEFORE the meowing, howling, scratching begins. She sees you, she walks towards the door, and begins to vocalize. The distraction needs to happen in the "sees you, walks toward the door" phase of the behavior so as not to reward the undesirable yowling and scratching.

You can create the scenario for this to happen, but you need your distraction plan in mind. Have your kitty's favorite toy, or favorite treat in hand. As kitty walks toward the door, sees you, but before the vocalizing begins, toss the treat or toy away from the door for her to chase. To make this more fun for kitty, have a large paper shopping bag (sans handles) on its side or a cardboard box in the area, and toss the treat/toy into the bag/box. This redirection from her initial purpose into a fun game generally takes her mind off of the door. The more this is practiced, the sooner the behavior will change.

Door Darting

This behavior is annoying (and very scary) for humans and self-rewarding for kitty. Each time she is successful, the behavior is reinforced. There are a couple of ways to inhibit door darting.

Provide kitty with a pleasurable reason NOT to dash out the door. Remember, cats are pleasure-seekers, and she has learned that she gets pleasure from darting out the door. Establish a place away from the door to reward good behavior when you leave or enter your home. Before you leave, call kitty to that particular place (a couch, a chair, an end table, a perch on her cat tree) and give her lots of love and her favorite treats. While she is indulging in the treats, proceed out the door without looking back. When you return home and open the door, if kitty is right by the door ignore her (don't let her out, of course!). Close the door, walk over to your special hello/goodbye place, give her lots of love and her favorite treats. Make this a habit, and ask other members of the household to do the same. Kitty will learn that it is more fun to be away from the door than to try to dash out, and will routinely go to that special "place" for her pleasurable reward.

Placing a tall cat tree or scratching post with a perch by the door will also provide an opportunity to make staying inside more pleasurable than dashing out. When you prepare to leave and kitty is by the door, lure her to the perch with treats or her favorite toy, and while she is enjoying the treats, leave the house. When you return, again lure kitty to the perch and reward with treats. In no time she will choose to jump up on the perch for rewards and forget all about the rewards of outdoor life!

A passive deterrent in front of the door can also be used in addition to behavioral modification. A clear vinyl carpet runner flipped nubby-side-up will encourage the cat to avoid walking near the door. Cats do not like to walk on nubbies!

Satisfying your newly-indoor cat's natural feline needs and instincts will lead to a happy and content couch-potato-kitty in no time at all! A feline friend to curl up with is an added bonus. Lots of love, attention, readily available food and water is a double bonus, as these are things that were lacking in kitty's previous life. Patience is essential, as each cat is an individual. The reward for both human and cat is an indoor lifetime of security, love and entertainment without any of the perils of an outdoor existence.

