

Forecasting the weather is a serious business. Every year, huge amounts of money are spent on satellites and computer models to predict everything from the path and severity of hurricanes, to the probability of sunshine so that supermarkets can order in extra salads.

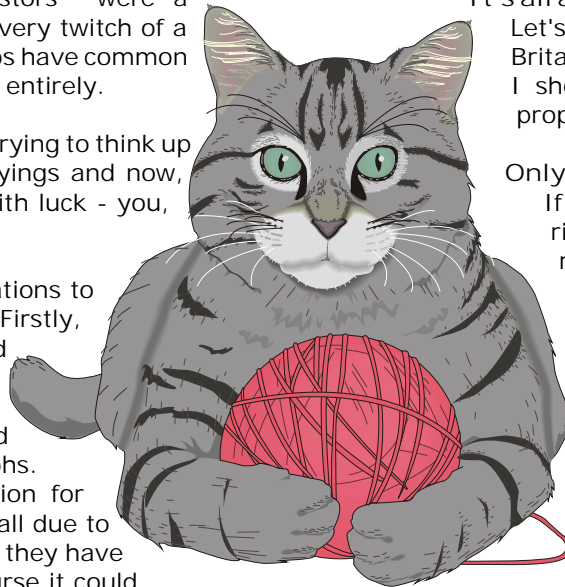
There's nothing new about predicting the weather; it was just as important before the advent of today's technology. But back then, all people could rely on was their instincts and experience. Every culture has its own set of weather prophecies, and some, like the Shepherd's saying, are still commonly used today.

Many traditional weather forecasts are based on the behaviour of animals: cows sitting down, sheep putting their heads into hedges, hogs running around with straw in their mouths... There are hundreds of them.

Even if you assume that our ancestors were a superstitious lot who saw disaster in every twitch of a lamb's tail, so many of these old proverbs have common elements that it's hard to discount them entirely.

Over the last couple of years I've been trying to think up ways of testing out some of these sayings and now, thanks to the Weather Show, and - with luck - you, I've got a chance to have a go.

To start with, I've limited my investigations to cats. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, cats are common in both town and country, unlike straw carrying hogs, and secondly, cats are top of the league when it comes to prophecy, and have been since the days of the Pharaohs. Quite why cats have such a reputation for prediction, I'm not sure. Perhaps it's all due to their ability to give the impression that they have their own, top secret, agenda. Of course it could simply be due to their popularity as pets.



The majority of cat predictions fall into one of two main groups.

The first group warn you to watch out for your normally playful pussy suddenly becoming quiet and moody. This saying, which dates back to 1710, is typical: "While rain depends, the pensive cat gives o'er her frolics and pursues her tail no more."

The second group are completely the opposite! These sayings warn you that a quiet cat becoming playful is the thing to watch for: "Against times of snow or hail, or boist'rous windy storms; she frisks about and wags her tail, And many tricks performs". Sailors in particular used to watch out for this sort of thing and were wary when the ship's cat "had a gale of wind in her tail."

The apparent contradiction between these two groups leads me to think three things:

It's all a load of old rubbish.

Let's face it, anyone who predicts rain in Britain is going to be right before too long and I should stop wasting my time and get a proper job!

Only one group is right.

If this the case we can find out which is the right group by watching our cats and recording their moods and the weather which follows.

Both are right.

This might sound silly, but it does make sense. Both groups have something important in common: sudden mood change. Perhaps the nature of the cat's mood change is irrelevant and we should really be concentrating on the change itself: when it happens and what follows.

Bio-meteorology

Exactly how an animal's, or person's, behaviour can be affected by the weather is part of the growing scientific field of Bio-meteorology.

There's nothing new about linking the study of medicine and meteorology. It's been going on for years, and even Hippocrates wrote about it (in between oaths). What's new, is the way potential links are being investigated with the help of the latest forecasting models and medical data. The Germans take it all so seriously that their meteorological office actually warns doctors of approaching low pressure systems as they have found links between these and a host of medical conditions including schizophrenia, depression, violence, strokes, arthritis, phantom limb pain...

Medics and meteorologists in Britain haven't gone quite this far, preferring instead to conduct more trials before committing themselves fully.

Keeping a Cat Diary

If you keep a "cat diary" you can easily compare your cat's behaviour over several days or weeks. In addition, it would allow me to compare your cat(s) with other cats across Britain. You never know, we might even discover something amazing!

There's no need to set time aside for watching your cat. If the two of you are together in the house, keep half an eye on what its up to and if you see a sudden mood change that seems to have no cause, note it down. You need to describe what the cat was doing before

and after its mood altered. You also need to record the date, time and what the weather was doing. Then, keep half an eye on the weather and record any changes.

If you want to send your diary to me, please remember to provide the following information: your name and address, the number of cats that live with you, the breed of your cat (in the case of moggies, describe its looks), its age, whether it is an indoor or an outdoor cat and its temperament (is it confident or timid, boisterous or moody).

Cat Watching

You don't have to spend long in the company of a cat to realise that they're intelligent and complex animals. For this reason, I'm not going to attempt anything more than provide a few pointers to help you with your cat watching. If you would like to know more, feel free to write to me. Alternatively, Desmond Morris has written an excellent book called, funnily enough, "Catwatching" which provides a fascinating, and understandable, introduction to the subject.

Pet cats are often three animals in one: kitten, mother and wild hunter.

Kitten

The domestic cat's wild ancestors were mainly solitary, very much as Scottish Wild (and feral) cats are today. Once a kitten reached adulthood it would be thrown out by its mother to make its own way in the world. By keeping a cat as a pet and providing it with food, shelter and social contact from early in its life, we encourage it to substitute us for its natural mother. Because we don't force them to leave our homes, a pet cat continues to greet and interact with us in the way a kitten treats mum for the whole of its life.

Mother

Although they love us, our pet cats are often confused by our odd behaviour. When your cat brings you a present of a half dead prey animal it is often desperately trying to show you how you should be behaving. This is what a She cat would do for her kittens to encourage them to hunt for their dinner and stop relying on her for everything.

Wild Hunter

Have you ever noticed the way your cat leaves the house when you let it out? Whoosh, gone! When they leave your company they cease to be kittens or mothers and get on with the business of being hunters, defending their territory and doing their mysterious catty things.

In spite of their split personalities, there are a number of common behaviours to which we can reliably attribute meanings. On the next page I've listed a selection which you might find useful as mood indicators. I've concentrated on the best signals of potential mood-change, as I feel that these will be of most use for testing the predictive potential of our pussies!

Eyes:

During the day, a cat's pupils are normally narrowed to thin slits to cut down the amount of bright light entering their sensitive eyes. A cat will however dilate (widen) its pupils to allow more light inside if it is suddenly stimulated (by the threat of danger or the promise of food).

A more useful indicator of mood is provided by the cat's eyelids. A relaxed, happy cat will often let its eyelids rest half-closed. But the arrival of strangers or possible danger will make it open its eyes fully. This signals the cat readying itself for action. If you spot this sort of mood-swing when there is no observable cause, note it down and watch the weather.

Tails:

When a cat wags its tail it's usually taken as a sign of aggression. This isn't strictly true. It's actually a signal that the cat is trying to decide between two courses of action: for example, whether to attack or run. This explains why you will see this behaviour at other times when the cat is in a quandary; perhaps about going out in the rain, or finishing all its dinner in one go. Tail twitching without any noticeable cause is well worth noting down as it could be another sign that the cat has detected something "in the air".

A relaxed cat will usually hold its tail in a relaxed S-shape (going up at the tip). If it becomes interested in something it may raise its tail slightly whilst maintaining the curved shape. When very interested, or greeting its owner, cats often hold their tails erect, but sometimes if they are feeling a little nervous will leave the tip pointing downwards.

An aggressive cat will hold its tail straight and bristled. A frightened/submissive cat will have its tail low, sometimes even tucked between its legs. In between these two extremes are a range of intermediate postures, with the tail arched in various ways and bristled. These postures indicate a frightened, but still dangerous, cat.

Ears:

A relaxed cat lets its ears point slightly forward and outward as it loafs around. If its incredibly sensitive hearing picks up anything unusual, this soon changes to an alert posture with ears pointed forward and the head facing the source of the sound. If you see a cat twitching its ears nervously you can bet something is agitating it: this is the behaviour to watch out for and record.

An aggressive cat, thinking about attacking, erects its ears and swivels them back, ready to flatten them if it needs to. The ears are held flat and back during fights for protection and kept back to signal submission if the cat loses the fight.

Purring:

Purring is what kittens do whilst suckling, to assure their mothers that they're okay. In return a mother will purr to reassure her kittens. An adult pet will often purr to show its owner that it is relaxed and contented. A purring cat is not, however, necessarily happy. Although it seems a contradiction, an injured or sick cat will often purr even though it may be in great pain. Purring then is also a signal that clearly says "I am no threat and mean no harm, please leave me alone".

Play:

Play is an important part of a kitten's life through which it learns the important social, fighting and hunting skills it will rely on as an adult. In pet cats, varied play often persists well into adulthood; however, the nature and extent of play varies immensely between individuals. Apart from the swatting and pouncing games with which all owners are familiar, many cats develop their own unique games. Watch out for play behaviour stopping for no apparent reason, particularly if the cat switches to nervous "kitten" behaviour - rubbing around your legs, raising its head and miaowing.

Miaow!:

Cat vocalisations vary immensely, both between breeds and individuals. This makes comparing the sounds made by different cats problematic.

Generally speaking, cats have two repertoires of sounds: their wild sounds and their home sounds. The wild sounds are the screams of the night that threaten violence, admit defeat or invite mating. As these sounds are directed only at other cats and only happen when we're not around they aren't much use for forecasting. The home sounds are much more suitable. These are the familiar Miaows that your cat uses to talk with you. Unfortunately, the exact nature and meaning of an individual cat's miaows are a product of its environment as much as its genetic inheritance. So, if you can't tell them apart on your own I can't help.

