

Reading Feline Body Language

Learn the differences between welcome and watch out.

By Pam Johnson-Bennett

Despite their apparent inscrutability, cats are great communicators and use several different forms of communication to make sure they get their point across. While we humans are a verbal species, cats rely more on scent communication and body language. In the wild, a cat will use her scent-marking ability and body posturing much more than vocalizing. Surprisingly, cats don't meow to each other as much as you'd think. They seem to utilize their vocal abilities more when trying to communicate with us—maybe because they realize it's the form to which we relate most easily.

As a behaviorist and author, I do a great deal of traveling and speak at a large number of cat-related events. As I greet people, it's amusing to listen to owners lament over the unpredictability of their cats' behaviors. I always sneak a peek at their hands as they're talking to check for scratches. I wonder how many of those scratches are the results of the owner not paying attention to the cat's body language.

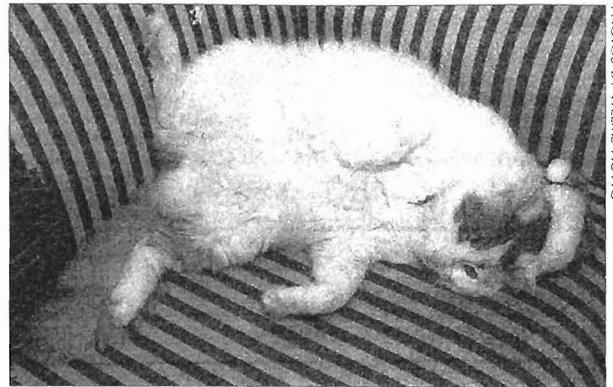
Your cat is so expressive in her body language. With a little awareness, a whole new world could open up to you about what she's conveying. Cats do everything possible to avoid hostile confrontations with each other. To achieve this, they rely heavily on body posturing because it can be done at a distance. Most cats give excellent warning signals. For example, just about everyone is

familiar with the image of the Halloween cat. The cat arches her back, there's a piloerection of fur along her spine, and she faces her potential opponent sideways. She straightens her legs and almost seems to spring up on her tiptoes. This display makes her appear larger and more threatening than she actually is. If it works, the opponent thinks better of attacking her and just goes along on his merry way. Body language has just saved the day.

By reading your cat's body language, you may prevent many of the scratches and bites you received in the past. In multicat households, it can enable you to see potential trouble while it's still simmering, before it boils over. The sooner you divert a potentially negative behavior toward something positive and diffuse the mounting tension, the greater your chances of permanently restoring harmony among your cats. Accurate interpretation of body language can be a lifesaver when introducing a new cat into the household or if your resident felines are in a status war.

Communication Breakdown

Let's start with one of the most misinterpreted behaviors: petting-induced aggression. The typical comment I hear most from owners is, "I was petting my cat while she was in my lap when suddenly, out of nowhere, she turned around and bit me!" Was it truly out of nowhere or did the cat give any indication before biting? Looking back over the situation you'll probably see that your cat



PHOTOS BY WEMMS HULTO

Consider yourself blessed if your cat likes his tummy rubbed.

revealed several warning signals through body language, indicating she was reaching the end of her tolerance.

One of the first signs may have been skin twitching along the back. Next, the tail may have begun a slight lashing back and forth. When those two signals failed to get a response, the cat probably turned her head back to look at the owner. She may even have shifted her position a bit. Her ears may have changed to a more flattened position. As the owner continued petting, oblivious to the change in attitude, the cat's tail lashing probably increased in intensity.

Finally, since no other warning signals were having an impact, the cat turned around and sank her teeth into the owner's hand. Out of nowhere? Hardly! By paying attention to the earlier signs of displeasure from the cat, the owner could have avoided fang imprints on his or her hand.

While we're on the subject of getting scratched or bitten, here's another often-misread feline body posture: Rolling over and exposing the belly. In dogs, this posture often indicates submission. Under friendly circumstances, it can also mean, "I want my tummy rubbed." With a cat though,

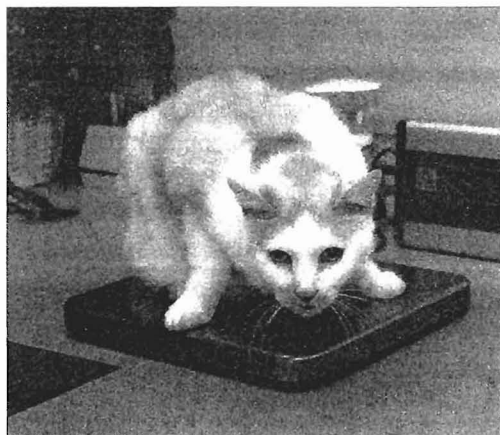
this posture in no way indicates neither submission nor an invitation for a tummy rub. In the cat world, rolling onto the back is the ultimate defense position.

When a cat is cornered in battle with no possible means of escape, she will roll onto her back to make full use of all her weapons—a mouthful of teeth and four paws with fully extended claws. Any owner who has misread this posture as a request for a tummy rub has felt the immediate sting of sharp claws. If your cat does like her belly rubbed, consider yourself privileged—all the more if she likes her tummy kissed, too!

Key Indicators

When it comes to better understanding your kitty, pay particular attention to her ears, eyes and tail. They can tell you volumes about what's going on inside her cute little head. Let's start with the cat's very versatile ears. Bebe, my formerly feral cat, experiences many moods throughout the day. I can tell how she's feeling just by interpreting her ear positions. By watching her, I've learned that her ears are her most accurate mood barometers. You, too, can easily learn to interpret your cat's mood by observing her ears.

In general, ears that are pointed slightly forward indicate relaxation. If they're pricked forward, your cat is alert (perhaps in a playful mood or listening for potential prey). If your



At the vet's office, this cat's dilated pupils indicate fear.

cat's ears are flattened sideways and down, it probably indicates irritation. Twitching ears can indicate nervousness. When the ears become flattened against the head and face backward, the cat is fearful or ready to do battle. Flattening the ears is a protective measure to lessen damage done by an opponent's claws or teeth. Note: If one or both ears remain in a flattened position, it could indicate an ear infection or possible ear mites, so check with your vet if you're unsure.

When gauging a cat's mood, I also pay close attention to her eyes. Depending on the specific circumstances, dilated pupils can be a warning to back off. During playtime with your kitty you'll probably notice her pupils become dilated due to excitement. If however, your cat is not engaged in play and her pupils are dilated, it can mean she's fearful. There can also be an underlying medical cause, so if your cat's eyes remain dilated, contact your vet.

A discussion on body language wouldn't be complete without including the cat's tail. A tail in motion is one way a cat displaces a build-up of anxiety, agitation or excitement. Don't be fooled into thinking the wagging tail of a cat means she's happy to see you. A wagging tail is really saying, "It's not a good idea to pet me right now." Being the stealthy predator that she is, the cat must spend a great deal of time silently stalking her prey. That means trying to be as invisible as possible.

You've watched your indoor cat sit in the window watching a bird outside. The cat's body is crouched and still, almost resembling a statue. Yet, her excitement eventually gets the best of her so she displaces it by way of her tail. As your cat sits in your lap getting petted or maybe brushed, the lashing or thumping tail reveals another feline secret:

Decreasing patience.

The position of a cat's tail will

reveal her mood as she is walking. A vertical tail is a sign of a friendly mood. As the cat approaches and gives a little flick of the tail tip, that's her version of a greeting. In battle though, the defensive cat may hold her tail high up over her back. A relaxed cat's tail will be in a more horizontal position. If a cat is unsure of her surroundings as she walks, her tail will also be more horizontal. And, as we noted before, a lashing tail indicated anger, impatience or uncertainty.

Offense vs. Defense

In a multicat household where there's tension between companions, your knowledge of body language can improve the situation. For example, when I counsel owners I recommend they use positive diversion techniques to prevent aggressive episodes. Sometimes though, you may walk into a room and find two cats already engaged in pre-battle posturing. But who initiated the attack? There's a way you can tell, and then use that knowledge to divert the aggressor.

A cat displaying offensive aggression is usually giving the other cat a direct stare. Her pupils will be constricted and her body will be forward-facing. The cat in the defensive position will very likely have her head facing her opponent; she won't be staring directly, and her pupils will be dilated. The rest of her body will be facing sideways, conveying the message that she'd rather escape if the opportunity presents itself.

Read the Environment, Too

To interpret body language accurately, don't just look at the cat, but factor in the immediate environment as well. A quick one-two check of these things can give you the clues you need to better understand what your cat is feeling. Watch your cat in a variety of circumstances, and you'll see the sometimes subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle changes in body language. If you're not sure how to interpret your cat's body language,

here's an easy way to start: Compare your cat's posture at the vet's office versus her posture at home. What does your cat's body look like as she sits on the vet's examination table?

Perhaps she crouches at the far end of the table, tucking her paws underneath her body. Have you noticed that she also wraps her tail tightly around herself? She holds her head low, her ears are back and her pupils are dilated. Does this fear position sound familiar? The cat's tucked in body posture is her attempt to become as invisible as possible, hoping the vet won't even notice her.

Now, compare that with how your cat normally sits while at home. Her body is erect, her head is high, her

ears are forward-facing and her eyes are bright and alert with normal-sized pupils. When she stands up and walks, her tail is held in a vertical or semi-horizontal relaxed position. Quite a difference!

The more you pay attention to your cat's body language in a variety of situations, the better you'll be at detecting even the tiniest shift in her mood or comfort level. Your cat's body is a communications center, whether she's at the vet, relaxing in your lap, looking out the window, greeting visitors at the door, in a standoff with another cat or playing with a toy. They don't need to speak our language to tell us what's happening with them. **WCF**

Hemmie's Tail

Hemmie was a stray of unknown origins who showed up on our deck about 1-1/2 years ago and announced that she wanted to join the family.

One of her more pronounced characteristics was her ever-twitching tail. Her integration into the household was a little rocky at times since she was a mature cat who was set in her ways. I knew that a twitching tail could be a sign of feline displeasure or excitement and asked Pam Johnson-Bennett if she could offer any further insight.

Pam said a twitching tail is also a sign of conflicting emotions, an indication that Hemmie was unsure about her new surroundings. I was already giving her several Bach Flower Essences to help with her "cat-titude adjustment." She was rather withdrawn and quick to lash out if she was stroked or petted the wrong way; she also intimidated two of our established adult cats. Pam suggested adding Star of Bethlehem, which, she says, "is good for a cat who needs comforting but doesn't know how to accept it."

Now more than a year later, Hemmie has adjusted nicely. She lets me know when it's time for bed by meowing plaintively; she follows me upstairs, hops right up on the bed and snuggles in till morning, occasionally installing herself on my chest. She purrs readily and seeks out attention. She is still a little edgy at times with Dusty and Coco, who can be seen as her peers ... and rivals, but she's great with Yuri and Kira, who are younger and less of a threat.

But as far as she's come, Hemmie still has that twitchy tail! Pam says it's a reminder that she's still not completely comfortable with "all that mushy stuff."-Sally E. Bahner



PHOTO BY SALLY E. BAHNER