

THE HISTORY OF THE CAT

Throughout history the cat has been a source of interest and inspiration as well as an object of persecution and suspicion. The characteristics that make a cat a cat have caused awe, admiration and fear and have given rise to interesting fantasies and tales.

Only one feline species was domesticated. About 5,000 years ago, the ancient Egyptians domesticated the cat, and since then people have been responsible for its care. The pet cat has retained many of the hunting behaviors and senses seen in its wild relatives. However, the domestic cat relies on humans to meet its basic needs.

In ancient Egypt the cat was worshipped as a god long before it became a household pet! The Egyptians thought cats were gods because their eyes seemed to glow at night. They were active at night and were very sleek, graceful and quiet. The Egyptian word for "cat" was *mau* similar to the sound a cat makes.

From about 5,000 B.C. until 2,000 B.C., both large and small wild cats were worshipped as gods. One of these goddesses was called Bastet. At Bastet's temple, wild cats lived in the courtyard. Looking after them was a special honor that was passed from father to son.

When a cat died, it was embalmed, placed in a *mummy* case and buried with full funeral honors. Cats were buried with water and food (which included *mummy* mice) for the afterlife. Anyone foolish enough to kill a cat paid for the crime with his life. When a family cat died, the whole family shaved off their eyebrows as a sign of mourning.

By about 1,000 B.C., the process of domestication had begun in earnest. The small native cats had become more common and tamer. Domestic or tame cats became family pets. It took many generations for the cats to become fully domesticated.

The Romans smuggled many cats out of Egypt. In Rome, the domestic cat became both a religious figure and a household pet. Cats were also valued because they protected gardens and warehouses from rodents like mice, moles and rats.

Wild cats, however, did not receive the same kind treatment from the Romans. The Roman Coliseum amphitheater was the site of gruesome staged wild beast hunts and fights. Before these spectacles were abolished, many of the large felines had become rare in their natural habitats, and the Assyrian lion actually became extinct.

Cats quickly swept through Europe and by the Middle Ages had become common in cities, villages and homes. During the early part of this era, sometimes called the Dark Ages, people became very fearful and superstitious and their attitudes about cats began to change.

People thought that cats were evil spirits because they were active at night, their eyes glowed, they were mysterious, quiet and very elegant. The very qualities which made the cat welcome and worshipped by the Egyptians – their beauty, grace, independent nature, ready companionship for the lonely – now made it the object of suspicion and persecution.

Cats were even blamed for the Black Plague (the bubonic plague) which swept through Europe in the Middle Ages, killing millions of people.

It was noted that farmers who kept cats to protect their crops, in so doing also protected their families from the plague. The cause of the Black Plague wasn't the cats, but the rats that had fleas with the disease! Unfortunately, by the time this was realized, three-quarters of the European population (and most of the blameless cats!) was decimated.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, over 200,000 women were accused of being witches and were hanged. Quite often these were women who lived alone with cats for company. Because the cats lived with these people who others thought strange, the cats were thought to be demons. Black cats in particular were thought to bring bad luck. When the so-called witches were killed, so were their cats. Hundreds of thousands of cats were destroyed because people believed they were evil.

As people became enlightened, they stopped believing in superstitions, and domestic cats once again became popular pets and companions. The cat's regained status is symbolized in popular literature. They began to take on the characteristics of humans, as in the story *Puss in Boots*. This is the story of a clever cat who convinces a foreign king that his master is really the Earl of Carabas and that he should marry the king's daughter to inherit his fortune. The scheme works, and Puss is made into a Lord himself.

In modern times, the cat has continued to inspire poets, artists and even television advertisers. Edward Lear made famous an unlikely friendship between a cat and bird in his poem "The Owl and the Pussycat."

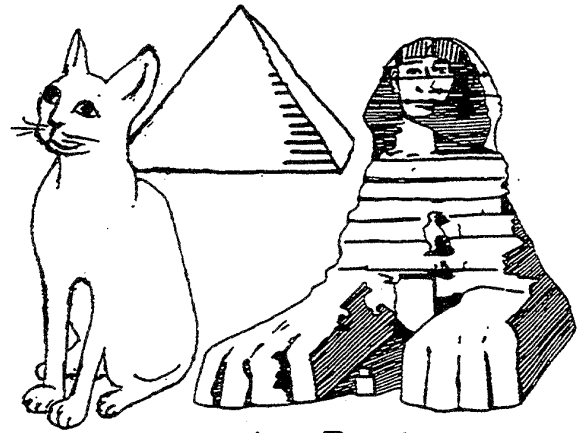
Cats have even become television stars! Everyone knows Morris, the star of 9-Lives cat food commercials. The reserved yellow tabby cat has starred in over forty commercials and won the Patsy Award for animal actors. He is the official "spokes-cat" for the annual Adopt-A-Cat campaign which is designed to encourage people to adopt cats from animal shelters. Then there's the wonderful, funny cartoon character Garfield. Do you know of any other famous cats?

Today, the cat is America's most popular pet.

Wild or Domestic?

Directions:

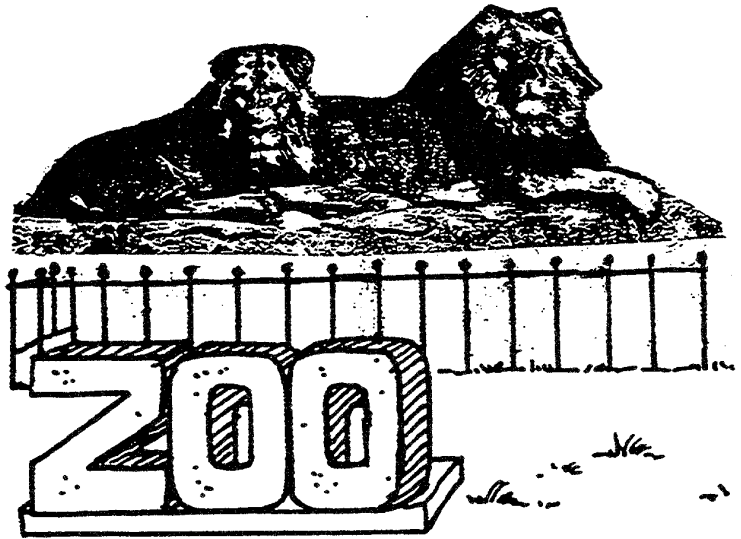
1. Study each picture.
2. Read each description.
3. Decide which cats are **wild** and which are **domestic**.
4. Write **wild** or **domestic** on the line under the picture.



1. a cat in ancient Egypt



2. a leopard in the jungle



3. Lions in a zoo



4. a pet cat



5. a stray cat

Wild or Domestic?

1. a cat in ancient Egypt

The cat in the picture could be *wild* or *domestic*. It was during this period that cats became domesticated by the Egyptians. Cats were thought of as gods by the Egyptians, in part due to their attributes, eyes that glowed in the dark etc.

2. a leopard in the jungle

This is a *wild* animal. It belongs in the wild where it can take care of its needs.

3. lions in the zoo

These lions are *wild*. Wild animals kept in captivity often become tame, (become used to people and lose some wild characteristics), but they have not been domesticated.

4. a pet cat

Pets are *domestic*. They rely on people to meet their needs.

5. a stray cat

This is a *domestic* cat that has no home. Often stray cats are abandoned by their owners or have gotten lost. Cats living as strays have greatly shortened life spans due to the hardships of living on their own. In some cases, strays and their offspring will revert to a semi-wild state and be considered *feral*. They are not used to being around people and develop some wild characteristics to help them survive. Stray and/or feral cats are at risk from disease, weather, starvation, wild animals and traffic. Stray and feral cats also pose a significant danger to wildlife (particularly songbirds). In addition, they are at risk of contracting disease from wildlife (such as rabies) and passing it on to other animals and people.