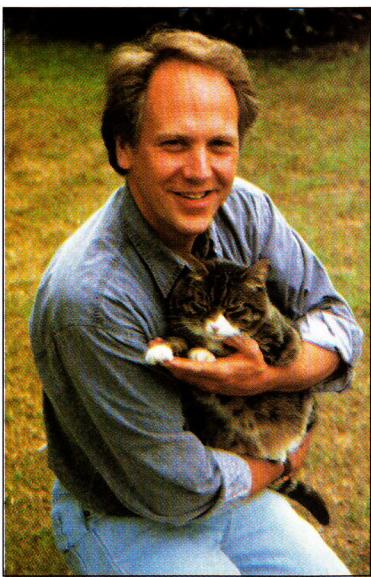


*Britain's Roger Tabor invades American public*

# THE CATMAN

BY CLAUDIA PEARCE



**House-trained: Roger Tabor with Leroy.**

Roger Tabor knows his cats. In fact, his peers refer to him as "the world's leading authority on cats." By "cats," however, they're alluding to more than the exotic, rare, endangered kind. Though the U.K. scientist is quite familiar with lions and tigers, he specializes in "moggies" (mogs for short)—that's British for "common cats." And moggies are the main subject of *Understanding Cats*, a program full of advice and cat lore airing Sunday, August 17, at 6 p.m. Moggies are also one of the few things Americans don't have a word for, much to Tabor's amazement.

"Americans have made an art form out of slang, damn it," says Tabor. "How is it possible you don't have a word for the common cat?" A quick mental run-through of our terms proves Tabor correct: Tabbies? Technically, tabbies have stripes. Alley cats? Implies stray cats without owners. Mutts? That's for dogs.

All right, we agree, the American vocab-

ulary is distinctly lacking when it comes to one of our favorite pets. From now on, let's hear it for the moggies!

With that important term established, Tabor proceeds with the phone interview. (He is speaking from his home in a Georgian water mill in Essex, England, which he shares with cat companions Leroy and Tabitha).

Moggie research science isn't exactly a conventional career choice. How did Tabor get into such a specialized field?

It was an accident, says Tabor, albeit a serendipitous one. The future catman majored in ecology and neurological biochemistry in college because he wanted to study the impact humans make on the planet and its wildlife. Soon after he got his master's degree, the young scientist happened to notice a lot of crows and rooks feeding by the side of the motorway (that's British for freeway). When he turned off the motorway to side roads which ran through farmland, however, there were no birds.

"One could think the crows and rooks were on the motorways because of people throwing sweets out the window or a lot of



Liz Attridge

television to mentor us on minding our "moggies."

# COMETH



Jeff Yeomans

animals getting hit by cars that the crows came in to scavenge," says Tabor. "But, ironically, what I found, and I had a lot of people helping me, was that, when the soil was damp, earthworms were being vibrated out by traffic, and the crows and rooks took advantage of them."

It turned out that modern farming methods had starved earthworms out of the fields, and birds were picking off the remaining earthworms that were eking out a living on the well-mowed motorway "verdures." The lethal combination was causing a severe shortage of earthworms in eastern England.

This rather bizarre fact caught the attention of the British media and Tabor became an instant celebrity. "Whether it was Freud at the back of people's minds, God knows," says Tabor, "but whatever the cause, Tabor

took advantage of the attention and called together a Conference on Motorways, inviting scientists and biologists and government motorway officials. The conference persuaded the British government to stop mowing its motorway verdures, and allow shrubs and underbrush to grow.

"By saving worms and creating better conditions on these linear pathways across Britain, which make up thousands of acres, you create an advantage for wildlife. It really did begin to change things," says Tabor.

"This had a profound effect on me. I was also doing work on other animals that feed on worms, and strangely enough, that included hedgehogs, foxes and cats."

When Tabor started following the nocturnal worm-eating, dumpster-diving foxes

## WHY CATS PLAY WITH THEIR PREY

Even the most rabid cat lovers will admit to a bit of disquietude upon seeing their precious Tabby catch a mouse and then torment the poor thing endlessly before finally delivering the death blow. Is the cat tenderizing the meat? Teaching nearby kittens to hunt? Or, as cat-haters allege, are cats simply cruel sadists?

"If owners were cat-sized, they would soon see why [cats play with their prey]," explains Tabor. "Cats go in paws-first with their heads well back. Only when they are totally sure they are not going to be bitten do they bring their mouth into position. But with their short faces, they can't see what is going on around their mouth. If the prey moves, or worse, bites back, the cat is in trouble. Consequently, it matters that the prey is not only fully subdued, but stunned, so that the cat can safely make the kill."

There's also a problem, Tabor adds, with cats whose mothers never taught them how to hunt. The few times they manage to catch something, they're not sure what to do with it. Fortunately (for their victims), the prey usually gets away.



C. Pearce

## JUST WHO REALLY IS 'MAN'S BEST FRIEND?'

It's ironic that dogs have the reputation for being loyal and loving, while cats are stereotyped as standoffish and two-faced, says Tabor. When one examines their natures, it's really the cats who love honestly and the dogs who are somewhat two-faced (but, he quickly adds, neither can really help the way it is—it's a matter of genetics).

Dogs evolved in an open landscape, as did their prey, Tabor explains. To survive, they learned to run as a pack, with a definite hierarchy. "If you hadn't organized yourselves ahead, when you're hunting and killing, you'd be biting each other and it would be a bloodbath. So dogs evolved with a firm hierarchy, with a lot of sucking up from the underdogs toward the top dog. And a lot of the stuff we call loyalty and affection could also be called sycophancy."

Cats, on the other hand, evolved in woodlands where they needed to hunt alone, in stealth, he says. So they tend to be much more solitary and not open to being ordered about. When cats come together for mating and rearing young, they only stick around afterward if they really like each other.

"Sure, dogs have bunches of affection toward their owners, but they also have a lot of this sucking-up stuff," says Tabor. "Whereas, when cats show affection, it's honest affection—they don't suck up."



Roger Tabor

and cats, he became awed at the survival skills of the feral cats. They weren't pathetic, sickly moggies that barely got by (as most people tend to assume), but bona fide, healthy wildlife, deserving of respect—and, as it turned out, of study.

"People were saying daft things like foxes are the main urban predator in London," says Tabor. "And to me, it was obviously rubbish, because the cat population is much higher than the fox population. At the time there were no good figures, but I was able to do studies to obtain those figures."

Since almost no one had researched feral cats before, the field was wide open. And it was cats and nothing but cats from then on for Tabor.

"Up until [the last few decades], biologists have been rather snobbish," he says. "They'd ignored people who'd had any involvement with animals close to us. Scientists would be much more likely to spend a research grant looking at something exotic in the Himalayas rather than spending it on the sparrows and alley cats in the streets. They didn't think of these as real wildlife worth studying. Yet the crazy thing is, by the 21st century, about 80 percent of the world will live in towns. Our treatment of and relationship to town wildlife is amazingly significant."

Tabor is insistent that cats really are "wildlife." Whereas the dog has been domesticated for at least 14,000 years (recent evidence suggests it may be more like 135,000 years), the cat was domesticated much later (circa 3500 B.C.), and readily reverts to living in the wild. These survival skills came in handy for European cats during the 16th and 17th centuries, when cats had to live on their own. At that time, cats were believed to be witches' familiars, and cat ownership could mean a

death sentence.

While Tabor has never personally run into anyone using cats for witchcraft, he has encountered, while studying feral and domestic cats in 25 nations over as many years, quite a variety of cultural views on felines. And, surprisingly, one of the biggest contrasts is between the people of the U.K. and those in its former North American colonies.

"Here in Britain, we have a conservation ethic, not because it's a new fad, but because we're a very, very small country with a huge number of people. In the southeast of England, where I live, we have the highest density of people on this planet! You tend to think of Hong Kong or places like that, but Southeast England has more people per square inch than anywhere else. When you're such a small island, if you don't want to lose everything very quickly, you learn about management. So we tend to keep to our stodgy, Old World ways, which have helped us survive."

"You've got a much more brash mindset in the States, a very pioneering spirit, even today. It doesn't mean one is right and one is wrong; it's just a different way of dealing with things."

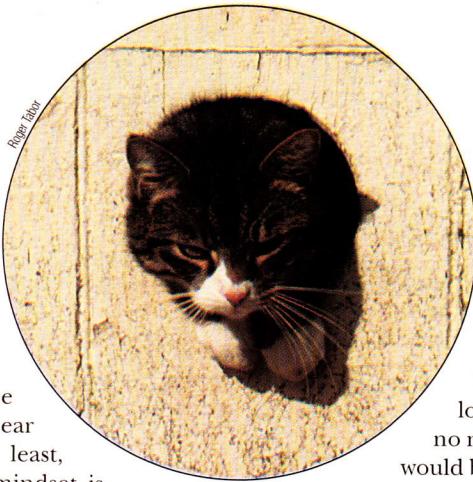
"It means you look on the countryside in a very bright way, but at the same time, it enables you to sustain the gun lobby. To people from Britain, this seems absolutely crazy."

"It is illegal in a lot of your cities to bury your own cat in your own yard. Now what sort of country would enable you to own guns and take potshots at people you don't know, and at the same time be so frightened of germs that you can't bury your own cat in your own back yard? There seems to be an imbalance of risk there."

As Tabor continues to elaborate (at great length, with much passion, quickly translating any quaint English colloquialisms that slip out as he speaks), it becomes clear that, regarding cats at least, he believes the U.K. mindset is preferable. But it is the evolutionary history of cats, rather than British nationalism, that makes him believe American customs such as declawing cats (which is illegal in Britain) and confining them in small apartments are harmful practices.

Until an American shopkeeper started the first cat litter business in 1947, says Tabor, most Americans kept moggies as indoor/outdoor pets (as most British cat owners still do). But now, "We're ending up with a very ironic situation, where it's the brave new continent—America—which is the frightened country. There's a growing fear of the outside world and a transfer of those fears to the cat, which has been functioning quite well in the outside world for thousands of years."

While Tabor admits someone in a Manhattan high-rise on a busy street may not be able to let his or her cat roam out-



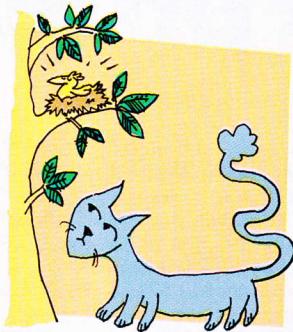
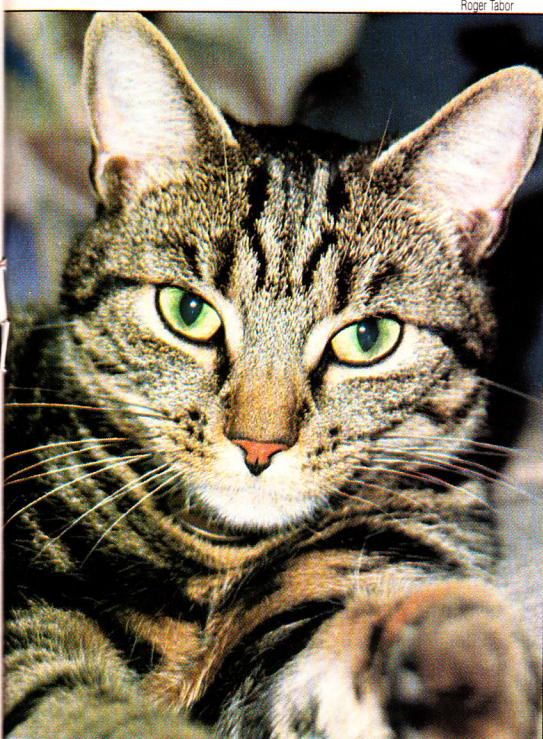
side, there are many others who keep their cats confined out of misguided fears—"It might get lost!"—when there is no need to, and the cat would be much happier as an indoor/outdoor cat.

Furthermore, he points out, many indoor cat behavior problems—spraying, aggressiveness, clawing furniture, and so on—can be resolved instantly by letting the cats come and go at will (unless the cat is declawed—then it must be kept in for its own safety). This is not to say Tabor ignores American reality. He includes numerous tips in *Understanding Cats* and his book of the same name for keeping confined cats content and relatively free of neurosis.

Tabor figures that if we understand our cats, we'll treat them right. "At a time when the cat has become one of the most popular pets in Britain and the United States," he says, "it is being increasingly restricted by fad and law. Consequently, our attitudes toward cat behavior, breeding and care are in a state of flux, and we're in danger of attempting to redesign perfection (see sidebar). The cat is not just the concern of cat breeders and pet food manufacturers, but of us all."

Tabor is really addressing more than how we treat our cats, however. What he also seems to be saying is this: The better we understand our cats, the better we understand ourselves. Perhaps our attempts to protect our cats are symptoms of our own fear of the outdoors. Since our moggies enjoy nature so much, maybe we should too. Rather than forcing ourselves to be "inside humans" behind our locked doors and gated communities, let's get out there and climb those trees, chase those mice! Er, well, even if the analogy's gone to the dogs, you get the idea.

*Understanding Cats—Parts I and II air at 6 and 7 p.m., Sunday, August 17.*



## PLAYING GOD WITH EVOLUTION

Designer pets. They're one of Tabor's biggest pet peeves. In the name of variety (and profits), some cat breeders are creating miserable freaks, he says. Take the "Munchkin." Bred to have short legs, the cat's natural behavior is continually frustrated. It can't climb, run and leap the way it's genetically programmed to, and it's more prone to arthritis. "If someone operated on a cat to produce such short legs, he'd face cruelty charges," says Tabor, "but breeding is a slow process, so we accept it."

He cites other breeding excesses: flat-faced Persian cats that constantly wheeze and form tears in their eyes because their noses are so far back that their sinuses are defective; hairless Sphynx cats, which suffer injury from scratches, cold and strong sunlight.

"At what point do you stop and say, 'This is not really a cat?'" says the feline advocate. "I argue that to choose to inflict distress, to breed to perpetuate disadvantage, is wrong and should be regarded as unacceptable."

"Moggies are proper cats, the essence of cat. They live longer than purebreds because they are more genetically robust. Since responsible pet ownership has led to about 80 percent of house cats being neutered, however," warns Tabor, "the true moggie could eventually become a rarity. If society doesn't watch it, he says, "we're in danger of destroying the cat—the animal we say we love—and replacing it with breeds of dependent toys."