Outdoor Cats: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

What is the Bad and the Ugly?

Cats Are Both Predators and Prey

Cats are very small animals in a big world. Predators include raccoons, coyotes, dogs and mountain lions, to name a few. Coyotes are found in all parts of Marin now and are out during the day as well as the night. Additionally, many cats hunt and kill birds in addition to rodents.

Environmental Poisons

Insecticides, rodenticides, snail and slug bait, ant bait, fertilizers and other lawn maintenance products, pool chemicals, anti-freeze and lead are toxic and in some cases lethal to cats. There are even some bugs, reptiles and insects that can pose a poisoning hazard.

Accidents

Traffic, drowning in pools or canals, getting locked inside storage sheds or someone’s garage are hazards for the curious cat. It isn’t uncommon for a cat to get trapped someplace with no way out.

People!

Well-meaning neighbors may find your cat and keep her, others many consider her a nuisance and take action to remove her from their yard by trapping or taking her to a shelter or she could be accidently trapped as a feral cat and removed or abused by people for “sport.”

Diseases/Injury/Parasites

All of these perils can be caused by interactions with other cats or wildlife. Fighting among outdoor cats can result in abscesses which require medical care. There are also risks from the environment such as skin cancer (sunlight exposure), foxtails, heartworm (through mosquito bites), fleas, ticks, mites and diseases for which we don’t currently have vaccines. Cats can ingest toxoplasmosis while eating exposed prey. Not only can it kill a cat, it is contagious to people and dangerous to pregnant mothers.

Getting Lost!

Most cats have a good sense of direction but if frightened and chases, may find themselves in an unfamiliar place where there is no home or food source.
**Bonding Issues**

An outdoor cat may bond less to her guardians. In fact, she may decide that she likes the neighbor’s set up better!

**Lifespan**

An outdoor cat’s average lifespan is just two to five years as opposed to indoor cats who can live up to 15 years or beyond. Guardians of indoor cats can often spot health problems earlier, before they become life threatening.

**What is the Good?**

**Utilize Natural Instincts**

Cats can be useful in organic pest control if they hunt rodents that spread disease or damage property.

**Natural Environmental Stimulation**

Fresh air, sights and sounds from the outdoors provide emotional and mental stimulation. Cats also enjoy basking in the sunlight and observing the world from high places. Climbing trees and jumping from place to place provide exercise and opportunities for natural scratching posts.

**How can indoor cat guardians provide outdoor benefits?**

The “Good” is a very short list compared to the “Bad” and the “Ugly.” There are many things one can do to provide outdoor benefits inside.

**Exercise Your Cat!**

Learn to play with your cat using her natural senses — seek, hunt and chase. Use interactive toys like the Cat Dancer (imitates insects), Cat Catcher (mouse wand) and Da Bird are great toys for exercise and bonding. Several play sessions a day will help tire out your cat. Non-interactive toys are good for play while you are away. The Cringle and Jingle balls, paper bags with the handles removed, boxes, catnip filled toys, cat coils and fuzzy mice are all wonderful. Rotate toys so your cat doesn’t get bored. Encourage your cat utilize her senses to find the toys by hiding them throughout the house.
**Clicker Train Your Cat**

Clicker training is fun and can be used both as an enrichment tool and as part of a behavior modification plan. Marin Humane regularly teaches [How to Train Your Cat](https://marinhumane.org/catclasses) workshops. Visit [marinhumane.org/catclasses](http://marinhumane.org/catclasses) for more information.

**"Cat-ify" Your House**

Provide cat trees, shelving, hidey spots, play tunnels, different types of scratching surfaces to satisfy jumping, resting and scratching needs.

**Food Puzzles**

Encourage your cat to hunt for her food by hiding treats and food in toilet paper rolls or commercially made treat dispensers. Use food puzzles and food dish foragers so she needs to think and work for her treats and food. See [Environmental Enrichment – Cats Just Want to Have Fun](https://www.marinhumane.org/catclasses) for many more suggestions.

**Sunshine**

Provide a comfortable shelf by the window for your cat to enjoy the warmth of the sun through the window. No shelf? Move a tall padded recliner or dresser to the spot near the window. Place a fleece for comfort on top. You can even add a safe pet warming pad to entice her to the spot. Add a bird or squirrel feeder just outside the window for entertainment.

**Fresh Air**

Install cat proof window screens and screen doors (find the security models) or build a small, perhaps even elaborate catio. See [https://www.marinhumane.org/oh-behave/cats/enclosures/](https://www.marinhumane.org/oh-behave/cats/enclosures/) enroll in our [Feline Environment Enrichment class](https://marinhumane.org/cathandouts) for more information or support.

**Feline Resources:**

We are here to help. Marin Humane’s Behavior & Training department conducts various [cat workshops](http://marinhumane.org/catclasses). Sign up on our Cat Behavior ([MarinHumane.org/catclasses](http://MarinHumane.org/catclasses)) page. We also have Cat Behavior Consultants who are available for private training or [consultations](https://www.marinhumane.org/oh-behave/cats/consultations/) (phone, online or in-home) at 415.506.6284 or [CatBehavior@MarinHumane.org](http://CatBehavior@MarinHumane.org). More information about cat behavior is available on our website at MarinHumane.org/cathandouts.