



# Feline Lives Reimagined

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## Adventures, Enrichment, Training, and Telemonitoring for Cats

by Roxanne Hawn

People—including your clients—make assumptions about the needs, personalities, and potential of pet cats. Yet, these stereotypes often limit the opportunities given to felines. Some cat lovers aim to change that by reimagining cats' lives.

### Adventure Cats

Take Lauren Modery and Geoff Marslett, who live outside of Denver, with a once-feral cat named FatFace (@life\_of\_fatface on Instagram). They fed her and a core group of a dozen community cats in Austin, Texas, for several

years before adopting her and moving to Colorado.



Guinness, the adventure cat

“One day we noticed she had very few teeth, and the other cats would bully her out of getting food, so we started to feed her separately from the other

cats,” Modery said. “It took many, many months for her to slowly warm up to us. One day, I opened the front door to see if she wanted to walk in. She did, and then she promptly fell asleep on my bed. I knew from there that she was our new pet. Actually, she’s more like our baby.”

Estimated to be 12 years old or older, FatFace now frequently travels with Modery and Marslett—30 states, 13 national parks, and counting. People often assume FatFace hates it, but Modery once tweeted, “At home she gets so bored and eats a lot. On the road, she turns into a kitten again, and I believe it’s good for her body and mind.”

FatFace usually sleeps under the car’s front seats in transit, but she isn’t stressed by even long car trips. “FatFace is a remarkably adaptable cat. I think that’s why she did so well in the wild. She just goes with the flow and has zero ego,” Modery said. “She’s a dream at the vet. They love her. While she’s not giving them kisses or anything, she just chills out. That’s how she is on the road. She just kind of goes along for the ride. She loves hotel rooms and exploring them. By the second trip, she was like, ‘Oh, I’ve got this!’”

In public, FatFace rides around in a pet backpack since she never took to leash walking. “She loves looking at things when we bring her out of the backpack,” Modery said. “Her favorite place seems to be Santa Fe. We think she likes the smells there.”

While some people post mean comments online, others seem astonished to see FatFace on adventures in real life. Kids especially find it fun and memorable to meet her, which gives them positive exposure and a broader view of what’s possible with pet cats.

“We treat FatFace with respect and so much love, and in return she trusts us and goes along with our crazy adventures,” Modery said. “We never make her do things that would freak her out. Ninety percent of her travel is hanging out on a big hotel bed watching TV. She’s a dream cat. I’ve never had a cat before, and she set the bar high.”

One feline travel warning, though. Modery reported that some pet-friendly hotels don’t allow cats. They did once sneak FatFace into a hotel, something they jokingly called “Mission Contraband Kitty.”

## Feline Enrichment at Home

Zazie Todd, PhD, author of the forthcoming *Purr: The Science of Making Your Cat Happy*, earned an Advanced Certificate in Feline Behavior (with distinction) from International Cat Care.

“When we provide cats with what they need, it makes life much better for the cat,” Todd said. “A lot of behavior issues simply come down to the fact that people aren’t providing what cats need.”

Todd hopes to change that with tips and checklists in the book, which will be available May 3, 2022. Broadly speaking, though, Todd outlined these key points:

### Training

## Feline Myth Busting

It’s well past time to retire myths and stereotypes about pet cats as cranky loners that mostly fend for themselves and don’t want more engagement or adventures.

As intel on the true needs and preferences of cats emerges, veterinary teams can contribute expertise and actionable suggestions:

- Consider busting myths in your client education materials, conversations, and social media content.
- Look for ways to highlight your feline patients whose training and enrichment improves their lives.
- Share stories about happier and more cooperative feline patients.
- Explain how training, especially with the cat carrier, leads to more frequent and better veterinary care and improved case outcomes for cats of all ages.

“Cats can be trained. Not only that, but it’s a really good idea to train them,” Todd said. “Cats can be trained using food as positive reinforcement, just like we do with dogs, although the pieces of food should be much smaller.” Think small pieces of tuna, cooked chicken, cooked shrimp, or wet cat food dispensed from a tube.

Make going into a cat carrier training goal number one, for safe transport and veterinary appointments. Purr includes a step-by-step training plan for cat carrier acclimation.

Todd explained, “Research shows that this makes vet visits less stressful for the cat, and the vet visit itself was shorter. As well, if the cats are trained, then the base of the carrier is a safe space for them to be in during the exam, with the top removed to facilitate the exam.”

To give the carrier context beyond veterinary visits, suggest clients keep cat carriers out at home all the time, as a safe space for cats to hide or relax.

## Scratching

“Scratching is a natural behavior for cats, which means we need to give them the opportunity to scratch,” Todd said. “But research shows that many people don’t provide the right kind of posts. Cats like scratching posts that let them get a full stretch, and the post needs to be sturdy too. Cats have individual preferences for the material of the post (like wood, sisal, or carpet), and for horizontal and/or vertical scratchers.”

Tips include placing scratching posts around the house, including near the sofa to redirect their attention away from furniture and rewarding the cat with food for using provided scratching posts.

“It’s really about helping people understand that cats need to scratch, and so we have to provide them with good scratching places,” she added.

## Enrichment/Engagement

“Cats need things to do, especially if they are indoor cats,” Todd said. “People should make time to play with their cat every day, and a wand toy is a great way to do this. Move the toy as if it is prey. Of course, cats also like to have toys to play with on their own (like toy mice or birds), but it’s still important for the person to play with their cat.”

People often fixate on catnip toys as the only option, but Todd explains that cats also like other plants such as valerian, Tatarian honeysuckle, and silver vine.

Food puzzle toys can also provide enrichment for cats. Examples include treat dispensing toys or DIY versions such as cupcake holders placed around the house with food or treats so that cats can enjoy time trekking around and hunting for food treasures.

Todd also recommended putting outdoor items such as stones, leaves from safe plants, and so on into a cardboard box for cats to explore. This gives cats exposure to outdoor scents and physical sensations.

## Cat Training for Fun and Function

Kelly Daniel lives in the Waikato district in New Zealand with five dogs and a two-year-old domestic shorthair cat named Oz. She does dog training for fun on the side of her full-time job as a science teacher.

It started with Oz joining the dogs in the training shed and stealing their treats, so Daniel said, “I decided to see if he would do some work for them.” With Oz wary of an actual clicker, Daniel uses a tongue click or verbal marker to let Oz know when he does something correctly, then she rewards with dry pet food.

It’s working. Oz earned his novice, intermediate, and advanced trick dog titles—including tricks like spin, hand touches, and even walking across and tipping over a teeter-totter.

“When people see his tricks, they normally are somewhat amazed, think that I’m using some magic food, and then exclaim that he has more tricks than their own dogs,” Daniel said.

Kathryn Schmidtberger lives in Los Angeles and trains her adventure cat, Guinness. Much of what Guinness learns focuses on functional things that keep him safe in public and allow him more freedom such as:

- Wearing a harness
- Walking on leash
- Riding in a backpack
- Traveling in an RV and camping in a tent
- Following directions about when/where to move
- Putting his paws up on things
- Coming when called
- Hopping into his cat carrier
- Hanging out in a larger dog kennel with space for a litterbox, etc.
- Climbing onto her shoulders

All of these behaviors are “helpful in managing where he is at when camping and hiking,” she said.

Guinness also visits family and pet-friendly stores. It started, though, with short trips on leash to the front porch. “The first couple of times out he didn’t go far and just walked out the door and smelled around right there,” Schmidtberger said. “But then one day he followed [her dog] Terra right out into the yard. Now, when I say ‘wanna go outside,’ he runs merrily to the ottoman, sits down, and waits for me to attach his harness.”

Schmidtberger doesn’t worry much about Guinness venturing too far to explore, but she does worry about off-leash dogs without proper supervision at campsites or on hiking trails harassing Guinness and potentially ruining his confidence for outdoor adventures. That’s when climbing onto her shoulders comes in handy.



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—LAUREN MODERY

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## Feline Telemonitoring

Redefining what’s possible in cats’ lives includes clinical advancements too. Imagine receiving validated information from clients’ homes about how much your feline patients eat and weigh on a regular basis rather than inaccurate self-reporting or guesstimates.

It’s possible thanks to telemonitoring from Healthy Pet Connect, a startup cofounded by AAHA member and former AAHA board member Ken Lambrecht, DVM, in Madison, Wisconsin. He also sits on the American Association of Feline Practitioners board, serves as student chapter chair for the American Academy of Veterinary Nutrition, and served on the board of the Pet Nutrition Alliance.

“We’re blaming everything on COVID,” Lambrecht joked, but moving his annual Pets Reducing for Rescue weight-loss challenge virtual truly did spur the idea for the new company. Other apps and tools lacked accuracy for the metrics they wanted to measure, so they began thinking about a new option.

The startup’s team continues to evaluate pet tech for additional applications in veterinary medicine. Currently, though, the company sells at-home food scales and highly accurate baby scales that sync via Bluetooth to a free, open-source app and free veterinary practice dashboard. Through the app, clients also can share relevant updates such as vomiting or diarrhea or behavioral changes indicating pain.

The Healthy Pet Connect team completed and published results of an initial trial that explored the use of tech in feline weight-loss cases. They found that cats monitored through technology experienced a higher weekly weight-loss rate as a percentage of initial body weight (0.694%) than the control group using a traditional approach (0.175%).

Consistent monitoring can uncover and help manage conditions in cats (and dogs) such as:

- Obesity
- Frailty and weight loss
- Osteoarthritis
- Diabetes mellitus
- Hyperthyroidism/hypothyroidism
- Inflammatory bowel disease
- Lymphoma

“We have many cats on the system that are older, where we want to detect weight loss,” Lambrecht said.

Rather than finding out weeks or months later about weight changes or compliance gaps such as cats not easily making the switch to a new therapeutic diet, veterinary teams could identify and assist much earlier.

Lambrecht expressed excitement about how the app and technology “help pet parents do a better job at home,” adding that “their relationship with

their veterinarian stays completely unchanged. All we do is provide validated information.”

Such hands-on telemonitoring and related case management establishes a potential new revenue source for practices. “[Veterinarians] definitely should consider charging for this,” he said.

For example, let’s say you have a high-demand, high-contact cat case, but your schedule and staffing can’t easily accommodate seeing the patient in person every week or fielding countless phone calls. Practices could charge for care made possible via the telemonitoring.

Lambrecht explained that Healthy Pet Connect plans to focus on software like the app, but they needed to fill a hardware void for scales and to prove the concept. Then, future outreach efforts include getting Bluetooth-connected scales for dogs into daycares, dog-friendly pubs, and other places dogs and their families frequent. And, he said, “We will be working with the top wearables and video analysis to determine cats (or dogs) that are arthritic.”



**Roxanne is a freelance writer and best-selling author living in Colorado.**

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