

Do You Have a Pack Rat Cat?

Ever wonder why your cat hoards and hides objects or brings you treasures? We asked experts to shed some light on this stealthy behavior.

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The term "cat burglar" refers to a robber who can enter, swipe goods and leave a building or room without being detected. Sound familiar?

Across the land, cats stealthily help themselves to treasures great and small (OK, mostly small) and build impressive stashes. Normally mild-mannered kitties commit these crimes for reasons as wide-ranging as the types of property your pack rat cat appropriates.

What a cat does with its prize is as telling as what it takes, says Kay Cox, Ph.D., an animal psychologist and behaviorist. Also known as "The Pet Counselor," Cox is heard on KTAR 620 AM in Phoenix, Ariz., and has appeared on talk shows throughout the United States. "If your cat carries something and shows it to you, he or she is gifting," Cox says, adding she had a cat that would jump on and swat the dishcloth and present it to her as a prize. But if a cat hides things, it could mean something different. "Female cats can go through false pregnancies and the items are like kittens," Cox says. Hormone-driven female cats collect items as though they are their kittens.

Male cats taken from their mother too early could perform nesting behavior, or even dominance in which they take an item that smells like you, demanding you retrieve it, Cox says.

A Dr. Doolittle-type who has a special rapport with animals, Cox advises pet owners to pay attention to their pets' feelings. "People didn't used to think animals had feelings," Cox says. "Now they know better."

Bringing home prey even an article of clothing or trash could be how well-fed house cats stay in touch with their wild side or try to teach us how to hunt, says Katherine Houpt, VMD, Ph.D., a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists and a certified applied animal behaviorist in charge of the Animal Behavior Clinic at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University, in Ithaca, N.Y. There hasn't been a lot of research on caching and pack rat behavior because most owners don't see it as a problem, Houpt says.

Common complaints among owners who seek her help for their cats are destruction of property and biting. She classifies pack rat behavior as fodder for cocktail party conversation. However, about once a year a client complains their cat is bringing home real prey. Keep your cat indoors to avoid these unpleasant surprises, she says.