

Cats and Scent Marking

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains why cats rub their faces on their favorite people.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: My 13-year-old Abyssinian Baldrick likes to lie on my chest and get as close to my face as possible. He then rubs the side of his face against my nose. I've often wondered what that means. I just call them Baldrick's kisses, but I'd like to know if there's another reason.

A: Feel honored and special! You are Baldrick's favorite person, and he wants to make sure that everyone, including other cats, is aware of your relationship. Baldrick, like all cats, has scent glands on his cheeks that produce pheromones. These pheromones contain information about Baldrick that he wants broadcasted world-wide. Since cats don't have pockets where they can keep their business cards, they leave information about themselves by rubbing their faces and heads on people and objects.

Cheek rubbing is also used as part of a formal greeting ritual that cats engage in. Cats are more open to fraternizing and building a relationship with us humans, when we learn how to formally and properly introduce ourselves to them.

Start by sitting 3 to 5 feet away from a cat you would like to meet. Extend your index finger toward the cat at his nose level. If he is interested in getting to know you, he will walk toward your finger, first touching it with his nose. Then he will turn his face so that your finger is moved along his mouth and finally rubbed on his cheek. After he formally greets you in this fashion, you can proceed to pet his cheeks, side of head and under the ears and chin. Like any relationship, it builds and you might find yourself the recipient of many head butts and purrs.