

Converting a Stray Into an Indoor Cat

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger gives pointers for making a cat's new indoor life as interesting as his old outdoor life.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: Just shy of the anniversary of our beloved kitty's death, we were visited by a cat in the neighborhood. After some lengthy investigation, I found that he was abandoned many weeks ago and living off the kindness of the neighbors. We are avid cat lovers and have just warmed to the idea of getting another kitty and this little boy was so friendly and loving we couldn't resist bringing him into our house. He also appears to have been abused as the end of his tail is bent and sensitive and he was rather skittish even though he was very friendly. I'm guessing he is around 1. He displays very young behavior and he is rather gentle and loving.

It's been a week since he's been an exclusively indoor cat and at times he seems somewhat listless, other times mostly bored. He is starting to relax, is less skittish and is becoming accustomed to our home and its noises. We think it would be safer for him to be an indoor cat because of dogs and predators, not to mention the extreme weather we have here in the valley of Las Vegas. We don't think he'd be able to survive much longer on his own outdoors. Plus we've become rather attached to him, and I can't bear the thought of letting him go. No cat could be treated better than the way we've always treated our cats (one lived to 15 and died of cancer and her sister died last year at 19). I just need to know we aren't harming him or holding him hostage.

My question is, can he adapt and adjust to being an indoor cat only? Can he be happy with us?

A: You are extending the life of your new cat by converting him into a 24/7 indoor cat. Not only are you protecting him from predators and dogs, but you are keeping him safe from cars and diseases. I encourage you to take him to your vet for a complete health check, since he has been outside for awhile.

In order for your new cat to transition easily and happily into an indoor cat, it is important to make the inside of your house more interesting than the outside. Provide him with lots of environmental enrichment. He will appreciate tall cat trees, shelves and other high accessible places to hang out on. The cat trees should be a minimum of 5 feet tall, with lots of wide shelves and a covered area at the top where he can nap. Since most cats love the texture of sisal, I recommend trees with posts that are wrapped in sisal rope. Additionally, interactive toys such as puzzle boxes and Turbo Scratchers will chase away the boredom blues. Treat balls will also help keep him occupied.

Have play sessions with him every day, at the same times. Use a fishing-pole toy and imitate the hunt. Pretend that the toy on the end of the pole is a wounded animal. Make the game fun by making the "prey" dart in and out of bags, under sofas and over chairs. Toward the end of the session, slow the game down, as if the toy animal is dying and then let your cat catch it one last time. Immediately feed him after he catches his "prey." He will eat, groom and then go to sleep.

Cats also enjoy daily treasure hunts. Hide small, delicious treats up in the cat trees, on shelves and in the puzzle boxes, Turbo Scratcher and other interactive toys. Each treat can be half the size of a piece of dry food.

Putting your cat on a schedule will also help convert him into a happy indoor cat. Engage him in activities that he enjoys. Feed him, play with him; conduct treasure hunts every day at the same time. If he enjoys being groomed, then have special grooming sessions every day. Consistency is very important.

Clicker training, a positive and humane training technique, is another effective way of refocusing your cat and keeping him challenged. You can teach him all sorts of un-catlike things to do such as shaking hands, giving you high fives, rolling over, etc. Besides keeping him challenged, clicker training is fun for both of you and it builds and strengthens the cat-human bond.