

Where Do Kittens Come From?

An experienced veterinarian describes and explains the courtship, mating rituals and pregnancy cycle of cats.

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Growing up in rural Idaho when spaying and neutering barn cats was unheard of, I received one of the most visible, and vocal, "birds and bees" lessons. It wasn't from a 5th-grade lecture given to boys and girls separately by the school nurse and Dad didn't take me aside for a nervous talk. My earliest sex education came courtesy of the barn cats that were mating under my bedroom window.

Duke was a big, black, longhaired tom that lived in the shadows of our farm. His mistress that night was Punkin, an orange tabby barn cat.

Looking and sounding more like a brawl than mating - with fur flying, vocal cords stretched like piano wires and teeth clamping - the actual copulation took only a few seconds. The courtship between Duke and Punkin was certainly more leisurely, taking place in a complex ballet of behavior that lasted a few hours.

The Queen's "Court" When it comes to sex, the male tom and female queen are romantically shackled and shaped by genetic and biological patterns forged over millennia, but ever changing to today's environment.

While the tom's mating-motor is always revving, the queen only ovulates when in season. In nature, females come into season during the winter solstice, as daylight and temperatures increase, giving birth 60 to 65 days later when food is most abundant. In controlled cat colonies, with 14 hours of light, 10 hours of darkness and constant temperatures, female cats will breed year-round.

The queen is able to bear young as early as 7 months of age and is fertile until 7 to 9 years of age. She will go into heat multiple times during the breeding season from January or February to October or November.

What makes cats unique among companion animals is that once in season, or heat, they are induced to release eggs from the ovary by the physical act of mating. This is called reflex ovulation and is nature's way of making sure that sperm and egg are most likely to meet. This is also why queens stay in heat (estrus) for 2 to 19 days.

To survive in nature, it is necessary for cats to mate multiple times by the same or different partners. In fact, studies show that cats that copulate once get pregnant only 50 percent of the time.