

## Cats Are in Control, Study Finds

**British research team finds that certain cat sounds elicit responses from humans.**

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A British study has found that cats can manipulate their owners by the pitch and tone of their purrs and meows. While cat lovers have known this for some time, a team of British researchers has made it official: Housecats' purrs and meows are sounds that humans just can't ignore.

In particular, there is a certain type of urgent-sounding, high-pitched meow, according to the findings, that humans find difficult to ignore. This meow is actually a purr mixed with a high-pitched cry. While people usually think of cat purring as a sign of contentment, some cats make this purr-cry sound when they want to be fed.

Dr. Karen McComb of the University of Sussex in England, got the idea for the study because her own cat, Pepo, had the habit of waking her up with an insistent purring sound.

"I wondered why this purring sounded so annoying and was so difficult to ignore. Talking with other cat owners, I found that some of them — including co-author Anna Taylor — also had cats who showed similar behavior," McComb said.

McComb and her team set up an experiment which tested human responses to the different purring types. She says: "When humans were played purrs recorded while cats were actively seeking food at equal volume to purrs recorded in nonsolicitation contexts, even those with no experience of cats judged the 'solicitation' purrs to be more urgent and less pleasant."

The crucial factor in determining whether a purr was rated as urgent or pleasant was an unusual high-frequency element — reminiscent of a cry or meow — embedded within the naturally low-pitched purr. When the team resynthesized purrs to remove the embedded cry (and left other characteristics unchanged) the urgency ratings for these purrs decreased significantly.

"The embedding of a cry within a call that we normally associate with contentment is quite a subtle means of eliciting a response — and solicitation purring is probably more acceptable to humans than overt meowing," McComb said.

The results were published in the July 14 issue of the journal *Current Biology*.