



THE COMPLETE CAT

VICKY HALLS

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Vicky Halls, the UK's bestselling cat behavioural expert, has now written an essential reference book that covers every aspect of cat ownership. Drawing on the breadth of knowledge gained over many years, *The Complete Cat* is an absolute must-have for cat owners.

It includes sections on:

- Taking in stray cats
- What to look for in a good cat breeder
- Effective flea control
- Diet and nutrition
- Giving your cat a tablet
- Poisonous household items
- Special needs for the elderly cat
- Understanding normal cat behaviour

And many more

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THE COMPLETE CAT

VICKY HALLS

To Mangus, my muse

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INTRODUCTION

So much has happened since I wrote my first book, *Cat Confidential*, in 2002. I have been fortunate enough to write two more (*Cat Detective* and *Cat Counsellor*), continue with my work as a cat behaviour counsellor and enjoy many other privileges afforded to those with a reputation for being a 'cat expert'. Ironically, I have never described myself as such, because that implies I know it all; on the contrary, I don't think I will ever know enough! Every day those little feline creatures teach me something new, which only goes to show that not all cats respond the same way in any particular situation. You can generalize and say that some will do 'this', while others don't, but the frustration (or the fascination, depending on how you look at it) is they are all individuals and their response to life will depend on their lineage and their experiences.

The most extraordinary and unexpected thing about writing these books on cat behaviour has been the thousands of new friends from all over the world I have discovered. Cat lovers have been extremely generous by writing or emailing me to say how much they have enjoyed the books. Many of them have added a query or two about their own cats that I will endeavour to answer to the best of my ability. Over the past few years these questions have started to include other conundrums that can't really be placed under the umbrella 'behaviour'. The clients from my behaviour practice will also telephone me to discuss practical problems, such as 'Which cattery should I choose?' or 'Is this grooming brush going to be right for

Ginger?’ I’ve had numerous heart-wrenching conversations about medical diagnoses and sudden illnesses when owners feel, rightly or wrongly, that I am the person to break down all the complicated terminology and give them the bottom line on their cat’s condition. I’m very flattered and, after a brief chat, usually refer them back to their vets, but I’m beginning to think that specializing in behaviour is only half the story. This book, therefore, is something a little different for me. It’s still my voice, my words, my thoughts, but with a great deal of research and knowledge acquired from working with experts in the fields of veterinary medicine, general care and behaviour whom I am privileged enough to call my friends.

Just one more thing: for ease of language I refer throughout this book to cats in the masculine. This shows no intended bias – my own cats, Bink and Mangus, are both female.

CHAPTER 1



How Much Is That Pussy in the Window?

ACQUIRING A CAT

MANY OF THE potential pitfalls of cat ownership are experienced by the unprepared. I have spoken over the telephone to so many new owners who have subsequently remarked, 'If only I had known that before I went ahead.'

When, as a newlywed, I decided the time was right to acquire my first cat I spent hours at the library researching breeds, cat care and cats in general to ensure I would a) be a suitable owner and b) choose the cat that was right for me. I'm glad I did, because it prepared me well and every subsequent moment with my cat companions over the years has been a pleasure.

You may be considering an addition to your existing cat family or even embarking on a new cat relationship having enjoyed one or more in the past. You already know the pleasure involved in cat ownership and the decision to go ahead has probably already been made. You may even be a member of a very special group of people I like to refer to

as 'cat wannabes'. If you have never owned a cat before or never had a cat as a child I would like to address you specifically for a brief moment.

Hello,

Let me tell you what a cat will bring to your life.

A cat is a naturally undemanding creature that usually takes out of the relationship what you are prepared to put in and nothing more. Cats have moments when they seem intensely pleased to see you and yet they don't sit and pine when you are out. They have a secret life outside your relationship, but when you are there you will be appreciated. They may show love to you when you are busy and spurn you when you want a cuddle; it's not always possible to turn their love on like a tap.

Cats seek out warm, secure places to sleep and so often prefer to share your bed. They see this as a privilege and not a right, so a hammock attached to a radiator or a place near the Aga will do instead.

If you are sad they will fall off the back of the sofa for you or lie with their legs in the air just to make you laugh. They are comedians in fur coats.

They will eat expensive prawns or simple cat food; the trick is to start as you mean to go on. They accept their lot - but the more you give, the more they will want. Be brave enough to have rules and you should still manage to maintain control of the household.

You will struggle with giving them pills, hate car journeys with them, be revolted by their hairballs and have every comfy chair in the house covered with a cat blanket. What you will get in return from a cat, if you are lucky, is twenty years of shared experiences, house moves, growing children, heartaches and happiness. You will take a million

photographs of him over the years and, eventually, you will develop your own personal language to understand what he wants and when he wants it. When he is gone you will mourn and marvel at how much you could miss such a small furry creature.

In conclusion, I am recommending wholeheartedly sharing your home with a cat. Once you have experienced the delights you will never regret your decision.

Yours truly,
A cat lover

It's hard to state succinctly quite how great it is to live with a cat; I suppose the best way to find out is to experience it.

If the decision has just been made to add a cat to your family it's merely the beginning of the process. It's now necessary to look at the 'what' and 'where from' bits. There are a number of options available to you at this point.

Kitten or adult cat?

A kitten is the ideal choice if you already have a cat in residence. Adult cats will accept a kitten more readily as it poses little threat to them at this stage. Kittens can be a bit boisterous with the more staid adults, so it's important to give the kitten other things to do apart from 'bouncing on the big cat'. [Chapter 7](#) will go into greater detail about how to make a stress-free introduction.

Kittens are always delightful to have around but they can be a handful. They will run up your curtains, disappear up your chimney, chew your fingers and generally act like hooligans. They probably aren't the ideal choice for people out at work all day; they need small frequent meals and lots of company when they are little, so if you are in a full-time

job and contemplating your first cat it's probably best to look for an older one. If you are working but adamant about acquiring a kitten, then breeders will sell you two to keep each other company. However, many rescue charities will not re-home a youngster to a house that is empty all day.

Kittenhood is an expensive time for the owner, including as it does full courses of vaccination, neutering surgery, microchipping and all the acquisitions that are necessary to provide the best for your first cat (see [Chapter 3](#)). Tragically, cats between the ages of seven months and two years are statistically more likely to be killed on the road than at any other age, so there is an added risk if you plan to allow your cat to have access outdoors.

If you decide that you want to 'rescue' a cat and adopt a second-hand adult with an established personality, then you have a wide choice of options. Adult cats in need of a new home can be obtained from friends, neighbours, rescue shelters, vet surgeries or even your own back garden. Some cats will find you and turn up one day demanding food and a warm bed. If you fancy something more exotic than your average moggie, you can contact the various breed clubs that have 'rescue' co-ordinators who re-home their own kind to worthy homes. Most of my cats (including my most recent acquisition, Mangus) were pre-owned and I don't for one moment regret taking them on. I have had nothing but pleasure from all of them, but I do accept that taking on a cat with a vague or unknown background can be a bit of a lottery.

If you do opt for an adult cat, then don't forget there are oldies to choose from too. People tend to overlook the older cat for obvious reasons, mainly that they may get illnesses relating to their advancing years, so cost a fair bit and then they die! While I accept that this is often true, there are many advantages to taking on older cats. They will be past the stage of running up your curtains, straying, hunting or fighting. They are usually more tuned in to people and very

fond of a good cuddle. They also seem incredibly grateful for a warm bed, a haven in which they can live out their days. When one day my present two, Bink and Mangus, are no longer here I have a feeling I may just act as custodian for a series of unwanted geriatrics.

Pedigree or moggie?

Many people decide on a pedigree as the ideal choice because they believe that it gives them a better idea of what they are going to get. This is true to a certain extent, but the next chapter will cover this in more detail. I struggle with the concept of spending a fortune on a pedigree kitten when there are thousands of healthy cats put to sleep every year for want of a decent home. If you are looking for a cat of a particular shape or colour, then I expect you would choose a pedigree. Don't forget, however, that the breeders will need to have done a good job in the first few weeks to provide the right sort of early experiences to make their kittens good pets. Owners of pedigrees also tend to follow breeders' advice and keep their pets exclusively indoors, thereby automatically curtailing their lifestyle to one of confinement.

Domestic short- or longhairs (the correct term for 'moggies') are nature's pedigree and they can be as beautiful, loving and intelligent as any expensive breed. They tend to be more robust in their health and probably more 'cat-like' than their pedigree cousins. It's your choice really.

Longhaired or shorthaired?

Longhaired cats are potentially high-maintenance pets, particularly the pedigree ones with a long coat that they cannot keep tidy themselves through grooming with their

tongue. Most longhaired moggies have coats that are self-maintained; they may get a little knotting under the armpits but most of the coat will stay mat-free. Your cat would still benefit from a bit of additional grooming and this can be very relaxing for human and cat alike. If, though, you are considering acquiring a Persian, for example, remember that this beauty requires daily grooming. Just to make matters even more complicated, Persians often don't much like being groomed and they can put up quite a fight for such a normally placid breed. Despite their opposition it really is essential to keep on top of the combing as, if you miss a day or two, knots will develop that are virtually impossible to untangle without a visit to your vet or a professional grooming salon. You then end up with a cat sporting the latest poodle or lion cut and an expression that could curdle milk.

Shorthaired cats are less prone to the formation of hairballs in their stomachs (from grooming and ingesting fur) and are perfectly able to maintain their coat condition with their specially designed barbed tongue. Usually, though, this doesn't mean they don't enjoy a little brush/massage after a busy day in next-door's garden.

Male or female?

There are some owners who favour one sex over the other. They will tell you, for example, that male cats are more affectionate than females. From my personal experience I beg to differ: I have had six females and four males in my cat-owning lifetime and they all had their own unique personality; some were more affectionate than others, but certainly there was no bias in favour of the males. I believe that the cat's individual personality is more important than its gender.

There are some financial and practical considerations if you are acquiring either sex as a kitten. Males are cheaper to neuter and the surgery requires a shorter recovery time. (Ladies, be warned on this point: some men have a problem with the whole concept of castration. Do not let them influence you about the necessity for surgery at the appropriate time; it is the responsible thing to do.) Once castrated, male cats can develop into mummy's boys if their testosterone was the only thing that was ever going to make them brave. Owners rarely see this as a big disadvantage, although it can leave these cats susceptible to bullying outside. Females take the perceived trauma of an ovario-hysterectomy at the age of five or six months in their stride, with no obvious personality change seen in most individuals.

If you already have a cat of one sex it may be advisable to get one of the other, providing their personalities are compatible (for example, don't get an extra-bold kitten if your resident cat is shy and retiring). If you are acquiring two kittens, then one of each sex from the same family is probably the ideal combination; otherwise, pick the personality that suits you and worry about the workings at the back end later!

I hope this hasn't confused you too much and you now have a clearer idea of what age and type of cat you are going to choose. Don't, however, get too locked into the idea that you 'must have a three-year-old ginger male shorthaired cat' when you go looking. It's like any shopping expedition - if you go in search of something too specific you will end up disappointed. By all means have a rough idea of what you are after and then be prepared to be flexible.

Getting a kitten from a domestic home

Some pet owners believe, erroneously in my opinion, that female cats should have one litter before they are spayed (neutered). Others like their children to experience the wonders of birth and the joy of little kittens. Unfortunately, another group of owners are either a little late in remembering to neuter their cat or don't wish to go to the expense and end up with a litter of kittens whether they like it or not. Inevitably all of these owners will advertise their kittens for sale at some stage.

The best places to look for 'kittens for sale' ads are:

- local newspaper
- noticeboard in your local shop
- noticeboard in your veterinary practice
- pet shop

Many kittens can be sourced via word of mouth; everyone seems to hear of a friend's neighbour's aunt with a litter somewhere in the country. There is a definite season for naturally produced kittens (pedigrees can be available all year round). Female cats are seasonally polyoestrous, which basically means that they will come into season at regular intervals between the months of February and September. After a nine-week gestation period they produce kittens during the warmer months, thereby allowing them a greater chance of survival. If you search for kittens during the summer months you are more likely to have a reasonable choice. In my experience those kittens available during the first four and last three months of the year tend not to be so robust, but I can't say I've ever seen any research findings to support that observation.

Some of the kittens advertised may be 'free to a good home'; others will be sold for anything between £5 and £100. I strongly recommend that you don't get tempted to pay a three-figure sum for a non-pedigree kitten. This may

just tempt the individual to breed again from the mother cat rather than take the more responsible step of spaying.

Once you have identified the advertisement that appeals, the next step is to arrange a visit potentially to choose your new companion. Picking a kitten from a litter should always be a labour of the mind rather than the heart, but this is easier said than done. Selecting a kitten because you feel sorry for it or want to rescue it from a filthy, uncaring home is a noble act but it could mean long periods of distress and worry and a greatly reduced bank balance. It is certainly possible that you could have a long and enjoyable relationship with a kitten acquired in this way. However, if you want to reduce the risks of chronic illness or personality problems, I would suggest you consider the following.

Research the litter first by asking questions over the telephone before you view. If the answers to any of the following questions raise doubts in your mind, it may be better to look for another litter.

Question: Have the kittens been reared in your house?

The ideal answer to this question would be 'yes'. It's important that kittens are born and brought up in a normal domestic environment with all the usual sights, sounds and smells they are likely to experience when they leave to go to their new home. I always say that the more chaotic the home the better! Kittens that are born outside then 'grabbed' and brought into the house when they are four or five weeks old will not be well socialized and they'll always remain wary of people.

Question: Have the kittens been well handled?

Kittens between the ages of two and seven weeks are at their most receptive to learning about social relationships

with other species. Research shows that handling by four or more people (men, women, children) gives the kittens the best possible start in life. If they are not being handled very much at all, this could be a problem, as they may never adjust completely to forming relationships with humans.

Question: Can the mother be viewed with the kittens?

If the mother is shy, nervous or unlikely to be around when people visit, then this reaction to human company may have influenced the kittens. I wouldn't necessarily rule out the litter based on this one negative reply but be mindful that the kittens may be nervous too.

Question: Has a vet examined the kittens and have they been wormed and treated for fleas?

It would be great if the owner is well informed and has taken all the requisite steps to ensure that the kittens have had all the necessary parasite treatment. If this isn't the case, you will probably incur a significant vet bill as soon as you take possession of the kitten.

Question: At what age are you allowing your kittens to go to their new home?

Pedigree kittens tend to go to their new homes at thirteen weeks of age, after a complete initial vaccination course. Owners of non-pedigree litters won't be offering this to prospective purchasers, so eight weeks would be the ideal time for the kittens to leave their mother and embark on their new lives. The owners may want to get rid of the kittens sooner because they are eating them out of house and home and annoying them, but I would suggest that is probably too young.

When you make the decision to view the litter, look for a kitten that fulfils the following criteria:

- bright eyes with no discharge
- clean ears with no evidence of dark brown wax
- shiny coat and no pot-belly (this would indicate a worm burden)
- clean anus with no sign of diarrhoea
- alertness and interactivity with the environment
- playful behaviour with the other kittens in the litter
- keenness to approach visitors

Getting a cat or kitten from a rescue centre

Rescue centres come in all shapes and sizes. Cats Protection re-homes the largest number of cats in the UK. The RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and Cats Protection have large and small shelters, depending on whether they are funded by headquarters or through local donations and legacies. The Blue Cross, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and Wood Green Animal Shelter are some of the better-known cat re-homing charities. In such large organizations staff training is available but the quality of care and knowledge will always depend on the individuals working at each establishment. Other smaller charities exist that do equally sterling work with a minute fraction of the funding. There are many volunteers doing this job and some will even have pens in their gardens or second-hand moggies living in their spare bedroom.

Cats end up at rescue centres for so many different reasons. They may have been found as strays or been the victims of a relationship break-up, an allergic child, an emigration or a 'no pets' policy in a rented property or a nursing home. Some cats may have been usurped as the

favoured pet when a new puppy came along or their owner may have died, leaving them alone. Once the cats have been signed over to the charity they start their journey towards finding a new home. They have first to be examined by a veterinary surgeon before they are put forward for adoption. Most centres are extremely thorough with health checks and they have local vets who provide charitable assistance at reduced prices to ensure the less fortunate of the cat world also receive good veterinary care. If the cat's background is unknown, before it is put on display it will usually be quarantined to ensure there are no diseases being incubated. During the quarantine period, or after if appropriate, the centre will usually perform certain checks including some if not all of the following:

- scanning for a microchip if the cat has been found as a stray
- castration of male stray cats if necessary (females are more problematical as it is not obviously apparent whether the surgery has already been performed)
- blood tests for FeLV (Feline Leukaemia Virus) and FIV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus) in high-risk cats - i.e., sick cats and entire male cat strays
- worming treatment
- treatment for external parasites - e.g., fleas, mites etc.
- veterinary examination including any necessary dental treatment

If the cats have come directly from a home along with a vaccination certificate it may be possible to waive these precautions, but they will undoubtedly be given a health check anyway.

At this point they will be available for viewing and prospective owners like yourself can visit a cattery, rehoming centre or private house during the relevant

opening hours to have a look at the various cats to see if any take your fancy.

While you are getting to know all the hopeful little contenders it's worth sparing a thought for those people who look after them during their time of need, as they do a very stressful and unglamorous job. I know because I worked for the RSPCA in the late eighties/early nineties, so I feel I have an understanding of the business from that side of the fence too. Every day these volunteers or low-paid workers have contact with the people who are giving up their cats for adoption, most of whom have a perfectly good reason for doing so, and the process is heartbreaking for all concerned. However, there are some the rescue-centre staff consider feckless and irresponsible with regard to the standard of care they give to their cats. These people, unlike you or me, don't want their pets any more or make unreasonable demands on the charity workers rather than deal with their own personal problems. It is very easy to fall out of love with humans when you work for rescue organizations and many do. Sadly this can spill over into their contact with the public in general and I often hear the complaint that rescue-centre staff can be abrupt and judgemental with prospective adopters and too critical of what constitutes a suitable home for their charges. It's simple for me to understand how they end up this way but I don't necessarily believe this attitude is very constructive. My advice to you is: stick with it; at the end of the day it's giving a home to an unwanted cat that matters. There are literally thousands of unwanted cats in centres all over the UK and they need people like you to care for them.

Whatever the reason for cats being in need of a new home, they are undoubtedly confused and distressed in rescue environments, kept in tiny cages surrounded by other cats and being poked and stared at by a random assortment of humans. It is a very difficult time for these cats, so it's essential you take this into consideration when

you view them. The individual cat's response to the cage and you can be very revealing and enable you to see how he may cope with adversity in the future.

Identifying stress in a caged cat

Stress in confined cats has been comprehensively studied and various scoring systems have been created (originally by Sandra McCune in 1992 and latterly by Kessler and Turner in 1997) to determine the level of stress via direct observation. This is referred to as the 'Cat-Stress-Score' (CSS) and it's useful to have a basic understanding of it when viewing a prospective adoptee. The scoring system starts at '1', indicating that the cat is fully relaxed, and slides down an increasing scale of distress to '7', referring to the cat as 'terrorized'.

A '1'-score cat would look like this:

Body - laid out on the side or on the back

Belly - exposed, with slow breathing

Legs - fully extended

Tail - extended or loosely wrapped round the body

Head - laid on a surface with the chin up

Eyes - fully or half closed; may be blinking slowly

Pupils - normal according to the ambient light conditions

Ears - half back (normal position)

Whiskers - lateral (normal position)

Vocalization - none

Activity - sleeping or resting

The scale continues in a sliding pattern to describe various body postures. Basically, if a cat is fairly relaxed he will be stretched out yet responsive to your contact but not over-alert. As a cat grows more stressed his body becomes upright and tense, the belly is hidden, the legs bend, the tail twitches or curls under and vocalization increases in

frequency and intensity. The truly fearful cat may even attempt to escape.

It's very distressing to see a terrorized '7'-scoring cat but this is Kessler and Turner's definition:

Body - crouched directly on top of all fours, shaking

Belly - not exposed, with fast breathing

Legs - bent

Tail - close to the body

Head - lower than the body, motionless

Eyes - fully open

Pupils - fully dilated

Ears - fully flattened back on the head

Whiskers - back

Vocalization - plaintive miaow, yowling, growling or silent

You can see the wide variety of stressed responses to confinement. It's hardly surprising really as the enclosure itself causes only a fraction of the stress for these cats. They are bombarded with the threatening scents of other cats, strange people and unfamiliar odours. Routine is often absent as the cage is approached randomly and mealtimes may vary as the carers cope with the demands of running a rescue shelter. The display of anxious behaviour at this time is not necessarily an indication of how they will behave when introduced to a loving home with few restrictions and new routines. Don't, however, believe that a '7'-score cat will automatically respond to your home with gratitude and transform into a laid-back pussycat. The degree of stress response from a caged cat gives a reasonable indicator how that individual may cope with challenges in the future, taking into consideration any specifically distressing prequel to its arrival in the shelter in the first place. Even if the fear or anxiety manifests itself in a rigid body and sweaty paws, you are still potentially adopting a cat that will struggle with any number of

difficult situations. If the cat's response is aggression it further complicates matters.

Finding out about their past

Many owners just don't get much information about the past life of their new acquisition. It isn't always the most important factor in adopting a cat, particularly as some of the information comes second-hand or is a vague representation of the truth. When I worked in a rescue cattery I coordinated the handover of many unwanted pets and several things became apparent then, namely:

1. People sometimes don't tell you the true circumstances for handing over a loved pet as they feel it will sign their cat's death warrant.
2. People feel guilty so gild the truth so that you don't hate them.
3. Cats are always three years old.

With regard to the latter, I'm not sure whether these owners lose count once the cat grows up or they have no concept of time. It could just be that they think if you knew the cat was really ten it could spoil its chances of re-homing. It is notoriously difficult to age cats unless they are very young or very old, but I have seen many adopted cats that new owners have acquired at the age of three and I would swear they weren't a day under fifteen! So what I am saying is: if the cattery supervisor seems vague about the cat's background, then it's entirely possible they either don't know the details or are not completely positive that they are true.

There are several things that may ring alarm bells, so a little close scrutiny and interrogation is sometimes necessary. These points may be raised by the shelter staff

during the course of a conversation or may even be written on a sign on the cage door.

Alarm bells!

'Not to be re-homed with small children'

This could indicate:

1. The cat has a history of aggression towards humans. Specifying 'small children' could mean that a small child has been attacked previously, small children could potentially provoke attack, or the rescue centre fear they would be vulnerable with such an unpredictable pet.
2. The cat is nervous and the centre may feel that small noisy children would terrify it.
3. The previous owners have indicated a specific problem that involves small children.

'Must be homed as a single cat'

This could indicate:

1. A history of inter-cat problems, either with other cats in the household or in the territory. The resulting stress may well have manifested itself in a behaviour problem that the previous owner found unacceptable or impossible to live with.
2. The cat may have a condition or illness that is potentially contagious or infectious to other cats.

'Must be homed to a quiet household with no other pets or children'

This could indicate:

1. This poor soul has been given up for adoption because it's scared of everything. The previous owners or the cattery staff were unable to establish what combination of factors freaked the cat out so chose to be cautious and cover all potential stressors.
2. The cattery staff assessed the cat as nervous and thought a quiet home was necessary.
3. The cat has a history of a behaviour problem.

'Must be homed as an indoor cat'

This could indicate:

1. A medical reason or a physical disability that would make access to outdoors potentially dangerous for the individual or for other cats.
2. The cat has always been an indoor cat (not a good enough reason in itself).
3. The cat is extremely nervous and the cattery staff realize that it will probably choose not to go outside.

'Needs to go to a farm, smallholding or a working stable yard'

This could indicate:

1. The cat is virtually feral.
2. The cat has a history of aggression to people.
3. The cat has a history of territorial aggression and can't live in a built-up area.

There are many other 'alarm bell' phrases but the ones detailed above are probably the most common. All are worthy of further investigation; if you are really lucky the staff are adept at getting the truth out of previous owners and they will be able to give you more information to help you make your decision. A history of a behaviour problem in itself is not the end of the world as many problems are

environment specific and if, happily, you fail to reproduce a similar environment in the future the cat will probably be fine. My own cat, Mangus, was second-hand when I acquired her because she had an expensive habit of eating leather (pica - the consumption of a non-nutritious material, see [Chapter 8](#)). Once she was removed from her multi-cat home to a place where she was queen of all she surveyed, she never touched an inch of leather again. I would always recommend you be armed with as much background on your cat as possible, so that you are prepared for all eventualities. The last thing you want is to take a cat to yet another household that just isn't right for him.

Adopting a 'special needs' cat

It's very difficult to walk away from the cat with 'special needs' because there is always the worry 'What if I don't adopt him?' or 'Who would want such a cat?' I totally understand the quandary as I have even succumbed to this emotional decision myself and adopted a 'scaredy-cat'. However, over the years I have spoken to literally hundreds of cat owners who have adopted an animal under these circumstances and suffered the consequences. There is always a feeling that love conquers all and kindness will reap rewards no matter how emotionally damaged the cat may be. Sadly, love is rarely if ever enough and a lifetime of stress-related illness, traumatic vet visits and disappointment usually ensues.

If, though, you genuinely want nothing back from this cat (i.e., no cuddles and no emotional feedback) and you have incredible patience, then you may be the right owner for a nervous cat. Just don't expect undying gratitude or affection any time soon.

My advice with my sensible head on would be to choose a cat that, when observed in its cage, would have a score nearer '1' on the Cat-Stress-Score scale described above and then you are more likely to have an emotionally robust creature that can cope with life's ups and downs. Always ask the cattery assistant to remove the cat from the cage and if possible allow you to have time in an area away from the pen where you can interact under slightly more normal conditions. Some larger rescue centres have rooms for this purpose that are laid out like a sitting room at home to give prospective owners the chance to see the cat behaving in a domestic setting. Unfortunately not all centres are so well equipped and you may only get the chance to hold them in a cramped environment with the other cats looking on.

Adopting a 'disabled' or elderly cat

Occasionally prospective owners will actively seek out those cats that they perceive will be left on the shelf if they don't personally take action. These are the geriatric, blind, deaf or amputee cats that sometimes find themselves in rescue shelters. It is a noble thought to give a home to the less fortunate of the cat world but it is not without its drawbacks.

Adopting an elderly cat

Pleasures

- doesn't stray very far and is often content just to sit in the garden on a sunny day and watch you weeding
- loves a warm lap
- rarely if ever runs up your curtains or destroys your furnishings
- has a wisdom born of age that is extremely endearing