

Cats and their boxes

*Christina Orieschnig delves into
this never-ending love affair*

In 1935, Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger was racking his brains, looking for a metaphor to explain a complex paradox in quantum mechanics. The result? To this day, students of physics learn about quantum superposition by hearing about Schrödinger's cat, Milton, hiding in a box, and so still that he might be simultaneously both alive and dead.

But why was Milton in the box in the first place?

The eternal love affair of cats and boxes – or really, any tight, enclosed space they can squeeze into – was a source of amusement for centuries before Schrödinger's thought experiment. Today, cats' affairs with boxes are better-documented than ever, with the collective internet taking delight in snapshots, videos and GIFs.

Why exactly is it that cats commandeer every box in their vicinity? Over the past few decades, animal behaviour scientists have looked into the matter, even though cats are infamously uncooperative research subjects.



Hiding away, feeling safe

Cats feel less stressed with boxes around – that is the main finding of several scientific studies. In 2007, researchers measured the stress levels of new arrivals in cat shelters in the UK. Some were provided with boxes, others were given no place to hide. As it turned out, cats with access to boxes were far less stressed in their new environment than those without. They were also more confident in approaching humans who came to visit, looking for cats to adopt. A 2019 study on Dutch shelter cats reached much the same result, finding that the cat stress score of felines whose environment was enriched with hiding places was significantly lower.

Boxes are places of safety and security for cats – and having the option of hiding in one is a considerable comfort to stressed-out felines. When hiding in a confined space, cats

have a much higher level of awareness and control over their environment. Nothing can sneak up on them from behind or from the side. And if something does approach from the front – even if it is just a curious cat owner's hand, carefully reaching into a suspiciously purring box – the cat can easily defend their hiding place (as many a finger can attest).

Being in a new environment inspires fear in most cats. A box is an invaluable retreat for cats to soothe this anxiety. Where wildcats would hide in a crevice, cave or thick undergrowth, their domesticated counterparts take refuge in Amazon delivery packaging – though big cats are also not averse to cardboard boxes, as footage from wildlife sanctuaries shows. >

They may come bearing Amazon deliveries but for cats they offer opportunities for exploration.

Provide boxes, respect private space

Providing domesticated cats with boxes to retreat into contributes significantly to their psychological wellbeing. That means cat owners should seriously consider sacrificing packaging to their furry darlings – or to acquire a dedicated hiding spot for them, such as Cats Protection’s Feline Fort.

“Even the most confident cat should be provided with a hiding space, to give them the option of retreating. This provides them with a reassuring level of control and predictability,” Nicky Trevor, a behaviour expert who has worked at Cats Protection for over 10 years, explains.

“It is difficult for many owners to accept and understand that cats tuck themselves away when they’re stressed or upset, because humans react differently. Most of us would probably prefer a hug or cuddles in such a situation. But cats are much happier if you respect their space and leave them in peace for a bit. They’ll come out when they’re ready. It’s important to explain this – especially to children. Ultimately, respecting a cat’s boundaries and giving them personal space will make them trust you more.”



Box and whisker plotting

But the feeling of security is not the only reason why cats will happily squeeze themselves into boxes and other confined spaces. These spots are also excellent assets to cats' inborn hunting instincts.

Cats are ambush predators. They excel at observing their prey, still as a statue, and then pouncing when the moment is right. Whether it is a mouse, a fishing rod toy, or an unwitting human's foot falling victim to the onslaught, there are few places from which to better spring an attack than a box. Especially one small enough for most people – and prey – to doubt a full-sized killer would even fit in.

Staying warm and comfy

Cats seek warmth. That is not news to anyone who has seen felines basking in sunny spots, in front of chimneys or on radiators. In fact, a 2006 study by the US National Research Council found that the thermo-neutral zone for domestic cats is between 30-38°C. In this range cats have to expend the least energy to maintain their body temperature, and it's consequently where they feel most comfortable. In temperate climes, finding hot spots is one of the main missions of domestic cats, and has led felines to settle on recently-used stoves, on laptop keyboards, or under terrarium lamps meant for their reptilian cohabitants.

Boxes can help cats achieve their heat-seeking goals in two ways. One, cardboard is an excellent insulator. And two, small spaces are far easier to heat up and maintain at a higher temperature with body heat – rather than the open expanse of a living room or a cat bed. Snuggling into a tightly fitting space is the feline equivalent of burrowing under a mountain of blankets to ward off the chill.

Curiosity, the cat and unexplored boxes

Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back, as the saying goes. To domesticated felines, any new object brought into their territory requires close investigation. Anything unusual will be sniffed, prodded and examined from every angle, including the cardboard boxes that arrive periodically at most homes nowadays. They may come bearing Amazon deliveries but for cats they offer opportunities for exploration.

One result that such exploration soon yields for many cats is that cardboard has a perfect texture to bite, chew and rip. It is pliant, does not splinter and gives way. Ploughing claws through wide, rippling expanses, biting into the thick hide of the cardboard beast, and chasing after the hapless fragments of the boxes that used to be is supremely satisfying for felines. Even though the same cannot be said for their human cohabitants, charged with clearing up the carnage.

Giving in to the box's gravitational pull


History has not recorded whether Schrödinger's cat Milton ever learned that hiding in his favourite spot was immortalised in textbooks, or if so, what he thought about it all. Chances are, though, that Milton was completely oblivious to his fame, and more interested in the comfort, safety and warmth provided by his now-famous napping spot.

As for Schrödinger, like many a cat owner, he probably thought that it would be easier to occupy himself with easier topics, like quantum physics, rather than figure out the workings of his cats' mind. Such as why he would spurn a newly unwrapped, expensive cat tree to follow the gravitational pull of its empty packaging. >

#cardBORED

kitty creations

Any cat owner knows the value of a good old cardboard box and it seems that while the nation was in lockdown, a little extra time at home went a long way...

Our supporters and our centres and branches have been getting creative with cardboard! The imagination that has gone in to some of the designs we've seen shared on our social media channels has been pawsome! If you've got your own feline fort, moggy-mobile or cat castle to share, tag us @catsprotection! 



@exeteraxhayescatsprotection

Don't expect a quick response time from this ambulance!



@Nicky_Luke_Ross

Ready for battle in the fight against the dreaded vacuum cleaners



Liz Macintyre on Facebook

Keep your paws off the remote, this is my favourite channel



@vickigreenfield

Desperate measures are called for when the pubs are closed