



FELINE

TIM FLACH

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At the heart of this project lies a quest: to unmask the essence of being feline.

Growing up, I was always surrounded by cats. They were my earliest companions, the animals closest to me throughout my childhood. It seems almost inevitable that, after seven book projects photographing some of the world’s most extraordinary species, I eventually confront the most elusive subject of them all: the cat.

Of all my animal subjects, the domestic cat has undoubtedly made me work the hardest; they are notoriously difficult models, and if there’s one thing I can be sure of, it’s that they do exactly as they please.

Unlike their canine counterparts, who eagerly respond to a squeaky toy or sausage to get an eyeline to camera, cats are a totally different story. They need to decide that even being in front of the camera is worth their time. That decision can take seconds; other times, an entire day. Drawing from our arsenal of toys, a humble feather became our most reliable tool, while treats occasionally worked too well, transforming the challenge from coaxing them onto the set to persuading them to leave.

Despite cats’ indifference, unexpected moments on set can reveal unique opportunities. Like when photographing Neville, the Siberian, who ignored us entirely and drifted off to sleep mid-shoot, allowing us a chance to capture the extreme close-up of his nose on pages 60–61.

Working from my studio in London, it’s remarkable to think that just a stone’s throw away, the very first cat show was held at the Crystal Palace in 1871. This transformed cats from working mousers to beloved companions, paving the way for their growing presence in our lives. Today, they rule the digital landscape, commanding millions of followers.

Also nearby is the final resting place of William Blake, one of the greatest visionaries of the Romantic era. His 1794 poem “The Tyger,” with its haunting lines, “Tyger Tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night,” captures the mesmerizing quality of felines. Cats have long been creatures of myth and muse, inspiring poets, artists, and scientists alike.

Not long after beginning this project, I found myself sharing my home with Loki, a ginger and white tabby kitten, who you can watch grow from eight days to eight weeks on pages 298–303. As I arrive home and my rush hour ends, his begins. Ready for action, the zoomies commence. A surprise attack, accompanied by a chirping invitation: *chase me now*. Then, suddenly, it’s over. He collapses dramatically, sprawled on the floor as if the chaos never happened. Game over. On his terms, of course.

This project benefited immeasurably from world-leading experts. Professor Jonathan B. Losos undertook

the writing of the text for this book, bringing rigor and commitment. We were also fortunate to have Professor Morten L. Kringelbach contribute to the “Cuteness” chapter, exploring how cats captivate us, and describing cuteness as a revolutionary force. I am deeply grateful for their contributions.

As we celebrate the beauty of these animals, we must also recognize our responsibility in shaping their future. The choices we make—whether as breeders, owners, or admirers—have a lasting impact on their health and well-being. I would like to extend my thanks to Dr. Dan O’Neill from the Royal Veterinary College for sharing his invaluable insights into companion animal breeding. We must advocate for responsible breeding practices that promote vitality and long-term healthy morphology, prioritizing health over looks.

The generosity and support from people around the world has been equally extraordinary. As we found ourselves photographing in makeshift studios—from kitchens and sitting rooms to hallways and bedrooms—across locations such as Japan, Canada, Borneo, and Paris, individuals shared their time and stories with us.

Beyond these familiar spaces, cats’ wild counterparts currently navigate a far more precarious existence. Wild species face immense challenges. Habitat destruction, human-animal conflict, and environmental pressures threaten their very existence. On pages 272–73, what appears to be a romantic scene of a jaguar approaching a carcass with circling vultures, carries an ominous truth. The atmospheric haze comes not from morning mist, but from nearby wildfires, serving as a reminder of the ecological threats they endure.

I encourage you to scan the QR code on this page for behind-the-scenes content featuring our masked cover star, and invite you to visit page 333 for further moving images to extend your experience of this book. Working on this project today, I am mindful that the interpretation of my images will undergo significant change as a consequence of AI. Photography has long been trusted as a record of reality, but AI-generated imagery is rapidly reshaping and eroding that perception. Many of the cats you will encounter in this book today seem almost too extraordinary to be real, yet they are.

I’ve come to appreciate that cats embody a quiet wildness that connects us to a time before modernity, reminding us of a natural world unburdened by human complexities. The images in this book honor their independence and their role in reintroducing wildness into our lives.

A cat is never owned, only accompanied. To truly appreciate them is to recognize that their loyalty is a gift, never a demand.

Prologue

Tim Flach









Cats are complex creatures. Unapologetically independent, undeniably intelligent, and strikingly beautiful, it's no wonder humans have long been intrigued by this most enchanting of creatures. There's a fascinating duality about *Felis catus* unparalleled among domesticated species. On one side, we have the affectionate, loving companion whose soothing purr brings a warm sense of comfort to whoever's lap they grace. Yet, interwoven with this gentle nature is the essence of a fierce predator, a hunter with instincts as potent as those of its forebears, the African wildcat, red in tooth and claw. We cherish tender moments of snuggling while taking pride in their untamed spirit—a little glimpse of the Serengeti right in our backyards.

As one writer aptly observed, “To see a cat outside is to see a creature in its element: stalking through the grass, climbing trees, battling for their territory. The predator, the wildcat, the king of the jungle—it's all still firmly ingrained in their DNA.”

This dichotomy is beautifully reflected in the varied appearances of our feline companions. Take the mackerel tabbies: gray with black striping (page 26), they could easily be mistaken for their wild relatives. But our penchant for refinement has given rise to elegant breeds like the curly-haired Selkirk Rexes (pages 200–5), sleek Siamese (pages 150–53), and fluffy Ragdolls (pages 216–17), none of which you'd mistake for a denizen of the wild. Yet, some breeds evoke the wild—creatures one could easily imagine prowling the frozen north (Maine Coons, pages 114–15) or the tropical forests of Asia (Toygers, pages 218–19). Indeed, the enthusiasm—now muted—for crossing domestic cats with wild species to produce exotic hybrids (the Savannah and Bengal, pages 233 and 226–27) is a manifestation of this desire to create wild domesticity.

This tension between domestic and wild is beautifully captured in Tim Flach's extraordinary photographs. Jaguars in the Brazilian wetlands (pages 272–79), cheetahs in the Masai Mara, Kenya (page 285), pussycats on the prow!—is there really much difference?

Feline is a collaboration like no other—one where science and art don't just coexist but actively shape and elevate each other. No illustrated book holds the depth that the outcome of our collaboration has created in quite this way. My goal as a researcher has been to provide a solid scientific foundation, offering a depth of insight into how cats came to be, and why they do what they

do. Tim's imagery creates an experience that makes the science tangible, immediate, and emotionally resonant. His images are more than just illustrations; they act as both documents and evidence, providing tangibility and direct understanding in a relatable way, shaping a book that neither science nor art could have achieved as powerfully on their own.

Most of the world's nearly one billion cats have forsaken our households, living in the wild just as their ancestors did—they didn't change much during domestication, so it wasn't much of a step to revert back to their ancestral ways. Nonetheless, the practice of selective breeding may play a pivotal role in shaping the future of our household companions. Traditionally, pet cats spent much of their time outside the home. Increasingly, however, such roaming can be problematic: the great outdoors holds many threats—cars, disease, poisons, and predators, to name a few. Keeping cats indoors is the obvious answer, but many felines are very effective in expressing their displeasure. What we need is the development of a breed of cats that has little to no desire to venture outside and, if they do, lacks the instinct to hunt. This would be a major change in the psyche of most cats. However, given the monumental achievements of selective breeding in altering not just the appearance but also the behavior of cats, dogs, and other animals, I have no doubt that a concerted effort could succeed.

What about the deep future of the feline tribe? Sadly, many wild species are currently in grave jeopardy, their continued existence in question. At some point, human decimation of the natural world will cease, and nature will recover, as it has from previous cataclysms. Will there still be lions and tigers and ocelots? We can hope so, but there's no guarantee.

There is, however, one certainty: *Felis catus* will endure. With hundreds of millions thriving in almost every conceivable habitat on every continent except Antarctica, feral domestic cats have proven themselves to be unparalleled survivors. These tenacious creatures will undoubtedly be part of the future and, should no other feline species withstand the test of time, they will be the progenitors of a new evolutionary chapter. These hardy survivors could very well become the founders of a feline resurgence, reestablishing cats as top predators wherever they set paw. Thus, while the future may hold many uncertainties, the indomitable spirit of *Felis catus* promises a continued legacy for the feline lineage.

Introduction

Jonathan B. Losos





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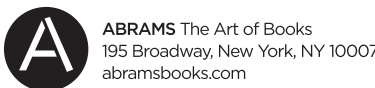
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