

The Secret Life of the Cat

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(<http://www.flickr.com/photos/45781575@N00/216825637/in/photolist-kahH4-kySGg-n3N4o-oUc3t-oUc4D-puVDN-pHL7j-gkmoq-rq2Mq-rqfsu-sBzeE-sQ93w-uBSBG-v6Nbg-w2nSQ-wnphd-wyTMP-xmLLM-xmLLN-xmLLV-xmLLY-xDPbV-xZ77q-zkGAm-A5zqy-AECTv-AEPFy-BCnn6-CdLzA-CGmdh-CP9ub-DUxkY-Fya7S-GGvp7-HjErt-HUbd8-K8qbD-LnYGK-LnYGP-LKtpB-NpHQe-PGcFQ-Rw6yd-T7LSy-T7LSJ-2aatJv-2am8fC-2dMgkK-2dRWp1-2dRWyb-2EhijR>) If you've ever wondered what your cat gets up to after it jumps through the cat flap and slinks off to explore the local neighbourhood, the BBC Horizon documentary *The Secret Life of the Cat* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b02xcvhw>), recently managed to throw some light on this hitherto unseen world.



We spoke to Dr Julia P Myatt, Lecturer in Behavioural Ecology and Morphology in our School of Biosciences, who worked as a scientific advisor on the programme.

What is the fascination with cats?

Here in the UK we are a nation of cat lovers and they are a common sight roaming our streets and gardens. Often seen as masters of their own destiny, many cats spend a large proportion of their time out and about, sometimes getting up to mischief, and yet we know remarkably little about what where they go and what they do when not in our homes! In fact, we know more about the behaviour of their wild African counterparts (lions, leopards and cheetahs) than our domestic pets. This study set out to uncover the mystery of our cat's lives outside the cat flap.

What was your involvement in the Horizon programme?

This study required the use of cutting edge, high-frequency GPS and activity sensor technology which has been developed by a team of experts at the Royal Veterinary College, University of London for use on both large African carnivores and small cats. I was part of the scientific team working with past colleagues from the **Structure and Motion Lab (RVC)** (<http://www.rvc.ac.uk/SML/>). We spent a week in Shamley Green, Surrey, putting our GPS/activity collars onto 50 cats and recording their movements and activity levels. As soon as the data came back I was involved in the analysis and extraction/interpretation of the results we found. We identified key cats that had large ranges and high activity levels as well as the more lazy cats! By analysing the data throughout the week as it came in we were able to identify cats that would provide interesting stories if they wore 'cat cams' and inform the next stage of the data collection.

What new insights into cat behaviour were you hoping for?

These data will enable us to answer questions that have not been possible before. Surprisingly we found that cats actually rarely travel far into the surrounding countryside and their footprint didn't cover much more than the area of the actual village. We can look at how cats relate to one another, how they maintain territories when there is such a high density of cats, and look at differences between sex and age in our domestic pets. What's really interesting is how the behaviour of domestic cats has changed in comparison to their wild roots - rather than spending their time hunting they seem happier staying close to home and relying on the food provided by us, even if this is from the home of another cat!

How did you go about filming the cats and were there any particular difficulties?

Most of the data were obtained remotely from our GPS/activity collars which meant we could collect data on the **behaviour of a cat from an entire 24 hour period** (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-22567526>). Some cats were also fitted with 'cat cams' to see a cat's eye view of the world and well as being caught on camera by more 'traditional' cameramen/women.

Have you made any discoveries as a result of this research and how will it inform future work?

A number of exciting stories came out during the week and have hinted at how cats may behave, for example cats that live particularly close to one another appear to time share - when one is inside the other is outside, to avoid direct conflict. Some of our cats also roamed further than the others and may be more regular hunters. We are currently in the process of analysing the whole dataset to extract overall patterns of behaviour and the results should be published in the near future. Projects such as this are not only crucial to help us answer questions about animal behaviour in more detail, but also push forward the development of the technology and software that is opening new doors in the study of animal behaviour all the time.

The Secret Life of the Cat is no longer available on the BBC iPlayer, but you can still **view clips from the programme** (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b02xcvhw/clips>).

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