

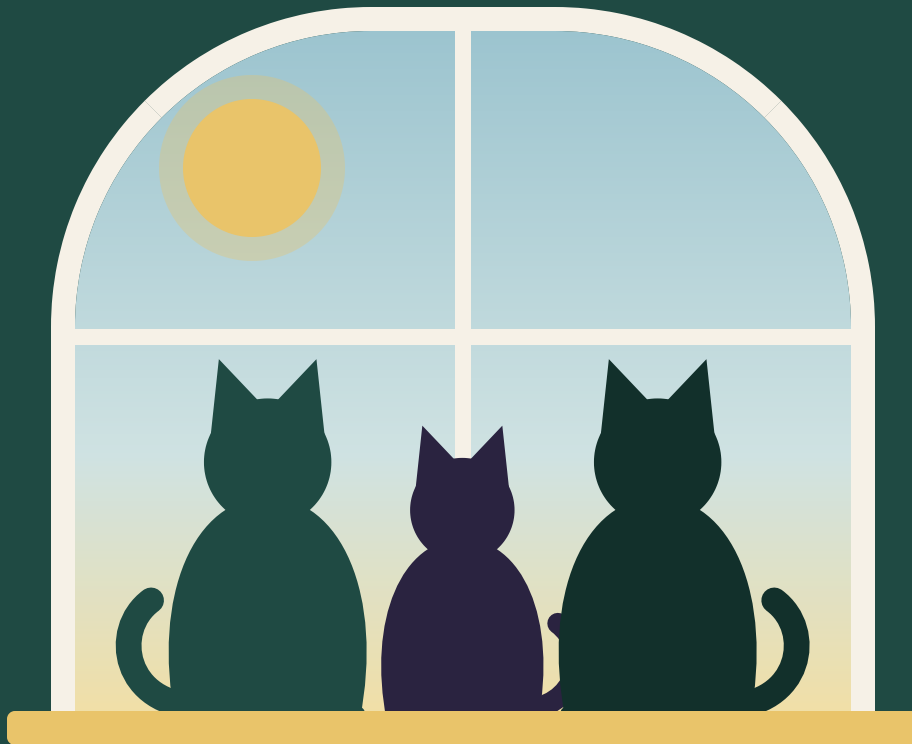
FREE CHAPTER

MARGIE KNOWS CATS

The Cat Room Manual

46 Plain Lessons for a Happy Cat and an Easy House

What your cat is telling you, and what to do about it:
body language, the litter box, food, safety, a clean
house, play and living together



by Margie Hollis

CHAPTER FOURTEEN • LARGE-PRINT MANUAL

A Box That Doesn't Smell

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There's no trick to it, only a scoop and a calendar

"If you can smell it from the door, the cat smelled it yesterday."

MRS. PRUITT

Visitors to the cat room always said the same thing in the doorway: "It doesn't smell." A whole roomful of cats, and it smelled of nothing much. There was no secret. There was a clipboard on the wall with the hours written down the side, and every box in the room was scooped morning and afternoon by whoever was on duty. Mrs. Pruitt didn't own an air freshener. She owned a great many scoops. When I began keeping my own boxes the way we kept those, my house stopped smelling of cat, and it hasn't smelled of cat since.

What you're seeing

The trouble with a smell in your own house is that you stop noticing it. So here's an honest test. Go out for an hour. When you come back, stop at the front door and breathe in through your nose before you do anything else. That's what your visitors smell.

Other things to look for at the box itself:

- A sharp smell near the box that catches at the back of your nose.

- A box that still smells just after you've scooped it.
- Litter that's damp and stuck to the bottom of the box.
- Clumps that break apart and leave bits behind.
- A cat that perches on the rim, shakes its paws, or goes in and comes straight back out.

That last one matters most. The cat has noticed long before you have.

What it usually means

Nearly always, something quite ordinary: what's in the box has been there too long, there's too little clean litter on top of it, there aren't enough boxes for the number of cats, or the box itself has grown old. Plastic scratches. Years of claws leave the bottom of a box scored all over, and smell settles into the scratches where no washing reaches it.

Wet litter smells sharper the longer it sits. A lid keeps that smell in. A box shut in a closet with no air does the same.

Now the part people don't expect. Scented litters, sprays and air fresheners make things worse. They don't take a smell away. They lay a second smell over it. To us that's flowers on top of a cat box. To the cat, with a nose far better than ours, it's both at once, and it has to stand in the middle. A cat put off by the perfume may go somewhere else, and then you have a real smell to deal with. Many scented products aren't safe around cats either. Ask your vet before using any scented product around a cat.

And here's what I can't tell you: whether a smell belongs to the box or to the cat. If your routine hasn't changed and the smell has, that's not housekeeping. See the box near the end of this chapter.

What to do

- 1 Scoop at least once a day. Twice is better.** Hang it on things you already do: the morning kettle, the evening news. I scoop sitting on a sturdy chair I keep by the box.
- 2 Scoop all of it.** Clumps, solids and the broken bits. Run the scoop along the bottom, the sides and the corners, where things stick.
- 3 Keep a lidded pail beside the box.** Line it with a bag. Scoop in, lid down. Take the bag out while it's still light enough for one hand, and oftener in warm weather.
- 4 Top up to the line.** After scooping, add clean litter back to about two inches, a pitcherful at a time. When the litter runs thin, the wet reaches the plastic.
- 5 Empty and wash the whole box on a regular rhythm.** In my house, with clumping litter, that's every two to three weeks. The kind that doesn't clump needs changing far oftener, about once a week in my experience. Go by the bag's own directions and by your nose, and write the day on the calendar.
- 6 Do the wash the easy way.** Scoop the old litter into a bag a little at a time. Never lift a full box by yourself; my other book, *The Easy-Care Cat Home*, goes into that. An empty box is light. Wash it in a deep sink with unscented soap and hot water, rinse it well, dry it completely and refill it. No strong-smelling cleaners, and never mix cleaning products.
- 7 Wash the scoop and the mat on the same day.** Wipe the floor around the box while it's bare.
- 8 Have enough boxes.** One for each cat and one extra. Two boxes scooped daily smell less than one box doing double duty.

- 9 **Use unscented litter and nothing else.** No powders, no sprays, no scented liners, no plug-ins near the box.
- 10 **Take the lid off,** if your cat will have it.
- 11 **Replace a scratched old box.** Run your fingertips over the bottom. If it feels rough and it still smells after a good wash, it's finished. Mine last about a year. A new one costs a few dollars.
- 12 **Air the room.** Leave the door open. Run the bathroom fan. Open a window a little each day if it has a secure screen.

READING THE ROOM

Every morning, before she switched on the lights, Mrs. Pruitt stood in the cat room doorway and sniffed. She called it reading the room. If something was sharp, she didn't reach for a spray. She went looking for which cat. One Thursday it was an old tabby named Hazel, whose box smelled different though it had been scooped at four the day before. Hazel went to see the shelter's vet that afternoon. I never learned what they found, and it wasn't my business. What I learned was that a smell is information.

MARGIE'S TIP · THE CAT ROOM RULE

If you can smell the box, scoop it. If you can still smell it, wash it. If you can still smell it after that, replace it. Never cover a smell.

THAT'S A VET VISIT

A box that suddenly smells stronger, sharper or simply different, when you've changed nothing, is something to tell your vet about. Telephone that day. The same goes for much more wet litter than usual, much less, a change in what you're scooping, or any blood. A cat that strains and passes little or nothing: the vet or the emergency clinic now, tonight. I don't know what any of these mean. Your vet does.

In one line: Scoop every day, wash on a schedule, use plain litter in enough boxes, let the air in, and treat a new smell as news.

THE WHOLE MANUAL

The Cat Room Manual

46 Plain Lessons for a Happy Cat and an Easy House

- ✓ Reading your cat: the tail, the ears, the slow blink
- ✓ Meows, purrs and the 3 a.m. concert
- ✓ The litter box, and the cat who stops using it
- ✓ Food, water and what a cat must never eat
- ✓ A safe house and a clean one, from a chair
- ✓ Play, the bored cat, and going away
- ✓ New cats, second cats, old cats, and when to call the vet

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That was one chapter of forty-six. The rest are waiting for you there, friend, whenever you're ready.

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