

After I wrote about the sheep dogs we have had over the years, I noticed that the cat population here looked very disgruntled. I soon realized that I would have no peace until they received “equal time.” So, here it is.

Our present feline population is out of balance. We used to have a few barn cats and one house cat. Now, we have two cats that live entirely in the house and one that hunts outside during the day. I do force him to spend the nights in the house to lessen the chance of his being eaten by a predator.

The reason we have three house cats is due, of course, to a cat. Butter was an exemplary barn cat except for one quirk. He tolerated no other cats in his territory. He kicked his own brother—a litter mate with whom he’d enjoyed many playful hours—out of the barn. That cat, who does our hunting now, is Muzzy. After Muzzy was barred from the barn, he temporarily took up residence in the hay barn/lambing facility. There was a stray gray cat that had been living there for a year or so, and he evicted Muzzy from his domain. There was no alternative; Muzzy moved into the house with Foxy and Raymond, our two house cats.

A year ago this past summer, Butter disappeared. This is not an unusual occurrence with barn cats. Free to live the lives they choose, they often end their days either from a disgruntled hunter’s gun or a predator—owl, coyote, or hawk. So, Muzzy is confined to quarters before dark every evening, and not free to patrol the farm yard until the light of morning.

He does a good job. He is not one of those cats that brings rodents and whatever else he catches to the doorstep and leaves them as “gifts” that prove his ability. No, Muzzy eats what he catches, unless it is some unsavory prey such as a vole or mole. He does not seem to savor them.

It is not at all unusual to see Muzzy eating his mouse or gopher. The cat’s hunting grounds are mostly between here and the barn. He has thinned the rodent population since his brother took off for parts unknown—or, more likely, a fatal occurrence somewhere.

I know that Muzzy catches a bird now and then, too, but it is not often. We can see him hunting, and his prey of choice is a rodent or a bunny. The birds he does occasionally catch are most often house sparrows, a species not in danger of disappearing, especially around farm buildings.

Before Muzzy, Foxy, and Raymond there were numerous cats on the farm. Some were in the house part of the time and outside when they wished. Others were purely barn cats.

Homely and Blackish were mother and daughter. They were both barn cats, but they were tame and friendly to us and to each other. One year, they had kittens about the same time. One of them kept her babies in a nest in the corner of the haymow. The other cat stashed hers under the manger in the lower level of the barn.

For some reason, they saw each other’s kittens and decided to merge the families. That worked for a few days. They had their kittens together in one bunch and both cats “owned” all of the kittens. Then, however, problems arose. Cats often move their kittens from place to place, perhaps an instinct from their evolutionary past. The problem in this case was that Homely

wanted the kittens in one location, and Blackish was sure they should be somewhere else. So, those two mothers carried kittens back and forth for a couple of days. The point at which I broke into laughter was when I saw them meet each other—Homely, with a kitten she was carried by the nape of the neck, was going in one direction while Blackish, similarly carrying a kitten, was going the other way.

I don't remember how that situation resolved itself, but we had both cats for a long time, so I guess they eventually worked it out.

My two favorite house cats before the ones we have now were Itch and Pocketbook.

Itch was mostly white. I think he had a little black on the ears and some spots on his back, but his stomach was pure white. His distinction was his habit of sitting up with his hind legs stretched out, stomach exposed, while he slept peacefully. I was much younger than I am now, so it does not embarrass me to admit that I had a nice set of five or six small red buttons that I placed at even intervals on Itch's stomach. He stayed in place and slept with his white pajamas neatly buttoned.

Pocketbook was what is, I believe, now called a "tuxedo cat." He was black with a white "shirt" and a little white on his face. He had some white on his paws, too. And, he had extra toes, so his feet were big and soft.

We had acquired Pocketbook's mother, Kelley, aka Boots, a year before he was born. A friend had Boots in defiance of the regulations at the married student apartment where she and her husband lived. Eventually, the situation needed remedying, and we took Boots and renamed her Kelley.

The next summer, Kelley had kittens. Pocketbook was the most beautiful, and he also had a wonderful disposition. We kept him, and he slept on my bed for years. My sister's family had another kitten from that litter, and he had the unfortunate propensity for vomiting during the last mile of a eighty mile car trip from their home to their cabin.

Foxy, the sixteen-year old orange cat that has been in the cabin here since he was a kitten is the only cat that was taught to do tricks. I clicker-trained him years ago, and he will still do his routine, though he needs visual cues now, since it is apparent that he is pretty deaf. He will shake hands, kiss, sit up and reach for a treat, twirl in a circle, and—exhibiting the ability that confounds watchers—he will wash himself on command.

So, that is the cat story, or at least, part of it. Probably, it is more than any reader ever wished to know about the cats here on this farm.