

I first saw Black Kitty last winter. Just a glimpse in the beginning, a flash of black with a streak of white on the face and a white tip on the tail. He appeared in the barn now and then, and from the cabin we would occasionally see him sneaking around the hay barn or sheep shed.

As time went on, though, and I began to call him by “name,” though I still have no idea if he has a real name or a home, he ceased to run away. He wasn’t tame, by any means, but he would sit still, social distancing quite naturally, and let me talk to him.

We have just one cat of our own these days. Muzzy is a wonderful hunter and keeps the cabin area free from mice. He also patrols the hay barn and the area in between. But, he doesn’t go into the old barn very often. And Muzzy is basically a house cat that hunts, but I insist that he come into the cabin before dark every evening. Black Kitty, then has everything else pretty much to himself.

That doesn’t mean that Black Kitty actually lives here on Coe Creek. He may “belong,” if that word is even marginally appropriate when talking about any cat, to one of our Amish neighbors. Or, he may not. He seems to cover the territory along our nearest gravel road for at least a mile or so. And he appears to have a somewhat regular route. I see him hunting in the grass along our lane, and he is often near the chicken coop, waiting for prey. Several of us have seen him hurrying down the road, obviously with a destination in mind.

Thinking that perhaps a change from mice would be tasty, I began leaving a little dry cat food in a dish in the barn. Before long, if I saw Black Kitty, I would feed him and then sit on a hay bale and watch him. In time, he became more accustomed to my presence and even answered with a meow when I called, “Black Kitty, come and eat.”

Then, for weeks, we didn’t see him at all. I didn’t leave anything in the food dish, because he wasn’t around, and I didn’t think it was necessary to feed wild creatures cat food, encouraging them to come into the barn.

Then, this summer, Black Kitty reappeared. Or, at least, he began coming again at a time when we happened to see him. And, he and I began to become a little better acquainted. I would feed him and then sit and talk to him. Sometimes, he showed up in the barn yard or near the chicken coop, and I could call him up to the barn where his food dish waited. I’d leave a little milk in an old pie plate and a handful of dry kibble in the same ceramic dish in which he’d had his food last winter.

By now, Black Kitty and I have an unusual relationship. He seems to know me and recognize his name, although he may have a regular home somewhere and a far different name. But, when we encounter each other, we have a little visit. I talk to him. He meows, and now, sometimes, he comes and rubs against my leg as I sit on a hay bale. I

still would not attempt to pick him up. And I have observed now that he is a tom cat. I was not sure before, though he certainly always exhibited the attitude of a traveling free spirit, something seen less often in mother cats. But, I still don't know if we are friends. After rubbing against my leg, coming when I call him to his food dish, letting me pet him as he purrs, he sometimes also turns, looks at me with that inscrutable cat expression and spits and hisses. And I sense that his domestication is just a veneer that covers a truly wild spirit. In a way, that can be said of any cat.