

Cats Who Are Afraid of New Things
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Now that warm weather has arrived, we've turned the ceiling fans on in our living room and bedrooms. Our cat Buffett carefully watches the one in the bedroom before lying down on the bed. The one in the living room doesn't seem to bother him as much. We haven't been able to understand the reason for this, because the fans are exactly the same. We have had several cases in which cats have been afraid to enter a room after a ceiling fan has been installed.

This behavior is a bit puzzling. It could be a neophobic reaction, meaning cats are afraid of these fans because they are something new that they haven't encountered before. It's adaptive for wild animals to be cautious around unfamiliar things – what you don't know about something may hurt you.

Some animals, like prairie dogs, often watch the skies because they are on alert for aerial predators. Birds of prey such as hawks, eagles and owls, hunt prairie dogs, especially young ones.

The big cats, such as tigers and lions, don't have anything to fear from above. The scientific literature on the behavior of smaller cats, from which our domestic cat is descended, is incomplete, due partially to the fact that some of these species are nocturnal. However, there are no reports in the literature of birds of prey routinely killing feline young. Thus, we would not expect this fan watching behavior to be a manifestation of an innate tendency for cats to be worried about things that move above their heads.

Buffett pays less attention to the fan as the summer wears on. This means that he is habituating to its presence. Because the fan causes no consequences for him – either positive or negative – he learns to ignore it. With the more severe phobic reactions we've seen in other cats, specific behavior modification was necessary to help the cats adapt to the fans.

In one case, we suggested that the owners start feeding the cat in as close proximity as she would come to the fan. Over a period of several weeks, we gradually moved her food bowl closer and closer to the overhead location of the fan. The pairing of the food with the location of the fan helped the cat overcome her fear, and she was able to enter the fan-room without problems.

In another case, we had the owners cover the fan with a sheet for a few days. Over the succeeding days, they folded back the sheet so just a small part of the fan was visible. This cat was able to adjust to the fan because rather than having to see it all at once, we gave him the chance to habituate to it in small steps.

It's fun to speculate about the causes of cat behavior, because so much of it is poorly understood. Buffett and the other cats we've mentioned know why they think ceiling fans are not trustworthy, but so far they haven't seen fit to share their reasons with us.