

Why Cats Scratch Things

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Our neighbor has a female cat named Peaches who frequently scratches the bark on a cherry tree in their front yard. In fact, the tree has been scratched so much that there are noticeable gouges in it and small pieces of bark have accumulated on the ground underneath. Why does Peaches scratch this tree so much?

It has long been assumed that when cats scratch objects with their front paws that they are sharpening their claws. It turns out that this is only a secondary reason. Research on cat behavior suggests that the major reason for this behavior is communication. By roughing up the bark of a tree (or the leg of your favorite chair) the cat is letting other cats or people know where she is and what she is up to.

Cats tend to pick a small number of conspicuous objects in their environments to scratch such as trees, fence posts, the corner of the couch, etc., and return to them repeatedly. This is why the tree next door looks so scratched up and why your cat may find it difficult to leave your couch alone. The scratched surface leaves a highly visible mark that can be easily seen by other cats. In addition, cats have scent glands in their paws so that when they make scratching movements they leave odor cues that the cats can smell. The fact that cats leave scent marks by making scratching movements may be the reason that cats will continue to try to scratch objects even after they have been declawed. Declawed cats may still be leaving scent marks on objects they scratch.

We don't know exactly what cats are communicating with their scratching. Both males and females do it, it is done inside and outside the home and even by cats living with no other cats around. It could be a territorial warning or just a marker that announces "Peaches lives here and is alive and well!" Cats don't scratch up your furniture to spite you or just to be destructive, but for specific reasons, one of which is communicating. Cats also scratch to stretch, during play, and possibly as a greeting or to relieve frustration when prevented from doing other things they want to do.

Cats use scent from other parts of their bodies to communicate as well. They have scent glands at the corners of their mouths, in the thin hair between their eyes and ears and at the base of their tails. They leave scent marks on people and objects when they rub their heads and tails on things. Just what they are communicating with the rubbing isn't known, but they seem to do it most to people or other cats they are attached to or when they are feeling friendly. Cats can also scent-mark by spraying urine on objects. Cats spray from a standing position, not from the squatting posture they use during elimination. Spraying often occurs during territorial disputes and when the cat is highly aroused or frustrated and is usually not related to litterbox problems. There is no evidence that cats use their feces to mark territory.