

Why are there so many dog breeds but only a few cat breeds?

September 30 2022



Credit: Alexander Grey from Pexels

The World Canine Federation recognizes more than 300 different breeds of dogs, while the Cat Fanciers' Association only has 42 different kinds of moggie on its books. Why the difference?

"My guess would be that dogs are just an awful lot more useful than [cats](#)," says Gilbert, a professor of paleogenomics at the University of Copenhagen.

Now, before the [claws](#) come out, let's take a closer look at why this is—and what usefulness has to do with how many breeds there are.

All dogs are domesticated from wolves—a process that Gilbert examines through genetic studies. Wolves are [social animals](#) that live in packs and work together. They are also predisposed to listen to a leader, the so-called alpha dog, a role that humans can replace.

"All these characteristics mean that dogs can be trained to do so many things that are useful to humans, such as pull and carry things, hunt and protect," adds Gilbert.

Cats, on the other hand, are largely solitary creatures that tend to have an ambivalent relationship with humans, at best. "Because they don't come from a particularly social animal, you can't get a [house cat](#) to do much," explains Gilbert. "Thus, whereas dogs have been bred to perform different tasks, cats have largely been bred for looks—the result being that there are more [dog breeds](#) than cat breeds."

The case of the feral kitten

To highlight how important this predisposition to socialization is, one only need to look at the case of the feral kitten. As Gilbert explains, if a cat runs away, becomes feral, and has kittens, and those kittens aren't given human contact within their first weeks, they are almost untamable. An adopted street dog, on the other hand, will form a bond with its human owners and can be domesticated.

"You can only change behavior if there's a standing behavior to build

on," notes Gilbert. "While cats are great hunters, you can't [breed](#) a cat to hunt on command because that behavior was never there in the first place."

In other words, cats are fundamentally resistant by nature to performing the wide range of functions often associated with domestication.

What's puppy love got to do with it

Of course, there are exceptions to the dogs are more useful rule. While there are no working cat breeds, not every dog is bred to work: clearly some are bred purely for nothing more than showering their human owners with love and affection (we're looking at you, pugs).

"We tend to forget that dogs were originally bred purely for function, that it was only in the past couple of 100 years that we started selecting based on looks," notes Gilbert.

But that doesn't mean dogs are no longer being bred for purpose. Guide dogs, comfort dogs for [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), and sniffing dogs at airports are just a couple of examples. "These are new tasks that [dogs](#)—not cats mind you—are being employed to do," concludes Gilbert.

"This once again demonstrates why canines are more useful than their feline counterparts and why, as a result, we have more dog breeds than cat breeds."

More information: Click here to find out more about Gilbert's research: [Large-scale sampling and incorporation of ancient canids shines new light on relation between wolf and dog.](#)

Citation: Why are there so many dog breeds but only a few cat breeds? (2022, September 30)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-09-dog-cat.html>

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