

Cat shelter findings: Less stress with box access

February 8 2015, by Nancy Owano



Out of all those cat videos that keep your eyes glued to the screen far longer than you would care to acknowledge, you may have seen some showing little and big cats trying their best to snuggle into big and too-little cardboard boxes. What makes them so content about being in a box? Scientists have spent much time looking for answers. "Will a hiding box provide stress reduction for shelter cats?" That is one such exploration, published in *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, the journal

of the International Society for Applied Ethology (ISAE).

The three authors, from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Utrecht, studied stress in shelter [cats](#) and found that hiding boxes reduced stress, at least on the short term. They chose shelters as their investigation site because that is where the stress levels for domestic cats can be serious. The researchers assessed the effect of a hiding box on [stress levels](#) of newly arrived cats in a Dutch animal shelter. Ten cats had a box; nine did not. They found a significant difference between the two groups on observation days 3 and 4. The cats with the hiding box were able to recover faster in their new environment.

Writing in *Wired*, Bryan Gardiner took up the topic of why cats love boxes, discussing the researchers' findings as well as other explorations into the way cats love scampering and even squeezing into boxes. One of the authors of the Dutch cat shelter paper, Claudia Vinke, was quoted in *Wired*: "Hiding is a behavioral strategy of the species to cope with environmental changes and stressors," Vinke said in her email.

Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, in their observations about cat shelters and stress, said that "cats benefit greatly from the ability to hide when stressed. In shelters, this can be accomplished in a variety of ways, with a range of costs and benefits." One type of hiding [spot](#) which they recommended was a "hiding box" which they said could be "a cardboard box, a specially designed Hide-Perch-and-Go box, a sturdier plastic box or cage insert, a plastic carrier, or a commercially available "cat den." The Cornell site said that while cardboard boxes are inexpensive, they cannot be cleaned, and must only be used for one cat before being discarded or recycled.

Gardiner in *Wired* made the point that boxes are not the only enclosures that attract cats; [bowls](#), a bathroom sink, or other enclosures seem to work, too. Gardiner also made the point that cats scramble for such

enclosures in a fundamental search not merely to feel psychologically cozy but for heat.

"According to a 2006 study by the National Research Council, the thermoneutral zone for a domestic cat is 86 to 97 degrees Fahrenheit. That's the range of temperatures in which cats are 'comfortable' and don't have to generate extra heat to keep warm or expend metabolic energy on cooling." Corrugated cardboard, he added, is a good insulator; if the box is a tight squeeze so much the better; it may "force the cat to ball up or form some other impossible [object](#), which in turn helps it to preserve body heat."

More information: *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*,
www.appliedanimalbehaviour.com ... 0236-6/abstract?cc=y

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