

For Your Viewing Pleasure

In our household, watching sports and nature documentaries on TV is a popular feline pastime. In fact, I'd even go so far as to say that Fudge is a TV fanatic. She loves tennis, wildlife shows such as "Meerkat Manor" and the occasional game of golf. Understandably, "Animal Cops" is at the bottom of her list; there is absolutely no entertainment value in barking dogs invading your living space.

In fact, many felines are avid TV viewers. Some are quite blatant about it. I once had a cat named Nibbi who was so enamored with horseracing that she would climb on top of the TV set and watch the races from above, looking down and trying to paw the horses along as they thundered across the screen. She also watched Formula One car racing from this angle.

Fudge is far more subtle. She jumps up onto the top of our couch and pretends to sleep. Then, when she thinks no one is watching, she opens one eye and peeks at the screen. The moment you look, she instantly pretends to sleep again, then surreptitiously goes back into viewing mode.

For the skeptics out there, I took the question of whether animals actually watch TV to behaviorist guru Dr. Nicholas Dodman, of the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University in Massachusetts. He confirmed that, in fact, all kinds of shows have an ever-increasing animal audience, even if their attention span is just a few minutes.

I wonder, when they do the Nielsen ratings, whether TV executives have any way of discerning what percentage of their audience has four paws and a tail. There's no question that they are aware of this phenomenon. I once interviewed Maureen Smith, Animal Planet's executive

vice president and general manager, who said that she received letters from viewers on a regular basis with photographs of their pets watching various Animal Planet shows.

In fact a couple of years ago, the company actually made 20-second movies aimed specifically at a cat audience as part of their Tail-O-Vision lineup. It showed someone playing with a cat toy and was shot from the cat's perspective. Sadly, the network hasn't been screening them lately.

It's become a widely accepted practice to leave the TV on to keep pets company when they are home alone. In fact these days, if you check your cat into a fancy feline hotel, chances are the proprietors will offer you a suite with a fish tank and a TV tuned to Animal Planet for viewing entertainment.

If your pet has particular viewing choices, you can get a cat-sitting video that will continue playing until you get home. My daughter's cat Isabella has a favorite featuring twittering birds and hopping rabbits that keeps her highly entertained for hours.

Dodman says that cats are drawn to things that move quickly across the screen — anything from butterflies to tennis balls, hence the interest in nature programs and sporting events.

The other day, I walked into the room and Bill O'Reilly was on the Fox news channel yelling and waving his pen around. Fudge was rapt in fascination.

I would have given anything to know what she was thinking... ○

Sandy Robins is an award-winning pet-lifestyle expert who appears regularly on TV, on radio and in international publications. She is an obsessed pet owner to her cats Cali and Fudge.

Some cats enjoy watching TV as much as their owners do.



BY SANDY ROBINS

