

### CORRECTING THE FELINE TRESPASSER by **Kelley Bollen**

*Our cat Twinkle is really driving us crazy. She constantly jumps up on the fireplace mantel and knocks everything off. We come home from work to find our knickknacks all over the floor. She even does this when we are sitting right in the room. We yell and chase her off the mantel, but this doesn't seem to affect her in the least; an hour later she's right back up there.*

What's a person to do with a mischievous feline like Twinkle? When you're trying to stop a pet from doing something that you don't like, it's best to start by determining what is motivating the animal. In Twinkle's case there are several possibilities –the desire for play or attention or the feeling of safety that comes from being high up.

Cats are very playful creatures that can turn anything into a toy. They are also good at figuring out what they need to do to get us to jump up out of our chairs and chase them through the house –oh! what fun! Also, cats prefer a view of the world from above. They love to perch on top of the refrigerator, the back of the couch, or the fireplace mantel. All of those factors have combined to create a behaviour that you find unacceptable. To keep your blood pressure down and your knickknacks safe, you'll have to deal with each issue.

How do we keep a cat off the fireplace mantel, the kitchen table, or any other place she decide to go? Most cat owners don't understand why their furry friends don't learn that some places are out of limits. They yell, throw things, some even swat at their kitties, all to no avail. But physical punishment or screaming, only teaches their cat to be afraid of them. Cats don't learn right from wrong; they learn safe from unsafe. And it's not long before they figure out that while it's unsafe to do certain things when their owners are around, it is perfectly safe to do them when they aren't.

So stop all the yelling and especially any physical punishment, and instead look for a way to teach your cat what's off limits without damaging your relationship with her. You can do this by letting the environment punish her for the unwanted behaviour. This is called "remote punishment." Aversive sound, textures, or smells are used to "booby trap" off limit areas until the cat learns to stay away. The idea is to make the location unpleasant so kitty no longer wants to go there. Then you can be the good guy, encouraging and rewarding appropriate behaviour. A motion detector that emits an alarm or a spray of citronella might do the trick. Other options include a pyramid of empty soda cans that fall when the disturbed or a mousetrap, placed inside a small paper bag (taped shut to avoid hurting the cat) that snaps when triggered. You can also try blowing a whistle, ringing a bell, or dropping an empty soda can with five or six pennies inside just as she is about to engage in the unwanted behaviour (remember, you shouldn't say a word). These events are designed to simply startle your cat, not terrify her. If you have a particularly sensitive cat, loud noise may not be the best method to use.

Aversive textures such as sticky paper, aluminum foil, or a plastic carpet runner (nubby side up) can be placed on the forbidden area. Cats hate the feeling of these things under their feet. Obnoxious smells can also keep a cat away. Substances that cats find aversive include citronella, perfumes, solid

air fresheners, citrus, aloe, and eucalyptus oil. Soak pieces of cloth or cotton balls in the smelly substance and place them strategically.

At the same time you are discouraging your cat from getting on the mantel, address her motivations for jumping up there. If it's a high vantage point she is seeking, providing several acceptable perching areas around the house may solve the problem. It's possible that Twinkle is knocking the knickknacks down to make room to lie down, but the most likely reason is that it's plain fun. She may have also learned that going there gets her the attention she wants. Remember that negative attention is still attention for a cat that is seeking it out. Try playing with Twinkle 10 to 15 minutes at the same time every night (cats love routine) to give her the attention she is seeking. Throwing a ball or wadded up piece of paper, flashing a beam of light on the floor, or dangling a toy on a string from a pole can keep her amused while you sit comfortably on the couch. Providing other playthings, such as Ping-Pong balls in the bathtub or paper bags to hide and play in, will help keep her engaged when you are away. Enriching a cat's environment can solve many a behaviour problem.