
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

How do pets navigate?

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Neil

Welcome to 6 Minute English, the programme where we bring you an interesting topic and six useful words or phrases. I'm Neil.

Dan

And I'm Dan. Today we're talking about one of the last mysteries of science. No, not if the universe will keep expanding forever, but this: how do cats and dogs find their way home over long distances?

Neil

We hear incredible stories of lost pets travelling tens and even hundreds of miles home – but scientists struggle to explain how they do it.

Dan

We'll hear the view of one scientist today. But before that – I have to ask an important question: Neil, are you **a cat person** or **a dog person**?

Neil

Oh, that's easy – I'm **a cat person**, for sure. Dogs are just a... well, they are hard work, aren't they?

Dan

If you say you are '**a cat person**' it means you prefer cats. '**A coffee person**' prefers coffee. A 'something' person likes or prefers that thing, often over another thing.

Neil

Back to the topic, I'm **a cat person**. But can you answer this, Dan? Recently, a cat called Omar made headlines for being, possibly, the world's longest cat. How long is Omar? Is it...

- a) 120 cm
- b) 80 cm
- Or c) 180 cm

Dan

I'm gonna say c) 180 cm.

Neil

Now, from long cats to long-distance cats. Scientists were **scratching their heads** a couple of years ago when a lost cat called Holly travelled 200 miles to get home. How did it do it?

Dan

We say you '**scratch your head**' when you are confused about something. There are a few theories about how cats and dogs navigate – but we don't yet have the full answer.

Neil

Well, both cats and dogs have an extremely powerful sense of smell, of course. Smells are like signposts – they let you know where you are. Visual **landmarks** also play a role, just as they do with humans. A **landmark** is something very easily recognised – a big building or mountain for example.

Dan

And what about this one: **magnets** are pieces of metal which attract certain other kinds of metal - for example, iron or steel. The Earth itself has a **magnetic** force.

Neil

Birds use it to help them navigate over thousands of miles – it tells them where north is. It's thought they have some iron in their beaks.

Dan

But some scientists think mammals also have this capability.

Neil

So we have a few ideas – smell, **landmarks**, **magnetic** forces – but can we explain how one kitty travelled over 200 miles by itself back to its home?

Dan

Let's hear from cat and dog expert Dr John Bradshaw. How do cats build up the maps in their heads?

INSERT

Dr John Bradshaw, School of Veterinary Sciences, University of Bristol

What they do when they are in a new **territory** is explore it in a very **systematic** way. So they will go out in ever-increasing circles, they'll literally construct a mental map in their heads. And so a cat that's lost its territory probably does the same thing. They'll rely on the idea that if they go out in ever-increasing circles or rectangles then eventually they'll either come across the **territory** or they'll come across a smell carried on the wind of the territory that they used to live in and then be able to go home.

Dan

Cats have a **systematic** approach – which means they use a **system**. Which is: first they walk around their area in a small circle, then a bigger one and then a bigger one – until they have a strong mental map of the place.

Neil

Yes – a mental map is a map in your head – stored in your memory. And the area cats explore – their home area - is called their **territory**. Cats are **territorial** – which means their **territory** is very important to them.

Dan

Having a map is great, but what happens when a cat gets lost? Dr Bradshaw says that again, it moves around in bigger and bigger circles, until it finds a clue – which is a **landmark** or a smell – that tells it where it is. Well, that's the theory. Though Dr Bradshaw says we really still don't have enough data – that's enough information about this.

Neil

When there is a scientific breakthrough - we'll bring it to you in 6 Minute English, I hope. For now, let's content ourselves with Omar, possibly, the world's longest cat. How long, Dan?

Dan

I said 180 cm.

Neil

Omar measures 120 cm – that's over two thirds of my height – and weighs a heavy 14 kg.

Dan

Well, one thing, Neil, if Omar ever got lost, he'd be found in no time.

Neil

He's a **landmark** in himself! Which reminds me – let's run through today's words again. If you're a **cat person**, you prefer cats. If you're an **evening person** – you prefer evenings.

Dan

I've always thought you were a kind person, Neil.

Neil

Nice of you to say, but we only use the phrase with nouns, not adjectives!

Dan

Indeed. We don't want the listeners to be **scratching their heads**.

Neil

No, we can't confuse them! So let's explain the next one clearly – a **landmark** is something easily recognisable that lets you know where you are. The bridges in London are **landmarks**.

Dan

And can we say the parks are **magnets** in summer? A **magnet** is a piece of metal that attracts iron and steel – but we can also use the word more widely to describe things that attract other things. Two more words: **territory** is a noun – the area of land that an animal considers to be its own.

Neil

Animals who feel this strongly are described as **territorial**. Humans can be too – about land or subjects they feel they own or control.

Dan

And finally **systematic**: the adjective from system. We can talk about a **systematic** approach, a **systematic** solution, a **systematic** study...

Neil

And we have **systematically** worked our way through all of today's words!

Dan

Very good! Which means – it's time mention our own online **territory** – our website and social media pages.

Neil

Check us out on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, and of course bbclearningenglish.com!

Dan

Bye bye for now.

Neil

Goodbye!