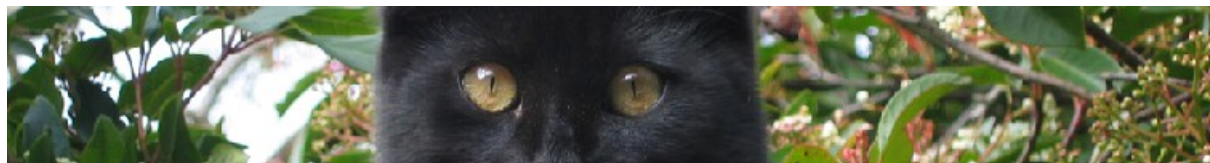


From the Kitchen

9 June 2010



“Bang! Pht-pht.” Silence. “Bang! Pht-pht.” The dogs are trying out the new dog flap in the back door. The last one was translucent and this one is clear, so it’s a new experience. They follow each other in and out several times to make sure, then they get on with other dog games, like destroying a cardboard box.

When I installed the first dog flap, I had to teach them how to use it, coaxing them through with the promise of a treat on the other side. They soon got the hang of it, but if one followed on the heels of the other, he got whacked on the nose by the return swing of the flap. A few such mishaps and they both learned to wait for the first swing and dive through on the second.

The cat and her personal flap in the high bathroom window were a different matter. I have yet to be able to teach a cat anything, with or without a treat. With her it was a case of pushing her through a number of times until she got the idea. When we’re home, she still prefers to have the front door opened for her, rather than make the effort of jumping up on the window sill and pushing through the flap.

The younger, larger dog (Willow) has a trait I’ve not seen in a dog before. He invents games for himself and then tests himself. For instance, he will drop a ball in front of the couch and watch it roll underneath. At the last moment he will lunge and retrieve it. He experiments with dropping it at different distances from the couch and at different places along the couch and watches how it rolls and tries to lunge and retrieve it at the last moment. Occasionally he leaves it too late and asks me to move the couch. He’s getting better at it.

The other, older dog (Murphy) finds this behaviour frustrating, because he would like to have the ball to bring it to me and have me throw it into the next room for him to chase and bring back to me, if Willow doesn’t get to it first, to continue his drop-it-in-front-of-the-couch game.

Willow doesn’t understand giving me the ball so I can throw it again. Actually, he does understand but doesn’t want to relinquish possession. He’ll stand in front of me, chewing the ball and occasionally he will drop it in front of me and catch it before it hits the floor. He has, however, found a solution. He’ll drop the ball near the couch and step back to allow Murphy to get it and bring it to me to throw. It works.

Willow wants to have everything that’s going. If there are two balls available, he’ll put them both in his mouth and try to play his usual game. If I give the dogs one ball each, he’ll want the one that Murphy has. So like children and their toys – some are happy with whatever they have while others want what someone else has. So like adults and their toys – cars, houses, boats ...

While the dogs are tearing up and down the house, the cat sits on her favourite chair, watching them. She’s black with huge round eyes. Sometimes all you see are the two eyes, like those enormous eyes on an owl. The only thing that gets her running around the house is the pursuit of a mouse. This time of the year these rodents come inside for warmth and the food scraps under the teenager’s bed. The cat (Paris) tends to catch them and bring them to us

alive, if terrified, to be held by the tail and released into the jungle of the creek reserve next to the house.

There are other unwanted wild visitors, including at least one possum in the roof. This cheeky squatter occasionally pokes its nose down between the stationary blades of the ceiling fan in the kitchen to see what's cooking. Yes, we need to get up soon in the middle of the night to seal the hole it uses and trust it will decide to use one of the possum boxes we have provided, rather than have it pull another tile off the roof.

Some spiders we let stay for a while in the odd corner, where they help to keep down the mosquito population. The larger, hairy, hunting types we catch with a glass and a sheet of paper and release them where the mice are freed. Flies are dealt with by employment of a swat (or, as one four-year-old called it, a splat), if they are not eaten first by Willow. Moths tend to be dispatched by Paris. Murphy ignores the indoor wildlife, but goes crazy outside if he sees ducks on the ground or catches a whiff of a rabbit or fox.

It's a constant job, keeping some distinction between the inside and outside of the house. Sometimes it seems less crowded and more peaceful on the outside.