



# KILLER KITTY

A 52' DOCUMENTARY BY  
JEAN-PIERRE COURBATZE





## PITCH

The cat... like you've never seen it before !

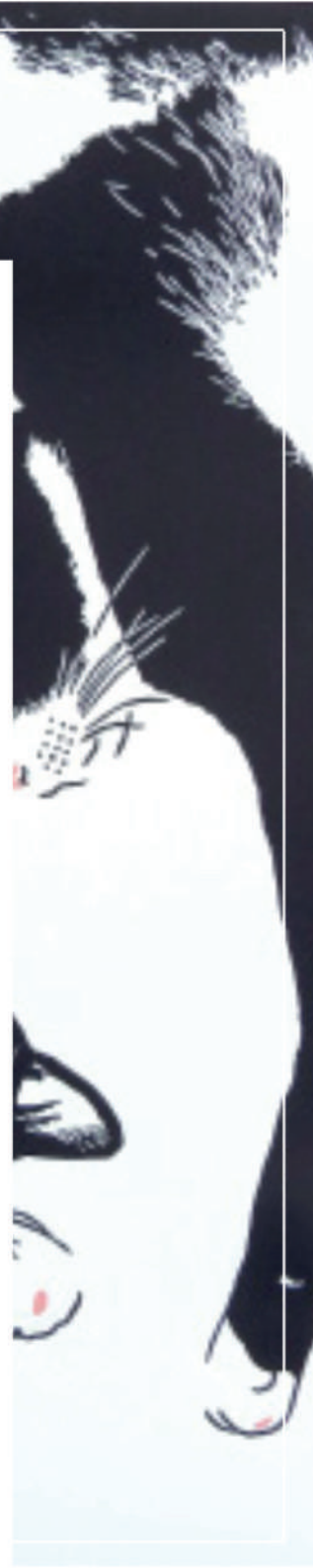
The cat is an affectionate little animal, a live cuddly toy, nimble and delicate, that everyone adores. You can find cats everywhere. They are praised all over the world and collect an impressive amount of clicks on the Internet.

But the cat is also a wild animal, which despite almost 10 000 years of domestication, has preserved extraordinary predatory abilities and a wild character. Over the course of European expeditions and colonisation, the cat has come to conquer the world, becoming an invasive species and causing much destruction along the way. In the context of the rising extinction of species all over the world, the presence of this versatile carnivore can have a devastating impact on many endangered animals.

In the USA for instance, more than 1,5 billion birds and more than 7 billion small mammals are killed every year because of cats. The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) has classified felines among the most aggressive and harmful species. The problem is even more acute in insular habitats.

This film is a journey on the cat's footsteps, precisely in those zones where endangered species need protection from it. We will discover fragile ecosystems, surprising and unknown species which the cat can dominate by a simple swipe of the paw, making a meal out of them.

The cat's predatory behaviour will be minutely observed, in a strictly controlled environment which we have created under our own latitudes : a "cat farm". It will help us understand the cat's strategies, its motivations along with its incredible feats.





## THE FILM

### SEQUENCE 1

We are in a “cat farm”. A place located in France which we created specially to study cats in the open, as we please. We want to observe the different aspects of a cat’s predatory skills.

An innocent little bird is perched on a branch. A cat performs an amazing jump to catch it. The feline is capable of leaping from the ground to a level seven times its own height. As the cat falls to the ground, its body twists and turns in the most surprising ways and the cat invariably lands on its feet.

We observe these movements in an amazing slow motion sequence.



## SEQUENCE 2

Australia : it is both an island and a continent and constitutes a unique ecosystem of its own. It is a land in which many conflicts occur between rare and fragile endemic species and new species that have been introduced more recently. Native animals have not had time to evolve and don't know how to protect themselves against an animal as versatile and resistant as the cat. In this region, unique species of rodents, marsupials and birds coexist with wild cats that populate the whole territory from North to South.

We wander in the bush to track down these felines. A small marsupial comes out of its den. A cat appears, stuns it with its paw and eats it.

Here, the cat is considered as an invasive species and a danger to biodiversity. A drastic governmental program was launched in 2015 : its goal is to eliminate 2 million cats by 2020 to protect 100 species of mammals and 33 species of birds that are threatened in part by cats. A challenging task since cats freely roam all around this giant island and have no difficulties adapting to its different latitudes.

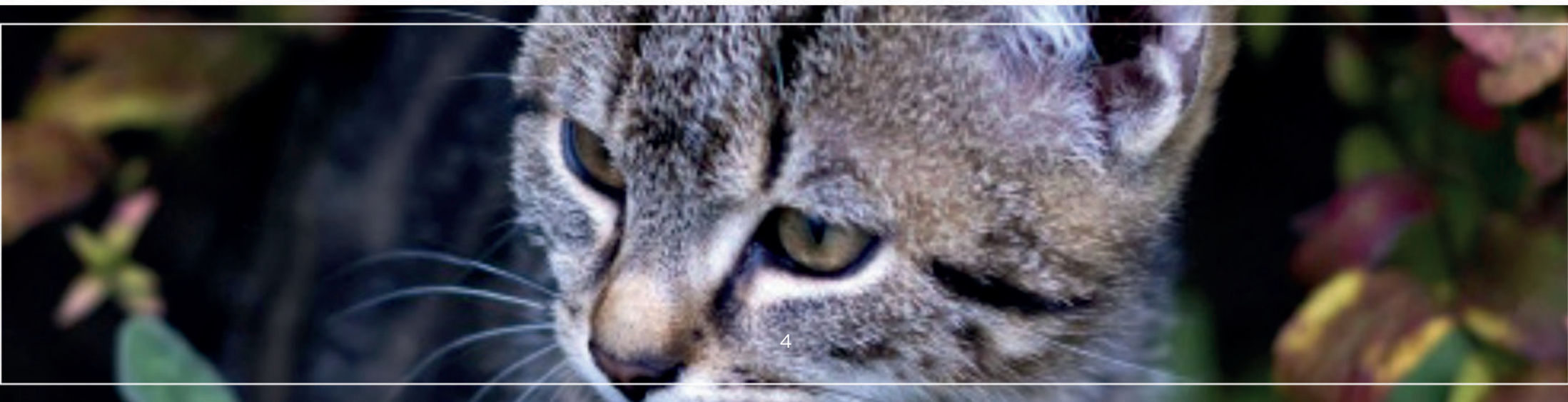
## SEQUENCE 3

But where does the cat actually come from ? This short historic perspective is shot from the fictional viewpoint of a cat.

The colour of the images change. The cat is filmed in an original way, in different places and times in History : for instance, the footwear of a man dressed in Roman attire will evoke Ancient Rome.

All cats that we know on Earth today belong to the same species, the "domestic cat" also known as *Felis catus*, which in reality is a domesticated descendent of the giant African cat. Its domestication occurs with the emergence of agriculture, 9000 years ago, long after the domestication of the wolf (the ancestor of the dog) which dates back to 33 000 years ago.

As predators, they control populations of rodents and birds that live around stocks of grain and cereal, initially in the region of the Fertile Crescent. The Romans will bring the animal with them all over Europe. As European ships travel overseas, cats will be introduced to other parts of the world. On these boats, mice must be eliminated. Towards the end of the XIXth century, the cat becomes fashionable and is much appreciated as a domestic companion. In the 1970's-1980's, cat populations explode in industrial zones.





## SEQUENCE 4

New Caledonia. This archipelago located in the Pacific is one of the planet's "hot spots" in terms of biodiversity. While it is extremely rich, it is nevertheless endangered. Some unique species populate its landscapes which are amongst the most beautiful in the world. New Caledonia is typically confronted with problems that are common to these kind of islands, especially in the Pacific. A recent study has shown that the presence of one single cat can impact 120 islands and at least 175 vertebrates, many of which are endangered species. The cat is the cause of at least one extinction out of seven over the past 500 years !

This is why in New Caledonia, the cat is considered as an invasive species. We track down the island's wild cats. Here, the animal is smaller than in Australia. It hunts puffins on the coast. We observe how the cat hunts these magnificent birds.

## SEQUENCE 5

Back to the "cat farm", where we take a closer look at this familiar animal. Its retracting claws are like scalpels that are constantly being filed on the barks of trees. By doing this, the animal marks its territory, thanks to the sweat glands located on its footpads. Its vertically slit pupils adapt to the ambient luminosity. When the cat hunts at night, a layer of reflecting cells located in the back of its eye redirect even weak amounts of light towards the cells of its retina : the cat is thus capable of distinguishing the same level of detail as we can, but with six times less luminosity. During day however, the cat's vision is less precise than ours.

Its hearing can detect high frequency sounds with which mice communicate. Its sense of smell is far superior to ours, as it possesses up to four times more olfactory cells than we do. The cat's whiskers and vibrissae are like sensors that guide it in the dark and can perceive vibrations that indicate nearby obstacles. If one cut them off, the cat could no longer hunt at night.



## SEQUENCE 6

Australia. The governmental program which aims to eradicate wild cats sometimes triggers strong reactions. Could it actually cause the proliferation of undesirable rodents ? Technically, the program has required setting up poisonous traps which are designed to be harmless for the native protected species. These traps are airdropped in the bush.

We follow the cats. Will they get caught by the traps ?

Some continue their hunt and lie in wait. One cat captures an exotic rodent.

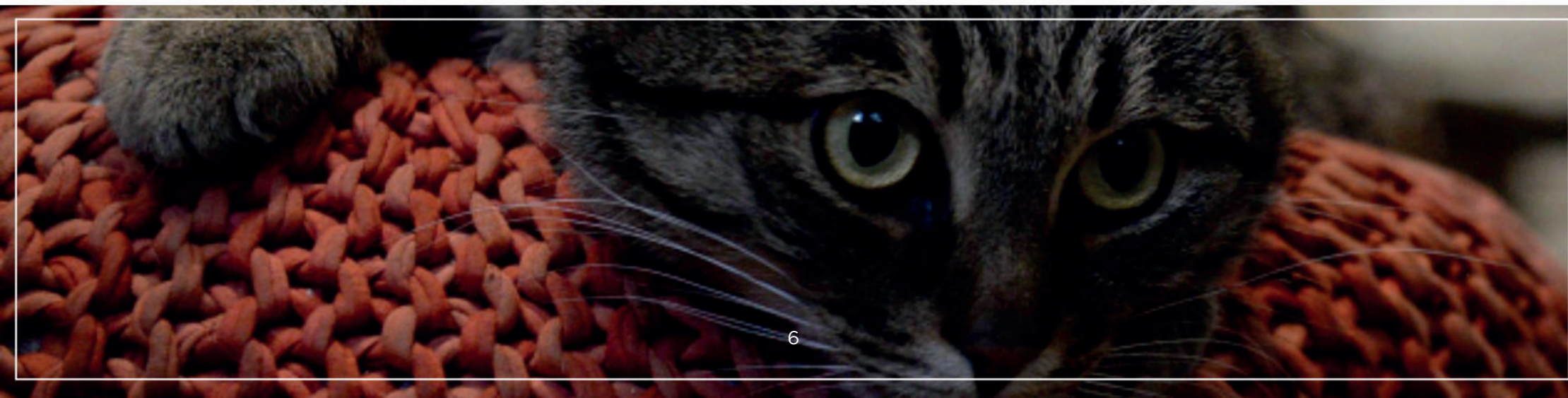
## SEQUENCE 7

Back to the cat farm. The cat we know of in Europe likes to play and hunt. While wild cats need to hunt to survive, domesticated cats have kept regular predatory habits, even though they are properly fed by their masters. And indeed, every cat owner has found one day a dead bird or a rodent on the doorstep.

We recreate Robert Adamec's experiment in our farm.

After having previously identified their food preference, we confront six cats with alternative situations. Each cat is served its favorite dish for 45 seconds. A rat is then placed a meter away. According to Adamec's results, five cats out of ten are likely to stop eating and to attack the rat before bringing it back. They will then resume eating the food from their dish.

As we observe the reactions of these different cats, we can see that this predatory behaviour is the same as for those that have not been fed beforehand and are confronted with a rat. The cat's main purpose in hunting its prey is not necessarily to eat it. In the wild, food can get scarce and cats might adopt opportunistic behaviour, attacking prey regardless of whether they are hungry or not... you never know...





## SEQUENCE 8

Back in New Caledonia. A cat attacks an impressively giant bat, called a “roussette” - or “flying fox” due to its incredible size.

By analysing 5500 cat droppings, scientists have discovered that there is an important population of roussette bats on the island, since the feline eats 200 to 300 000 a year !

## SEQUENCE 9

Southern Australia. A cat stops in front an enclosure with a curved edge : it delineates a protected zone without cats or red foxes (another invasive predator in Australia). In this thriving ecosystem, native species evolve in a safe haven protected from all danger. Yet, human beings decide to place a cat inside this enclosed zone. A symmetrical “Hunger-game” type of experience is carried out here : the goal is to make species evolve in such a way that they can learn to protect themselves against cats ! - in this case the Boodie (or Lesueur’s rat-kangaroo) and the Bilbi, a marsupial. Within this enclosed zone, we confront the cat to the boodies so that, over time, according to Darwin’s principles, they learn to survive against predators. The future purpose of this wild land might well be to enhance, trough evolution, the defensive nature of these prey.



## SEQUENCE 10

In our farm, a cat plays around with a lizard which it has just stunned.

In Europe or in Asia, things are very different from the Pacific islands since cats have been around for long enough to be considered as “native” animals. They can therefore continue to peacefully wander the underwood, bringing back strange prey to their masters. They continue to fascinate with their aloof demeanour, their agility and electric reactivity. Their incredible reflexes are concealed by their impassible expression.





# **arte**SALES

## **CONTACT**

CÉLINE PAYOT-LEHMANN  
[c-payot-lehmann@arteFrance.fr](mailto:c-payot-lehmann@arteFrance.fr)

