



Laurie Coughlan

People joke about cats stuck in trees. “He’ll come down on his own.

You don’t find cat skeletons in trees.” In fact, cat skeletons have been found in trees, but naturally finding one up high is unlikely because, well, gravity. A cat high in a tree may be in real trouble. Of all felines, only the forest-dwelling clouded leopards have specialized anklebones and footpads which allow varied climbing positions, including the ability to come down trees head first. A domestic cat’s feet and claws are designed to climb up, not down. So, to get down, the cat must come down backwards, usually jumping the last part. That is a daunting task from 40 or more feet up. It gets worse over time, because once a cat has spent a few days in a tree, it is weakened from hunger and dehydration, and less likely to be able to maneuver his way down safely.

Why do they go there? A stressed cat is likely to consider the tree a handy escape route when scared. A dog, wildlife, another cat, loud noises, and human strangers all may inspire a need to escape. In many cases the cat is stressed from recent changes in the household, like a move or a new family member. Sometimes cats, and especially kittens, simply climb to explore and get stranded.

As distressing as it is to hear your cat way up a tree calling for help, it may be best to take a breath and take stock of the situation. Normally it does not hurt to give the cat some time to come down. Some will figure it out within 24 hours. Tempting the cat with food will probably not work. From 40 feet up, your cat will probably not sense the food. More importantly, any food you put out to tempt the cat down is likely to attract the very same creature that sent him up the tree in the first place.

It happens in an instant. Your door is open a split second too long, and your indoor-only cat is outside and up a tree—way up a tree, beyond reach of most ladders. You hear the piteous cries from above.

Now what?

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Contrary to tradition, there is little point in calling the fire department. They don’t want staff and equipment tied up in collecting a kitten from a tree when a major fire emergency occurs. They also do not want to risk the safety of staff untrained in tree climbing and cat handling.

Local rescue groups can offer help or provide referrals. Nicole Polotsky in the Baltimore area works with local rescuers, sometimes recruited via social media, to find lost cats and sometimes get them out of trees. Some of her volunteers are trained in rock climbing, but not many are tree climbers. Her involvement started when an injured rescue cat went 75 feet up a tree. When the fire department declined her request, a friend recommended that she call Pikesville Tree Service. By that time, the cat had been up the tree for about two days. Within two hours of the call, the tree service had him back to ground level. He was treated, recovered nicely, and was adopted out, and Nicole learned about tree rescues.

So who do you call? Your best bet is a tree service. Some will rescue a cat for free, or take donations. Others will charge, as time spent helping the cat is time they are unable to spend providing professional services. Ira Novograd of Pikesville Tree Service confirmed that they do not charge for simply climbing a tree to rescue a cat, but if the job requires additional personnel and equipment, they need to recover their costs. Equipment and staff availability may limit the number of rescues a tree service can take on when workloads are heavy.



Patrick Brandt of Rescue My Cat

THE RESCUERS

Most regular rescuers are tree climbers and cat fans. Some are certified arborists, a designation that refers to knowledge of trees rather than climbing skills. There is a private network on the internet for those who rescue cats from trees: WHISKR, which stands for Warm Hearted International Society of Kitty Rescuers. According to the group description, it is for people “who are always looking for an excuse to climb trees, especially if we can help poor stranded kitties and their concerned humans.”

There is an international directory of tree-climbing cat rescuers maintained by Dan Kraus (catinatreerescue.com). It is a challenge to keep such directories completely up to date, but they are a very good place to start. In general, a group that no longer does rescues will provide a referral. In addition to the directory, the site includes tips, articles, rescue stories, and an arboreal cat rescuers guide.

Patrick Brandt (www.rescuemycat.org) performs rescues in Durham, Orange, and Alamance Counties in North Carolina. Local shelters and fire departments have his information for referrals. He maintains a webpage which includes a list of rescuers in North Carolina. He works on a donation

basis, with priority on getting help for the cats. Donations go to replace equipment, including a microchip scanner.

Patrick has practiced climbing skills since 2010. He started doing cat rescue as an excuse to do more climbing. He got specific training in tree climbing, then became an arborist in 2018. His love for cats changed his focus to rescue, and he takes care to protect the trees as well as the cats. Patrick will climb in rain, wind, dark, and snow to a point, but always avoids thunderstorms. To retrieve the cats, he uses a laundry bag with gloves sewn in the bottom. Turned inside out, it allows him to grab the cat and pull the bag over it for a safe descent. In addition to his climbing gear, his safety equipment includes nets and bite gloves, which he prefers not to use as they impair dexterity.

According to Patrick, the 250+ cats he has rescued fall into three basic categories. Most are owned, friendly cats that will meow at you and either wait for you or try to approach. Others are feral, or with unknown owners, and are scared of the rescuer. These may move about in the tree and resist help. Some will jump. Sometimes a net will work. Other times he leaves a baited Havahart trap in the tree. It must be continuously monitored for quick retrieval in case the cat is hit by the trap or its attempt to escape makes it less stable in the tree. A third group is the repeat offenders. A cat named "Grits" has been retrieved four or five times. Families are greatly relieved to get their cats back, and Patrick sometimes feels he is rescuing the humans as much as he is rescuing the cats.

Shaun Sears and Tom Otto of Canopy Cat Rescue are probably the most experienced and well-known rescuers of cats in trees. They are both certified arborists and cat lovers who like to climb. They began rescuing cats in 2009, and even had their own television show on Animal Planet. At this point they have rescued over 4,500 cats, around 750 just this year. Shaun freely shares advice and information about their work to help cats and their people.

Sometimes locating the cat is a problem, especially in very tall trees. Shaun recommends that if you think your cat is up the tree but you can't see it, come back at night with a flashlight. You will get much better visibility if you stand away from the tree trunk and shine the light towards the top of the tree, looking for the reflection from the cat's eyes.



Shaun Sears of Canopy Cat Rescue

What to do next depends on how long the cat has been in the tree. Under normal circumstances, give the cat 24 hours to figure out on its own how to get down. Some will. For feral cats, giving them more time is a good idea, as they are more likely to be scared by an attempted rescue and may go higher in the tree or even try to jump. Shaun noted that special or emergency circumstances require faster rescue. This is true for cats that may be injured, declawed, wearing a collar or harness that may get hung up and cut off circulation, or cats with health conditions requiring daily treatment. Faster rescue is also recommended for kittens, indoor-only cats next to busy highways, or cats stranded when the weather service predicts severe weather.

Cat psychology and handling skills play a big role in successful rescue. Shaun and his fellow rescuer Tom Otto spend time talking with the owners about the cats, learning names, temperament, and any special quirks or circumstances. They also get a waiver acknowledging that there is no guarantee of success, because one never knows what a cat will do. Some may panic and jump. Once up in the tree, they call out to the cat in a non-threatening voice to let it know help is coming. Patience is sometimes needed to let the cat decide that the human is there to help. Many cats are obviously grateful to see a human and are fairly easy to handle, but others, in such a strange situation, may take fright and go higher in the tree or resist

handling. Videos available on the internet (canopycatrescue.com) show rescuers introducing themselves to the cats, petting them, and picking them up as you would pick up your cat in the living room. They try to avoid scruffing, which is uncomfortable for the cat and sets up a bad dynamic for getting back down the tree. They avoid using a noose pole, which is on occasion a good tool for rescues at ground level, because it is hard to control noose tension, and dangling a cat in midair is almost certain to increase tension and risk of injury. They sometimes have to use a net on a long pole for cats that climb beyond where humans can go.

Once the cat is safely in the rescue net, allowing the rescuer use of both hands, Shaun descends the tree and hands the cat over in the net or bag to the family to take into an enclosed space before opening the net. It is a very rewarding experience to bring that cat down safely and see how grateful the owners are. When a cat's owner is unknown, he scans for a microchip. Unidentified cats are passed to a network of specific local shelters and animal rescue organizations.

Canopy Cat Rescue has saved about 4,500 cats, including an occasional repeat offender. At this point, they focus completely on cat rescue, although arborist knowledge helps them avoid damage to the trees. Because they believe that every cat deserves rescue, they do not charge for their services, although donations are welcome.

FINN'S TREETOP ADVENTURE

Finn and his family experienced the confusion, fear, relief, and joy of his successful return from the trees after an eight-day adventure. Lindy Bobbitt and Angie McDonald took Finn and his sister Edie in as six-week-old fosters and ended up adopting them. When the cats were two, the family moved to a new home. Six months later, the pandemic struck, life was disrupted, and shy, indoor-only-cat Finn got out of the house and up a tree.

According to Lindy, at first no one noticed. "We think a fire alarm spooked Finn on a Sunday and he ran outside as we were trying to clear the kitchen of burning pizza. He never goes near doors, so we had no idea he even got out for two days. We thought he was hiding somewhere in the house. We found him under a neighbor's deck and spent three days trying to trap him and coax him out. One night we went to check on him under the deck and he was gone. We were convinced we would never see him again.

"We heard some kind of animal scuffle on Friday night and didn't think much until we spotted Finn in the tree the next day. We think something startled him up the tree. He ended up being in the tree until Monday morning. It was awful; we could hear him crying at night."

Finn was about 30 feet up in the tree. Lindy called the fire department and was told that they did not rescue cats in trees. She reached out to Feline Rescue Association and was referred to Pikesville Tree Service. Less than an hour after she called their emergency number, they were on their way to assess the situation.

The tree service staff told her that rescues are more successful if the cats are tired. Informed that Finn had been outside for almost a week, they decided to give it a try and climbed up the tree. Finn kept going higher and higher until they were running out of options. They set a trap in the tree. Lindy and Angie monitored it, and the company texted daily to check on Finn.

Lindy continued the story: "On Monday morning it started raining and the stay-at-home order was issued for Maryland. I was convinced between the two, Finn would be up there for a long time, and I was not managing that thought well. Pikesville texted and said they were on their way to get Finn down. That was my first of many breakdowns that day!

Finn the cat is 30 feet up in a tree! Fortunately, Josue and Mike of Pikesville Tree Service were able to rescue Finn and return him to Lindy Bobbitt, his worried owner.



"They climbed the tree in all their gear and had a bag to put Finn in. We just watched in complete terror... The company was very confident, but I was just a wreck, not knowing what would happen once they grabbed him. The moment they grabbed him and put him in the backpack, I lost it... Finn was coming home! They handed me the backpack, and I released him into one of our bathrooms so he could readjust. We had him in a bathroom for several hours. He was out of sorts at first but quickly ate and fell asleep... probably his first real rest in over a week!"

"The entire experience was awful, but I was blown away by the generosity of so many. Pikesville Tree Service would not accept a payment (so we tipped them all the cash we had in our house) and the greatest irony is that Finn is a better cat. It's like he knew he was saved... He is cuddly and loves to be around us and steers clear of every door in the house."

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