

Panicking Pets!



While most pet owners commonly say their dog or cat is frightened of fireworks or reacts antagonistically towards the postman calling ... some pets seem fearful of the oddest of everyday things.

My own 'best friend', Giro, a pint-sized Rottweiler cross, is an amazingly calm and laid-back dog. He's quite happy to continue sniffing around the garden on November 5th while fireworks bang and crash in the sky above and barely even raises his head when the postman calls. Giro is just one of those dogs that aren't easily spooked – unless someone happens to sneeze, at which point he runs from the room as if a balloon has unexpectedly burst behind him.

Why does sneezing affect him so? He's okay with coughing. And how did this fear of sneezing start? My partner and I have had many discussions about it, trying to work out how this strange behaviour began, but to no avail. Now we just accept this is a part of him, although we do develop a sense of grim foreboding if either gets the common cold because we know what it's likely to involve – lots of handkerchief-reaching and a normally attentive dog always scurrying away like a bat out of hell.

My friend Sonya's dog, Bella, is petrified of lipstick. Yes, lipstick!

Another friend has a feisty Yorkshire Terrier, Mindy, who can't cope with feathers. Owner Vicky explains: "It's just any stray feather ... and it's even worse if they are plain white. She completely freezes then barks at it until I go and rescue her. She can't bear to pass one! Birds are no problem, but a lone feather and she freaks."

Sometimes owners can trace back and find a rational cause to the problem. Take the case of Californian-based Heather, whose cat won't step onto or go anywhere near a mattress. Most cats love the thought of climbing into a nice warm bed, especially if their owner is still in it. It's like having your very own human hot-water bottle. But Heather's cat made the error of popping an air-mattress with its claws some years ago, and ever since it has freaked out at the sight of any mattress ... anywhere ... anytime.

But then there is the apparently irrational behaviour of some pets. While we all know Guinea-Pigs can be timid creatures, why on Earth would Barbara's two both become petrified of oranges? And at the other end of the spectrum, there's a big brute of a Staffie living with its owner in Manchester that cowers at the sight of a snail. Jaye explains: "He just stands rooted to the spot (when he sees one) and starts shaking." Even more bizarre, Georgie's crossbreed Jess is scared of snowmen. And then there's Jennie's Labrador that panics every time she unfolds the ironing board. Mind you, I'm none too keen on ironing boards either, so I can kind of understand that one!

Furry animal lookalikes are a more common source of odd behaviour amongst our dogs and cats. Anne tells me: "My sister once bought me a Furby and the Alsatian who lived with me, Dreadlock, hated it with a passion. He'd sit under the shelf it had been flung on and bark. It got banished to the attic where it still is. Dreadlock has since died but out of respect to him the Furby will stay out of sight forever."

Heather, a former Programmer at NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, explains her dog is frightened of anyone that breaks wind ... including her own occasional lapse of control!

Ellie's chocolate lab (Star) used to trot sideways whenever she got too close to a traffic cone. Ellie says she has no idea how it all started, but now Star is 13 years old it seems to have stopped. Age and maturity are sometimes wonderful things – and it tends to make us less spooked by such unfathomable objects.

My own take on this is that the world must be an alarming place for a dog, cat or other furry friend who has been plucked from somewhere familiar and placed in our weird and rather extraordinary environment. There are so many strange and alien-like things that we may understand and find familiar, but which make no sense whatsoever to our pets. Some objects make horrible noises, others that seem to move all on their own, and cuddly (stuffed) creatures that never eat, meow or bark. There are kitchen machines that whirr, buzz and whiz unexpectedly and what looks like a window in the corner of the living room that has people, trees and cars moving around inside it. Is it any wonder that our pets develop phobias about almost anything ... and everything?

Sarah is a dog-trainer in Rotherham with what most of us would imagine are three boldly macho Rottweilers. She probably should be a little embarrassed to confess that one is scared of water, another is afraid of cows, and the third is afraid of just about everything. An anecdote that rather dispels the stereotype about Rotties, I guess. But it offers the rest of us some reassurance that even a professional dog-trainer can't always solve the mystery over why some pooches become so utterly petrified by seemingly natural things.

After sending out a request for my friends on social network sites to let me know what strange things their pets were spooked by, this is the diverse and curious list I eventually compiled – and for which there are no logical answers or rational explanations:

Snowmen, oranges, water, snails, sneezing, traffic cones, a white feather, bubblewrap, ice cream cartons (attracted by the smell but too afraid to go near them), ironing boards, farting (from anyone, including himself), mattresses, one corner of the living room (I'm thinking I may have a ghost), his reflection in a pan lid, her own shadow on a sunny day, car windscreen wipers, Christmas crackers placed on the dinner table, a zig-zag patterned sofa

cushion, balloons, the television set (and the floor surrounding it), fridge/freezers, plastic bags blowing in the wind, any rearrangement of household furniture, yellow gloss paint ("he's fine with white or blue"), a Minion toy teddy bear, cows, every radiator in the house (as the central heating switches on), clothes drying on the washing line, concrete car park bollards, the vacuum cleaner (even while switched off), flies hitting the car windscreen while driving, our pet tortoise, a Furby, rustling coats, the recycling box, the hairdryer, any empty plastic milk bottle, those little half tents that fishermen have, a four inch high wooden duck, vertical blinds as they are being closed, ... and finally ... the fake Audrey Hepburn in the chocolate advert.

Note: While this article is presented as a free information resource for dog owners and associated interested parties to read, it remains the copyright of Tony Booth. No copying, publishing or printing in full or part is permitted without express written permission and agreement of the author.