

Featured Felines: Cats' Adventures & Travels 8

(page checked May 2026)

Nigeraurak

Arctic explorer
and survivor
of the ill-fated
Karluk expedition

(2010)



In 17 June 1913 a ship called the *Karluk* (photo on third page below) sailed from British Columbia on a Canadian mission to explore the western Arctic, with the intention of over-wintering at Banks Island in Canada's North Western Territories. They never got there; their ship was crushed by ice and sank, and the party was forced to try to survive on the ice through an Arctic winter. The expedition had been assembled by a man called Vilhalmjar Stefansson, Canadian but of Icelandic origin, and the *Karluk* was one of three ships. The whole enterprise was a disaster practically from start to finish. It was put together in a hurry; most of the crew had little or no Arctic experience; they were supplied with inadequate clothing and especially footwear; and — worst of all — the *Karluk* was not built to deal with ice, was barely seaworthy, and gave constant trouble.

A cat joins the crew

On board originally were 13 crew, 10 scientific staff, a carpenter who joined as a passenger, and four Alaskan Inuit (at the time called Eskimos). One of the latter insisted on bringing his wife and two young daughters with him (photo on third page); the wife would cook, and sew skins for winter clothing. There were sled dogs; and for days before sailing the crew had sought a cat to bring aboard, as maritime superstition said a feline presence would bring them luck. Stefansson vetoed the idea, saying the dogs would eat it, but just before sailing one of the crew managed to smuggle aboard a thin, black kitten he had found at the docks in Esquimalt, British Columbia. They called it **Nigeraurak** (or Nigigugauraq, main photo above), meaning 'little black one' in the Inuit tongue. She became the beloved mascot of the crew and was well-looked after, particularly by fireman Fred Maurer. At first she was kept in the foc's'le, but soon made her way aft, where one of the men would teach her tricks.

Stefansson's betrayal

It became evident before long that they were not going to reach Banks Island; instead, locked in the ice, the *Karluk* drifted across the western Arctic Ocean, at the mercy of winds, weather and the prevailing ocean currents. In September Stefansson did an extraordinary thing: he announced that he was going to leave the ship, with five men including two of the Inuit, for what he claimed was going to be a hunting trip. In fact he made no effort to return, and almost certainly never intended to. He over-wintered relatively comfortably with the two other expedition ships further south, having effectively abandoned the complement of *Karluk* to their fate.

Abandon ship!

The ship continued to drift westwards and by January was well north of Siberia. On 10 January 1914, in the dead of winter, the inevitable happened: the ship started to be crushed by the ice and captain Bob Bartlett (*right*), a resilient, versatile and reliable Newfoundlander, gave the order to abandon ship. The men moved their most valuable belongings and as many essential supplies as possible onto the ice — but in all the commotion of so doing the kitten had hidden herself away and couldn't be found. However, by the following morning the ship was still afloat, although filling with water, and Nigeraurak emerged, to be lifted lovingly onto a bed of skins in a basket. She was put into one of two 'houses', built of snow and boxes, that the men had fashioned on the ice, and made herself at home.



By 4 pm on 11 January, *Karluk* had disappeared under the ice.

Life on the ice

The weeks and months that followed were an increasingly desperate struggle for survival. Bartlett knew that their only hope was to try to reach the uninhabited Wrangel Island, north of Siberia, where at least they would be on land instead of shifting ice, and there might be game for them to catch and eat. Some of the men eventually did reach it, although there were deaths in the meantime; and a small group reached the even more inhospitable Herald Island — but rescue didn't come in time for them and they died. Meanwhile, Bartlett and one of the remaining Inuit made an epic journey by dogsled and on foot to reach Siberia; ultimately they made it and after many delays and privations Bartlett was able to regain Alaska and set about arranging rescue for those left behind.

Travelling cat

When the time came to leave 'Shipwreck Camp' and begin the trek to Wrangel, no one wanted to abandon the cat. Maurer and the carpenter Hadley made her a little deerskin bag to travel in; sometimes she rode in state on a sled, while at other times Maurer slung the bag around his neck, so she could snuggle safe and warm inside next to his body. At night they let her out into their igloo, where she would curl up to sleep inside one of their foot bags. She lived mostly on pemmican scraps, which she seemed to enjoy and of which everyone donated a little.

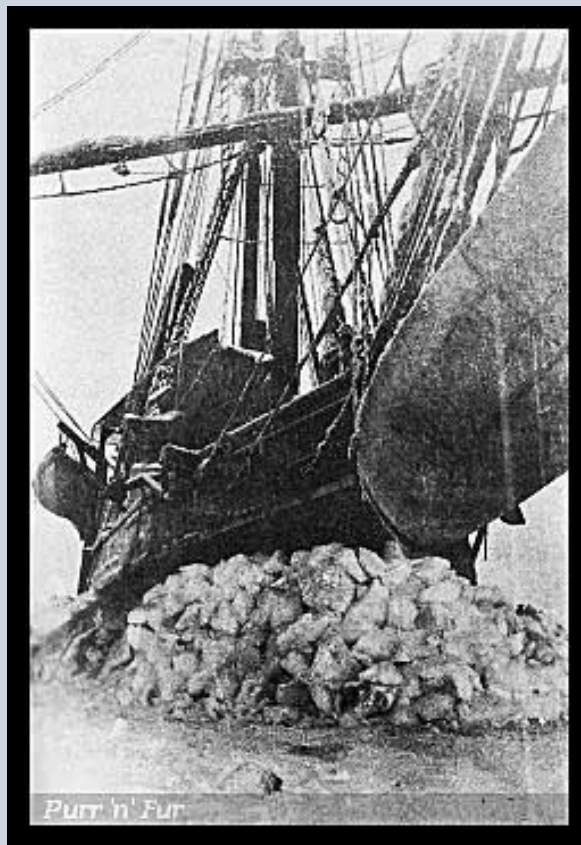
The two young Inuit girls, Qagguluk (known as Helen), who was 8, and Makpii, or Mugpi (later known as Ruth, *right*), who was 3, especially enjoyed the kitten's presence. Like many young children, Mugpi liked to chase her and pull her tail, although her mother was constantly warning her not to tease the cat; Mugpi just couldn't resist it. One day Nigeraurak got her own back, though; Mugpi received a deep scratch on her chin, just below her lip, requiring medical attention for several days until it healed but left a scar.



Desperate times

As time dragged by and things became ever more and more difficult, the men always made sure that neither the two little girls nor the kitten went hungry; they were fussed over and well-fed, even when it meant the men giving up part of their own rations. It might seem strange to have made so much fuss over the cat, particularly, but she helped to sustain them in the long, dark days, gave them something to think about other than themselves and was their good-luck charm, giving them grounds for hope. They felt that as long as Nigeraurak was alive, they would survive.

The story of the desperate struggle for survival of the occupants of the *Karluk* has been extensively researched and documented in a book entitled *The Ice Master* (the name refers to Bartlett) by Jennifer Niven (Macmillan, 2000, ISBN 0 330 39123 2).



Rescue

It was September of 1914 before relief finally arrived for those who had survived, just as they were facing the grim prospect of having to try to live through another Arctic winter. A Canadian schooner, the curiously named *King and Winge* (below), was the first vessel to reach Wrangel Island. She was able to rescue 13 survivors from two different camps — and Nigeraurak the cat. When they reached the second, larger camp photographers from the ship wanted pictures to be taken of the men holding aloft the cat and some puppies that had been born to one of the dogs; Nigeraurak was apparently not pleased to be woken from her morning nap! She was, in fact, fatter and fitter than when she had been 'recruited' from the Esquimault Naval Yard over a year before.



Later life

Eventually Nigeraurak joined her friend Fred Maurer, her early 'champion', when he returned to his home in New Philadelphia, Ohio, where he married. She's reported to have had numerous litters of kittens — all black with white feet and a white bib — before her death in 1926. Several of them were given by Maurer to other surviving expedition members.

Last survivor

Perhaps fittingly, the last survivor of the ill-fated *Karluk* expedition was the youngest at the time, Mugpi/Makpii (*below*). She found work in Barrow, Alaska, married and raised several children. She died at the great age of 97 on 2 June 2008 in Anchorage, Alaska — still bearing the scar on her chin that Nigeraurak had inflicted on her as a young child all those years before.



Note:

A later expedition instigated by Stefansson, in 1921, sent four men and an Inuit woman to Wrangel Island again, in a bid to claim the island for Canada. This expedition also had a cat, named **Victoria** ('Vic'), and one of the men was Fred Maurer, who had survived the *Karluk* voyage and had been one of Nigeraurak's chief carers. Unfortunately three of the men disappeared in an abortive attempt to cross the ice and reach Siberia to find food, and the fourth man died of illness. Only the woman, [Ada Blackjack](#), survived, together with Vic. They weren't rescued until almost two years later.

Links

Obituary for Makpii at [The Globe & Mail](#) (Sept. 2008 – *archived copy*). For more about her life, the other Inuit and the *Karluk* expedition in general, see Wikipedia: [Voyage of the Karluk](#)

* * * * *

Featuring Felines: Cats' Adventures & Travels 9

(page checked May 2026)

See **Featuring / Special needs 7** for Ryzhik and Dymla, Russian cats who had all four paws replaced; also Vituzzo from Italy who had prosthetic back paws.

Oscar, the 'Bionic' Cat

from Jersey,
Channel Islands, UK
(2010+)



In 2007 **Oscar** went as a kitten with his sister Poppy, both black, to live with Mike Nolan and his partner Kate Allan after they had moved in together on Jersey, largest of the Channel Islands. There were two other cats of Kate's in the household, British shorthairs called Buzz and Lou; all four cats were much loved, but Oscar seemed to have a specially warm and loving personality and everyone who met him liked him.

Trouble with cars

He also seemed to be seriously accident-prone! Although the road outside the house wasn't particularly busy, and there's a 40 mph speed limit (64 km/h) on Jersey, it wasn't all that long before Oscar was hit by a car. He made it home and at first it didn't seem too serious; but in fact there was damage to his urinary tract and his tail, and quite complex surgery was needed, together with a skin graft. The total cost was several thousand pounds.

After a fairly lengthy recovery period, it wasn't long after he was more or less back to normal that he was again hit by a car. That time he dislocated his hip — but it wasn't just a matter of popping it back into place; it was an awkward dislocation and needed further expensive surgery. Oscar was not yet two years old. But 'the big one' was still to come.

Big problems

In October 2009 Oscar was sunning himself in a field not far from his home when he must have been caught in the blades of a combine harvester. Both his back feet were severed, and when he was found about an hour later by a lady who happened to be passing, he had lost a lot of blood and was close to dying. She alerted his owners and he was rushed to the vet's, who by now had got to know him quite well!

The local Jersey vet, Peter Haworth, gave him emergency first aid and bound up the wounds, which subsequently began to heal quite well. The unsolved mystery was how the accident could have happened. Why had Oscar not taken flight, away from danger? Howarth offered a guess that he had been asleep and awoke disorientated by the noise of the approaching harvester's engine, which would be some way behind the cutting blades at the front. In a state of sudden fright and confusion Oscar may have rolled over while starting to make a late escape, the blades catching and severing his paws.



While cats can lead quite a good life with only three legs, it's more difficult with just two ([Anakin](#) manages well but in a rather different way). It looked initially as though Oscar might well have to be put to sleep, as he wouldn't have been able to lead a reasonably normal life. However, the vet gave Oscar's owners some hope when he referred the cat to [Professor Noel Fitzpatrick](#), a vet on the

British mainland in Surrey, not far from London, who is a pioneer in prosthetic surgery. He runs a state-of-the-art practice that could rival many hospitals, with its own MRI room, a hydrotherapy pool and all modern veterinary facilities. In a previous operation he had given Storm, a Belgian shepherd dog, a unique prosthetic paw attached to a titanium rod implanted directly into Storm's foreleg, joining the skin with the metal prosthesis. It proved a great success, to the extent that Storm had to have the prosthesis replaced because he was leading such an active life that he had worn it out!

To go ahead or not?



There was much heart-searching to be done as to whether it would be right or fair to subject Oscar to further lengthy operations and recuperation from what would be a ground-breaking procedure — quite apart from the further expense, although Oscar's owners wouldn't have to foot the entire bill — but Professor Fitzpatrick felt there was hope for Oscar, although no animal had previously had two feet replaced. And so the decision was made to go ahead. Oscar was flown to England (at a cost of £600, some 900 US dollars, for a 40-minute flight). Custom-made implants (*left*) were attached internally to the ankle joints by drilling into

the bones above where the feet had been amputated — a procedure that needed great care and precision as a cat's ankle bones are so small. The implants emerge from the skin rather like a pair of stilts (*below right*). They're coated with hydroxyapatite, a material that imitates the way the bones of a deer's antlers mesh with soft tissue, and have a honeycomb structure that allows skin to bond to them, sealing them against infection. The flesh and bone bond to the bionic limbs well enough that they can bear weight and be flexible under the skin.

The operation to attach the implants lasted three hours; they cost £2000 each (about 3000 US dollars at 2010 rates). Technically they're called ITAPs — intraosseous transcutaneous amputation prosthetics — and were developed at University College, London by biomedical engineer Professor Gordon Blunn and his colleagues.



Oscar
after acquiring his new blades,
with Professor Noel Fitzpatrick



Above:
Graphic illustrating
how the ITAPs
would be inserted

Right:
X-ray of Oscar's
right leg
after surgery

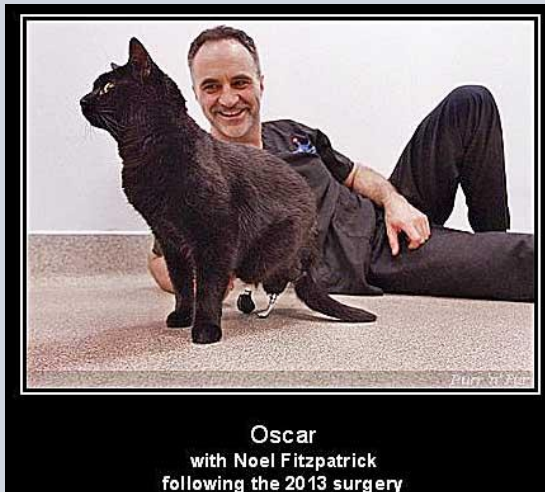


The new paws

Once Oscar's implants had been successfully inserted and had healed, new feet were attached simply by screwing them into the end of the implants. At first these were prototypes developed at the University of Salford, made of rubber and with a degree of 'wobble'. They were intended to encourage Oscar to use his feet, and allowed him to walk fairly normally and even do a bit of climbing; but they were brown so were modified with black adhesive tape so they did not look too out of place on a black cat! But before long he had four pairs of longer-lasting 'blade runner'-style feet of rubber and metal, which were not only more durable but allowed him to run and climb more easily. They resembled the prosthetics used by Paralympic champion athlete Oscar Pistorius. However, the artificial paws were never going to be suitable for a full outdoor life, so Oscar had to become more of an indoor cat, although he was allowed out on occasion under supervision.

Wide media attention

Oscar's story was released to the world in late June 2010. Since the accident he had spent eight months at Fitzpatrick's practice. There's a good account, from which we have used information and a couple of images, at the [Daily Mail \(Feb. 2013 – archived copy\)](#). Oscar and his ground-breaking new paws were featured in a British TV series called *The Bionic Vet* in early July. In August 2010 Fitzpatrick's practice posted a [video update](#) of Oscar's progress: it shows him three weeks after his more advanced and improved 'blades' had been fitted and explains the thinking behind them.



New home in England

Since Oscar would need periodic check-ups after his operation, it was felt best, after lengthy discussion, that he remain in England rather than subjecting him to the stress of journeys back and forth between England and Jersey. A home was found for him in a country house quite near the practice, with Fitzpatrick Referrals' project manager Matt Connor, and Oscar settled in happily there. Mike and Kate were able to visit him in July 2011. Then events took an unexpected turn when the landlord of Matt's house decided he was no longer going to allow pets. At that point, therefore, although it had been almost two years since his accident, Oscar finally went home to Jersey, we think sometime before September 2011. Mike went to collect him and bring him back in the car via the ferry. Three short clips of Oscar at home were uploaded to YouTube in January 2012 by his owners, all available from their channel page [TheBionicCat](#): he looks very content, doing all the usual things that cats do! Apart from a further trip to the vet to have a broken tooth removed, he was in good health and leading a fairly normal life.

Fitzpatrick's ethos

The whole procedure with Oscar cost in the region of £30,000, or about 50,000 US dollars at 2010 rates, much of the funding coming from Fitzpatrick's practice. He regarded it as pioneering work that had exciting implications for the treatment of severely disabled humans, too, and not only animals. And Professor Fitzpatrick was adamant that he wasn't simply experimenting, or performing such operations 'because he could'. He said, 'I know where to draw the line. Animals are sentient creatures, with needs and wants. Doing a procedure just because it can be done is not ethical. I'll do it only if the perceived outcome improves the animal's quality of life.'

Disaster

Then, when all seemed finally to be going well, there was a further major setback: in August 2012 one of Oscar's implants broke. The titanium rod snapped at the exit point from the stump of the leg, leaving him seriously off balance: he couldn't walk properly. For an active cat in the prime of life — he was just five years old — it was a major blow. Once again he was treated by his Jersey vet and made comfortable, while urgent contact was made with Noel Fitzpatrick for advice. He said he would be able to carry out a further operation, but it would mean inserting a longer implant, further up the leg, and of course it would again mean a lengthy convalescence. There was also the matter of expense, several more thousands of pounds: but they would find the money somehow if required. A further complication was that the company that had made the implants was no longer in business.

What should be done?

There followed many long, agonising discussions as to the best course of action, always with Oscar's best interests at heart. Would it be in any way fair to subject him to more major surgery, after all he'd already been through? Or would it be kinder to just have him gently put to sleep? He was a wonderful cat and they didn't think they would ever have another like him, but that in itself wasn't a reason for keeping him if it meant more suffering for him. In Kate's early-2013 book about Oscar (see our [Folios section](#)) she left the matter unresolved at the end, with no decision having been made — but a search revealed further information.



Kate Allan with Oscar

Later news

There were few details, but it seemed it was finally decided to 'keep going', and for a while Oscar was learning to cope with just three legs. In mid-April 2013 Kate said he 'was hopping around just as much as before and can still jump on the bed and the chairs'. Later in the year, though, he underwent a further operation and was back to four feet. It wasn't clear if he'd returned to Noel Fitzpatrick or there'd been some other option, but by mid-October he'd had the operation and was recovering well, with the hope that he would be home soon. By early November 2013 he was 'learning to walk on four feet again, and doing really well' and it appeared that by Christmas he was back at home in Jersey.

May 2014 saw the airing on Channel 4 of a further TV documentary series covering the work of Noel and his team, *The Supervet*, and in the first episode it became clear what had transpired with Oscar in 2013. He had indeed ultimately returned to the Fitzpatrick practice for a further procedure to address the snapped prosthesis. It was also found that infection had returned to the ankle. It was amputated then a new implant was inserted higher up his leg into the shinbone, but with no movable ankle, as there still was with his other hind leg, it had been necessary to design a new and different type of foot to screw onto the implant. The next-generation prosthesis was called a PerFits. The surgery was a success and, as before, once his new foot was attached Oscar was up and about!

Oscar holds two Guinness world records: one for being the first animal to have two bionic leg implants, and another for being the first animal to receive implants into its moving joints.



So Oscar rebounded once again; with everyone hoping there would be no more mishaps for this brave little cat! In 2018 his human Mike Nolan reported that Oscar was 11 in July of that year and was still going strong. See this [Twitter](#) link.

And a post on the Facebook page of the New Era Veterinary Hospital in Jersey (where Oscar was first treated) in November 2019 celebrated some 10 years since the incident with the combine harvester, and reported that Oscar was alive and well

Update In July 2022 Oscar celebrated his 15th birthday – not bad for a cat who almost died when he was just a couple of years old! All went well in recent years with his prosthetic feet and he had long since got used to them. His birthday news was reported [here](#) (copy link o browser), and Professor Fitzpatrick sent him a personal message on Facebook.



Oscar died at home in Jersey in July 2025, not long after celebrating his 18th birthday; an amazingly long life considering all the early traumas with his back paws! He'd been diagnosed with a lymphoma some three years earlier, but continued to lead a happy life until his passing.

[ITV News](#) (July 2025) | [Instagram](#) | [Facebook](#)

Further links

- ❖ BBC Jersey, Jun 2010: [A cat from Jersey has shot to fame as the 'bionic cat'](#).
- ❖ *Guardian*, Jun 2010: [Paws for thought: pioneering surgery puts cat back on his feet](#).
- ❖ The original of an excellent BBC clip explaining the procedure and the fitting of Oscar's (first) new feet is no longer included at the BBC page, but it has been uploaded to YouTube: [A bionic cat](#).
- ❖ CBS News, Jun 2010: [Oscar the 'bionic' cat](#) - shows Oscar's blades, and Noel explains the procedure.

- ❖ Smithsonian Channel: [The Bionic Vet: Oscar's New Feet](#) (*archived copy*- includes footage from the operation.
- ❖ *Daily Telegraph*, Nov 2010: [The Bionic Vet: he can rebuild them](#).
- ❖ Kate Allan writing in the *Daily Mail*, Feb 2013: [The £50,000 bionic cat](#). **archived copy*
- ❖ Facebook: [Oscar The Bionic Cat](#) (NB: the page is maintained by a fan, not by Oscar's owners). (*short, and nothing about Oscar since June 2010*)
- ❖ Essential Surrey, Feb 2014: [The Supervet: We interview Noel Fitzpatrick](#).
- ❖ 2011: Fitzpatrick Referrals' own promotional video, in the form of a [guided tour](#) of the practice and its world-class facilities, includes a scene with Oscar walking on his blades.
- ❖ Jan. 2025, Oscar's 17th birthday: [Jersey Evening Post](#).

* * * * *