

Worldwide, cats may have been involved in the extinction of more bird species than any other cause, except habitat destruction.

“Free-Ranging Cats” and Pets Take Huge Toll On Wildlife



University of Wisconsin researchers found that cats kill an estimated 19 million songbirds each year in that state alone.

Nationwide, rural cats probably kill over a billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds annually. Urban and suburban cats add to this deadly toll.

True, many of these kills are mice, rats, and other species considered pests, but many are native songbirds and mammals whose populations are already stressed by other factors, such as habitat destruction and pesticide pollution.

Cats are contributing to the endangerment of populations of birds such as least terns, piping plovers, and loggerhead shrikes. In Florida, the population of marsh rabbits in Key West is threatened.

Although rural free-ranging cats have greater access to wild animals and undoubtedly take the greatest toll, even urban house pets take live prey when allowed outside.

Extensive studies of the feeding habits of free-ranging domestic cats over 50 years and four continents indicate that small mammals make up about 70% of these cats' prey, while birds make up about 20%. The remaining 10% is a variety of other animals.

Observation of these cats shows that some can kill more than 1,000 wild animals per year. Free-ranging cats living in

small towns each kill an average of 14 wild animals annually. Rural cats kill many more.

Not only do cats prey on many small mammals and birds, but they can outnumber and compete with native predators such as hawks and weasels.

Free-ranging domestic cats may also transmit new diseases to wild animals. For example, cats have spread the feline leukemia virus to mountain lions, and may have recently infected the endangered Florida panther with feline distemper and an immune deficiency disease. Plus, they can transmit rabies and toxoplasmosis to humans.

Domestic cats originated from the ancestral wild species, *Felis silvestris*, the European and African wild cat. They are

now considered a separate species, named *Felis catus*.

Cats were first domesticated in Egypt around 2000 BC and were worshipped as a goddess. The Romans introduced the domestic cat to Britain by 300 AD. Colonists from Europe then introduced them throughout the world.

The cat population is skyrocketing. The estimated number of pet cats in urban and rural regions of the U.S. has grown from 30 million in 1970 to 60 million in 1990. These estimates are based on U.S. Census data and include only those cats that people claim to "own" as pets, not cats that are semi-wild or free-ranging.

Nationwide, about 30% of households have cats. In rural areas where free-ranging cats

are usually not regarded as pets, about 60% of households have cats. The combined total of pets and free-ranging cats in the U.S. is probably more than 100 million!

Cats differ from wild predators in three important ways:

- (1) People protect cats from disease, predation, and competition – factors that can control numbers of wild predators, such as bobcats, foxes, or coyotes.
- (2) They have a dependable supply of supplemental food provided by humans and are not influenced by changes in populations of prey. Whereas populations of native predators will decline when prey becomes scarce, cats receiving food subsidies from people remain abundant.
- (3) Unlike many native predators, cat densities are either poorly limited or not limited by territoriality.

With abundant food, densities can reach over 9 per acre. Unlike some predators, a cat's desire to hunt is not suppressed by adequate supplemental food. Even when fed regularly by people, a cat's motivation to hunt remains strong, so it continues hunting.

Some people put bells on their cat's collar. But, bells are mostly ineffective in preventing predation because, even if the bell rings, it's usually too late for the prey being stalked.

What can you do? Here are some tips:

- Keep only as many pet cats as you can feed and care for.
- If at all possible, for the sake of your cat and local wildlife, keep your cat indoors.
- Neuter your cats or prevent them from breeding, and encourage others to do so.
- Make sure your feeders are 8 ft. to 10 ft. away from nearby trees, bushes, or other hiding places where cats and raptors will wait in ambush.
- If you have a feeder or birdbath that is close to a bush or tree, circle the feeder or bath with 2 x 4-inch mesh wire fencing, at least three feet tall, to disrupt the approach of both cats and raptors. This will allow the birds to fly through the mesh or fly upward to escape.
- Don't dispose of unwanted cats by releasing them in rural areas. Contact your local animal welfare organization for help.
- Eliminate sources of food, such as garbage or outdoor pet food dishes, that attract stray cats.
- Don't feed stray cats.

Declawing may reduce hunting success, but many declawed cats are still effective predators.

In most areas, the person who provides care for a cat is legally responsible for its welfare and control. It is usually the responsibility of the owner to control the cat's movements.

Many municipalities have leash laws and require vaccination and neutering of pet cats. Because laws vary, one should check local ordinances for the appropriate way to deal with stray cats.

Cats are popular pets. In order to have and care for our pets – and still protect our native wildlife – we must make an effort to limit, in a humane manner, the adverse effects free-ranging cats can have on wildlife.

*(This article was condensed from
Cats and Wildlife—*

A Conservation Dilemma

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WindStar Wildlife Institute is a national, non-profit, conservation organization whose mission is to help individuals and families establish or improve the wildlife habitat on their properties.

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