Free-Roaming Cats & Wildlife

While humans themselves are one of the greatest threats to wildlife, they are also responsible for another devastating threat to wild animal populations: the domestic cat. Whether it is your cat, your neighbor’s cat, or a feral cat living in your neighborhood, free-roaming domestic cats are responsible for the unnecessary deaths of millions of wild animals each year. Furthermore, free-roaming cats are exposed to unnecessary risks that threaten their health and shorten their life spans. Domestic cats are a big problem for our ecosystem, but you can take steps to help both wildlife and domestic cats lead longer, healthier lives. What is the problem? 1. Each free-roaming cat can kill between 100 and 1,000 wild animals every year.1,2Wild animals are ours to protect and enjoy. If your neighbor’s pet or a wild animal came into your yard and killed one of your pets, you would justifiably be upset. This kind of killing probably happens to the wildlife in your yard every day. Each year in the United States, free-roaming cats kill over a billion small mammals and over a million birds. Even a well-fed domestic cat that wears a bell can and likely will attack hundreds of small animals each year. More information: http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/materials/predation.pdf 2. The bacteria in a cat’s mouth is deadly to small animals.3, 4 If a small animal is attacked by a cat, then it likely has a puncture or scratch. Without antibiotics, that wound, no matter how minor, can kill the animal within 24 hours. Cat saliva contains a bacterium called Pasteurella that causes small animals to develop a lethal systemic infection. If you rescue an animal from a cat, please assume that it has a wound and find a wildlife rehabilitator immediately. Do not release the animal back to the wild to suffer and die a painful death. 3. Outdoor cats are constantly exposed to diseases and situations that threaten their health and their lives.5, 6, 7 The average lifespan of an indoor cat is 14 years, but the average lifespan of an outdoor/indoor cat is 4 years. Cats that are allowed to run free are exposed to numerous hazards that can kill them or shorten their lives significantly. These hazards include being hit by a car, being poisoned, getting injured or killed by another animal, and contracting diseases. Some of these diseases, like rabies, can be passed on to humans. When something happens to an outdoor pet cat, we tend to blame the car, the dog, the coyote, etc., but not ourselves. As pet owners, we are responsible for providing a safe haven for our pets. We need to take responsibility for the fate of our cats. 4. The killing does not stop with just cats and small animals.8 Cat owners who allow their pets to roam free perpetuate a cycle of killing that affects our entire ecosystem.

- First, the cat kills hundreds of wild animals each year.
- Next, the cat is killed or goes missing.
- Then, someone sees a coyote or fox and blames it for the cat’s demise, whether the animal was involved or not.
- Next, the neighborhood hires someone to try to trap all the coyotes and foxes — a costly endeavor that actually will increase rather than decrease the population and by law will require euthanasia of the trapped animal. As a result, even more wild animals die.

What caused the problem?1. Cats are the only domestic pet that we allow to roam free in North America. We don’t allow dogs, horses, sheep, or any other domestic animal to roam free without providing an enclosure to protect them. Some cities and counties have leash laws for cats, but those laws are rarely enforced. 2. We have been brought up to believe that cats must be free to roam and hunt to be happy. This argument could be made for any domestic animal, especially dogs. However, we do not allow any other domestic animal to have this freedom because we are concerned about both the safety of the animal and the safety of the people and animals it will encounter.

What can you do to help? You can protect both wildlife and cats by providing the same safeguards that you would for any other domestic animal. 1. Bring your cat indoors permanently and create a wildlife viewing station for your pet by hanging a bird feeder outside its favorite window. 2. Provide your cat with a safe enclosure in which to live outside. You can attach this enclosure to your house with a wire tunnel and cat door to allow your pet to go in and out when it wants. This enclosure will keep the wildlife safe from your cat and your cat safe from wildlife

- Cat Safe hArbor: http://www.awareone.org/Cat%20Safe%20Harbor.pdf
- Purrfect Fence: http://www.purrfectfence.com/default.asp
- Cat Enclosure Kit: https://www.cdpets.com/Products_Detail.php?ProductID=5

3. Take action to curb the stray and feral cat problem. Trap stray cats and either find them an indoor home or take them to the local humane society or animal control agency. Find out what you can do to reduce or eliminate the feral cat population in your neighborhood.4. Share this information with any neighbors who have free-roaming cats so that they can take steps towards protecting both their pets and the wildlife we share.

Want to learn more?

- Watch a video on cats and birds
- Cats, Birds, and You (American Bird Conservancy)
- Cat Indoor Campaign (American Bird Conservancy)
- Reducing Threats from Cats (Audubon Society)
- Protecting cats and wildlife (Humane Society)
- Keep your cat happy indoors (Humane Society)
- Outdoor cat vs. Indoor cat (Animal Planet)
- How to make an outdoor cat an indoor cat (American Bird Conservancy)
- Fox and Coyote Problems
- AWARE's Tips for Coexistence

References

(1) http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/materials/predation.pdf (2) http://umaine.edu/publications/7148e/ (3) http://twera.org/newsVol1No2.pdf (4) http://www.themodernapprentice.com/puncture.htm (5) http://www.tufts.edu/vet/behavior/feline.shtml#out (6) http://www.vetinfo.com/indoor-outdoor-cat-life-expectancy.html (7)

http://www.cat-world.com.au/indoor-vs-outdoor-cats (8)
http://www.highlandsranch.org/03_p&os/osicfiles/MostCommonlyAskedQuestionsAboutUrbanCoyotes110409.pdf