

REDUCING THE IMPACT OF CATS ON
BIRDS AND WILDLIFE:

A BRIEFING NOTE FOR
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS



Adapted for Canadian Municipalities by Nature Canada

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STEWARDSHIP CENTRE
FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA



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We are committed to champion science-based best practices so that British Columbians understand, enjoy, and sustain healthy ecosystems. As good stewardship relies on good decision-making, we work closely with our partners to develop innovative technical, educational, and capacity building resources. For more information about the Stewardship Centre, go to www.stewardshipcentrebc.ca.

Nature Canada Nature Canada is the oldest national nature conservation charity in Canada. Our mission is to protect and conserve wildlife and habitats in Canada by engaging people and advocating on behalf of nature. Learn more at www.naturecanada.ca.

Nature Canada works with partners across Canada to keep cats safe and save bird lives. Please visit their websites (www.catsandbirds.ca) and take full advantage of their resources and on-the-ground reach. Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives is a coalition of individuals and organizations concerned about the well-being of cats and birds. We believe all animals are important, and as humans we owe both cats and birds protection. Cats are at risk when they go outdoors unsupervised. Through improving our treatment of cats we, as a society, also limit their impact on the environment generally, and birds in particular.

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INTRODUCTION

Free-ranging domestic cats are considered to be one of the top sources of bird mortality in North America (Calvert et al., 2013), estimated to kill between 1.4 to 3.7 billion birds annually in the United States (Loss et al. 2013) and 100 to 350 million birds annually in Canada (Blancher 2013), though there are very few published studies on cat predation of birds from Canada. We do know that slightly more than one in three Canadian households keeps cats. Most human-related bird deaths (about 75%) are caused by impacts of feral and domestic cats. These numbers dwarf the next largest source of mortality, collisions with buildings, transmission lines, and vehicles. Impacts of cat predation are believed to be highest in densely settled areas of Canada. Blancher (2013) estimates that between 2 and 7 percent of bird mortality in southern Canada is caused by cats. Canada.



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The domestic cat is now so common that many people do not realize they are a non-native species to North America and were introduced only a few hundred years ago. Their dramatic rise in population numbers during this time has been devastating to native wildlife. Virtually all cats are skilled hunters if given the opportunity, although some kill much more than others and individual cats vary in the types of prey they target. Being fed by humans has little or no impact on predation rates. Younger cats (1-2 years) typically catch more

prey. Most cat owners have little idea of the extent of the problem, in part because only a small proportion, less than 25%, of kills are brought home.

Canada has a critical conservation and stewardship responsibility for birds – with over 450 species that breed in Canada each year. That number includes many migratory birds that arrive in our communities over the course of the year. These birds all depend on the availability of food and suitable habitat to maintain their population numbers.

Reducing feral cat populations and keeping domestic cats indoors or under the owners control when outside would help to mitigate the impact of cats on wildlife populations.

There is mounting evidence that changes in attitudes toward domestic cats, new animal control legislation and cat management policies are needed to bring about the human behavior change necessary to ameliorate this problem. (Holm 2014; Pearson and Blair 2013)

The purpose of this report is to provide decision-makers with a summary of the issues related to cat predation of vulnerable bird and wildlife species and provide some recommended actions to consider.

Canada's songbird population has decreased 12% since 1970. Let's help our backyards and natural areas safe from cats.



(Rufous Hummingbird, Song Sparrow, & American Robin (photos: Wikimedia Commons).)

THE CURRENT SITUATION

THE RISE IN CAT POPULATIONS IN CANADA

The Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS) undertook a multi-stakeholder research initiative to understand the scope of cat overpopulation in Canada (2012). The research found that there are an estimated 10.2 million owned cats in Canada growing at a rate faster than the rise in number of households across the country. While it is difficult to estimate the Canadian feral cat population it is thought that these cats are significant contributors to overpopulation because of their lower spay/neuter rates leading to unwanted litters (Slater, 2007, 2002, Centonze & Levy, 2002). Adding to the problem is inter-breeding between feral and domestic cats. At this point, if large-scale, targeted action is not taken, the cat overpopulation problem in Canada will worsen.

BIRD POPULATIONS ARE IN TROUBLE

Slow but steady declines in the populations of specific groups of birds in North America have prompted analysis of the factors related to these decreases. Although birds are small and somewhat secretive, they are well-censused. Annual bird counts and bird surveys have been conducted since 1900. “The State of Canadian Birds” published by Environment Canada on behalf of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (2012), concludes that on average, Canadian breeding bird populations have decreased 12% since 1970. Bird species at risk have increased from 47 to 86 since 2001. Some groups of birds such as aerial insectivores (i.e. swallows, swifts, nightjars, flycatchers), shorebirds and grassland birds show major declines of 40% to 60% or more in this same period and individual species such as the Chestnut-collared Longspur, a ground-nesting, sparrow-like bird of the prairies, have declined by over 90%!

WHICH SPECIES ARE MOST VULNERABLE AND WHY?

SMALL MAMMALS

Small mammals are a common prey of cats. **In Canada, hundreds of millions, most of them native species, are killed annually by cats.** Shrews, voles and mice are most likely to be impacted because of their small size and likelihood of being found around farms and urbanizing areas. Species like the House Mouse or the Norway Rat are also vulnerable to cats, but cats 'employed' on farms as pest control officers are in a different category than pet or feral cats.

SONGBIRDS

Songbirds are also a common prey. Bird predation is highest in spring and summer when nestlings and fledglings are abundant. The number of birds killed by cats annually in urban areas is often greater than the number of young hatched and often up to 40% of the total population in the area. With such high death rates these areas reduce rather than contribute to regional bird populations. Species that nest on or near the ground are most vulnerable, as are birds found near residential neighbourhoods, farms and at bird feeders.



Photo by Ted Cheskey



Photo by Dave Semmelink

The White-throated Sparrow and the Barn Swallow are just two of the species susceptible to cat predation.



Photo: by M. Pearson

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Reptiles and amphibians are reported as prey in almost all studies of free range and feral cats. They are rarely brought home by free-ranging cats and are likely more commonly killed than most owners realize.

SPECIES AT RISK

There are a number of species at risk that are impacted by cat predation, including the Sharp-tailed Snake in BC and the Woodland Vole in Quebec and Ontario. Both are small, land dwelling species found near urban and suburban areas and consequently very vulnerable to cat predation. Rare and threatened bird species plus species that nest or feed on the ground are prey for domestic and feral cats.

BIRDS IMPACTED BY CAT PREDATION:

- Common songbirds, such as the White-throated Sparrow, and American Robin and long-distance migrants such as Indigo Bunting and Yellow Warbler.
- Rare and Threatened species, such as the Yellow-breasted Chat, Barn Swallow and Wood Thrush
- Birds that nest or feed on the ground, such as the Killdeer.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT

Cats are prolific breeders, and can produce two to three litters per year of three to six kittens. The problem of cat fecundity is exacerbated by cat owners who let their cats roam free, fail to spay or neuter their pets, and abandon unwanted cats. When considering cat management, both domestic and feral cat populations need to be included –with different management strategies for each. Free-roaming owned cats interact and breed with feral cats, adding to the already serious overpopulation problem.

MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

There is no one stakeholder or group responsible for the managing domestic and feral cats– it is truly a multi-stakeholder issue that requires a combined effort to resolve. The Canadian Federation of Humane Societies identifies six stakeholder groups that are concerned with domestic cat care and management: municipalities, veterinarians, humane societies, animal rescue groups, spay and neuter groups, and feral cat support groups (2012). Nature Canada’s *Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives* campaign has coalesced many of the groups from both sides of the issue – cats and birds – in an multifaceted national Initiative to make measurable progress on this issue.

CAT IMPACTS ON HUMAN HEALTH

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) has noted that cat overpopulation, if ignored, could impact human health as well as native wildlife populations. The AAFP published a comprehensive review of zoonotic disease¹ carried by free-roaming cats that are vectors for serious diseases passed through direct contact or soil and water contaminated by cats (2003). Individuals most susceptible to zoonotic diseases include unborn children, the young, elderly and people with lowered immune systems.

Look what the cat brought in!



Roaming cats can bring home diseases that are picked up from other cats, wildlife that are caught and eaten, and from the soil. Fleas and ringworm are unpleasant but diseases such as feline leukemia are life threatening to your pet. Cat scratch disease, rabies and toxoplasmosis are examples of serious diseases and intestinal parasites which can be transferred from cats to humans.

¹ Zoonotic disease is a disease that can be passed between animals and humans. Zoonotic diseases can be caused by viruses, bacteria, parasites, and fungi.

STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES TO REDUCE CAT PREDATION

Most municipalities and regional districts in Canada have had dog control bylaws for years. Bylaws restrict dogs from freely roaming to protect domestic pets, wildlife, farm animals and humans from injury (BC SPCA, 2015). Historically, cats have been allowed to roam freely because of an attitude that cats are independent and need to roam. However, with the increasing domestic and feral cat populations, it is time to consider a different approach.

A multi-pronged approach which includes public education about responsible pet ownership; the enactment of local government bylaws to protect birds and other wildlife and reinforce responsible pet practices; and increased municipal support to humane shelters and societies will help address the cat overpopulation crisis and its impact on birds and wildlife.

Following are various actions, called Stewardship Practices, which can help reduce the impact of cat predation on bird and wildlife populations. It must be kept in mind that limiting the impacts of feral and free-roaming domestic cats requires different strategies.

EDUCATE PET OWNERS

Local governments have jurisdiction to implement a number of mechanisms to control cats, *but none are likely to be effective or politically possible in the absence of public education efforts*. Public attitudes towards control measures typically vary with pet ownership. Non-cat owners are more likely to recognize that cats may pose a threat to wildlife in urban and suburban areas and are more likely to favour control of cat movement. Finding and working with cat owners who do support strict controls, however, can be very effective in educating others and increasing public acceptance of these measures. Other potential partners include animal shelters, local veterinarians, and nature clubs.

Tips for Happy Indoor Cats

- Provide window spots so your cat can look outdoors and watch wildlife.
- Cats love to perch up high. Install a cat post or shelves to give your cat "a bird's eye view."
- Clean litter boxes regularly.
- Spay or neuter your cat at 4-6 months.
- Play with your cat and encourage their urge to chase and pounce with toys and laser pointers.
- Provide a carpeted scratch post.
- Take your cat to the vet for annual check-ups and vaccinations.
- Provide access to the outdoors with a screened porch or an enclosed outdoor run.
- If trained when young, cats enjoy walking with a leash and harness.



Key points for pet owners

KEEP DOMESTIC CATS INDOORS OR ON LEASHES

Pet owners can provide their pets with longer lives and better health and prevent the deaths of many birds and mammals by keeping the pet indoors or on a leash or in an enclosure outside. This is the single most effective stewardship practice to limit the impact of cat predation on wildlife and species at risk.

STERILIZE CATS

Cats can breed at just 4 to 6 months of age and can produce two litters annually. With about 8.5 million pet cats in Canada, allowing pets to breed is unnecessary and contributes to the problem of cat predation on vulnerable wildlife. Neutered animals also range over smaller areas.

KEEP CATS AWAY FROM NESTS AND FEEDERS

You can keep cats out of bird habitat by fencing the area to exclude all cats. If cats do have access to bird feeding areas for example, place feeders on high poles away from areas where cats have cover to stalk. Avoid providing bird seed on the ground as much as possible. For more ideas on deterrents visit the following website <http://catsandbirds.ca/research/cat-proofing-your-garden/>

ADOPT POLICIES AND BYLAWS TO REDUCE IMPACTS OF CATS ON BIRDS AND WILDLIFE

Bylaws and policies evolve to reflect the values and needs of communities. Bylaws for animal control often only stipulate regulations for dogs. Newer bylaws titled “Responsible Pet” or “Companion Animal”

bylaws reflect a concern for general animal welfare as well as public safety. Recognizing the impact of human activities on birds and other wildlife, local governments have the opportunity modify or enact bylaws to protect birds and other small wildlife within their jurisdictions.

Domestic free-roaming cats and feral cats have been shown to have a significant negative effect on local wildlife and bird populations. Nature Canada recommends the adoption of bylaws and policies to address cat predation of sensitive species. The recommended bylaws would also mitigate the current feline overpopulation problem which requires ever increasing resources of animal welfare organizations and animal control agencies.

Municipalities in Canada can require that cats be licensed, neutered and/or vaccinated with permits for exceptions such as licensed breeders or animals too old or medically unfit to be neutered safely. Microchips or tags can be used to positively identify animals, reducing the number of lost pets that are sent to shelters or euthanized. A licensing program can also be used to limiting the number of cats per household and to allow the return of lost pets to owners.

SEE ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENT: RECOMMENDED LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND BYLAWS TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF CATS ON BIRDS AND WILDLIFE FOR FURTHER DETAILS.

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WEB RESOURCES

Cats and Birds <http://catsandbirds.ca/>

Nature Canada invites Canadians to consider what they can do to make Canada a safer place for both cats and birds. See tips on caring for cats, research on cat and wildlife issues, information for municipalities, and ideas on how to take action. Cat owners can “Take the pledge” to keep cats safe and save bird lives.

Stewardship Centre for BC <http://www.stewardshipcentrebc.ca>

SCBC has produced a series of documents encouraging individuals, communities and local governments to adopt practices that can reduce the impact of cats on birds and wildlife. “The Happy Cat” brochure offers tips on responsible pet ownership.

American Bird Conservancy <http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/index.html>

Information and educational resources on cat predation and how to transform outdoor cats into contented indoor cats. ABC has public educational brochures which are available to order.

Cornell Lab of Ornithology <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/Page.aspx?pid=2656>

“View from Sapsucker Woods”, an excellent short essay on the impacts of cats on bird populations.

BC SPCA <http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/animal-issues/professional-resources/model-bylaw.html>

Recommended local government bylaws for all animals.

Rithets Bog Conservation Society <http://www.rithetsbog.org/>

Videos of domestic cat predation on songbirds in a Victoria Conservation Area

Cat Bib Information <http://catgoods.com/>