

# Survey of perceptions of veterinarians on cat management strategies to reduce cat overpopulation and impacts on wildlife

## INTRODUCTION

Roaming cats present a challenge for feline welfare advocates and conservationists. In Canada, there are an estimated 1.4 to 4.2 million feral cats and 3.5 million roaming pet cats.<sup>1</sup> Feral cats and pets permitted to roam kill an estimated 100 to 350 million birds each year in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

Wildlife populations are affected by a myriad of factors but preventing cat overpopulation and predation not only helps reduce wildlife mortality, it also promotes improved health and welfare for cats. Outdoor cats can suffer from trauma, disease, and lack reliable sources of food, water, shelter and medical care.



**Veterinary professionals** are key partners in addressing this issue. Partners in Flight BC sent an online questionnaire to the College of Veterinarians of British Columbia. We have summarized the results from 389 survey<sup>2</sup> participants below.

## Veterinarian perceptions of cat overpopulation and management

**56%** agreed that cat overpopulation was a problem in their community.

**91%** agreed that they play a role in helping to reduce stray and feral cat populations.

**70%** reported that they performed early-age sterilization upon request.

**88%** are involved in, or support the principle of, low-cost spay-neuter services.

**54%** always provide permanent identification, 38% by request.

Outdoor roaming cats pose a risk to birds and other wildlife.



## Approaches to reducing cats' impact on wildlife

The top five approaches respondents considered most effective at reducing cat impacts on wildlife were:

- 1 Keeping cats indoors
- 2 Public education by municipalities and humane groups
- 3 Outdoor enclosures for cats
- 4 Education of cat owners by veterinarians
- 5 Low-cost spay/neuter programs



### Practices with clients

**Almost 80%** of BC veterinarians in this survey recommend an indoor lifestyle for owned cats, most commonly to avoid the health hazards associated with unsupervised outdoor access.

## Veterinarian contributions to reducing stray and feral populations

Our survey results suggest veterinarians are committed to alleviating cat overpopulation by providing surgical sterilization services, counseling owners on responsible pet ownership, and by providing leadership on welfare issues.

However, cat overpopulation is a large-scale problem, and veterinarians cannot solve it alone. Efforts need to be accompanied by effective education campaigns and funding initiatives from humane societies and municipalities to increase adoption of sterilization, permanent identification, and preventing unsupervised outdoor access.



### Veterinarians and Veterinary Technicians are a trusted source of information

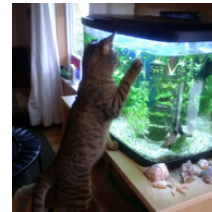
By advocating for a responsible pet ownership model that includes health and reproductive management and excludes unsupervised roaming, veterinarians and veterinary technicians can improve feline welfare, reduce public health risks and contribute to wildlife conservation.

The roaming cat issue is an opportunity to apply the One Health Approach, using interdisciplinary collaboration to achieve an outcome that improves animal health, conservation and public health.

- Discussing an indoor life for cats is particularly effective when clients acquire a new cat, when they recover a lost cat, or when their cat is injured outdoors.
- Responsible pet ownership practices include indoor feline enrichment strategies to provide adequate stimulation and exercise to prevent obesity and behaviour problems.
- Encouraging early-age sterilization and promoting its safety and benefits, is key.
- Providing tips and resources will help improve the client's confidence in their ability to transition their cat to life without roaming.
- For clients whose cats are not suited to a completely indoor life, veterinarians and veterinary technicians can recommend safe outdoor options such as harness training and leash-walking or outdoor enclosures.
- Veterinarians and veterinary technicians can help clients understand the risks to cats and and the detrimental effects of outdoor roaming cats on wildlife.



Cats and Crows, Astrid Mills



[www.catsandbirds.ca/resources/](http://www.catsandbirds.ca/resources/)

[www.cathealthy.ca](http://www.cathealthy.ca)

[www.adventurecats.org](http://www.adventurecats.org)

[www.indoorpet.osu.edu](http://www.indoorpet.osu.edu)

[www.catssafeathome.org](http://www.catssafeathome.org)

[www.stewardshipcentrebc.ca/cats-and-birds/](http://www.stewardshipcentrebc.ca/cats-and-birds/)



#### References:

1. Blancher, P. 2013. Estimated number of birds killed by house cats (*Felis catus*) in Canada. *Avian Cons. Ecol.*: 8 (3). <http://www.ace-eco.org/vol8/iss2/art3/>

2. Sherwood, L. J. et al. 2019. Perceptions of veterinarians in British Columbia of cat management strategies to reduce cat overpopulation and impacts on wildlife populations, *Anthrozoos*: 32(5). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08927936.2019.1579473>