



The Nature of Bath

By Gregory A. Smith

I was recently sitting in my Field Station office watching a neighborhood cat pounce around on a downed log, presumably chasing something. Events such as this take place every day, with the cat often walking away with a snack or at least a plaything.

“Who cares?” you might ask. “What’s one fewer mouse anyway?”

There are many reasons to care, and if you are a cat owner, there are ways you can help prevent such unnatural predator-prey interactions.

Before I continue, let me state I’m not a “cat hater” or a “dog person.” We have two cats in our house, which remain indoors at all times or are supervised for brief excursions outside. You might also wonder why this article does not discuss dogs. Granted, unsupervised domestic dogs can pose problems for human health and safety; however, the impact of dogs on native plants and animals pales in comparison to the impact of cats.

Feral and free-ranging domestic cats are exotic (non-native) species to North America. Cats were domesticated around 2000 BC and arrived in North America with the first settlers. Today, there are as many as 90 million pet cats in the U.S. – less than half of which are kept exclusively indoors – and untold numbers of the feral variety. Cats are top predators, killers of the highest order, even more specialized for predation than dogs. We may feed them in a bowl, but cats will practice their evolutionary skills at any given opportunity.

I am sure it is hard for some of you to believe that the little bundle of fur curled up in your lap would ever harm another living creature, but that is the “nature of the beast.” This attitude has led to several myths: a well-fed cat won’t hunt; a

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Look What the Cat Dragged In

cat without claws can’t kill; domestic cats are too lazy to hunt; a collar bell alerts potential prey – all false, by the way.

So how much damage can cats do?

Although they usually prefer small mammals, cats will prey on birds, reptiles, amphibians and even insects.

In a survey of 100 San Diego residents living in a 50-acre residential neighborhood, cat owners reported their combined 35 cats killed 840 rodents, 525 birds and 595 lizards in one year. And, this was in an area of less than 1 square mile!

A study in Wisconsin estimated that feral and free-ranging cats may kill as many as 39 million birds annually



Photo: Kevin and Jay McGowan

throughout the state. Nationwide, cats may kill more than 1 billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds each year.

Domestic cats are major competitors
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with native predators and often occur at much higher densities than their wild cousins. They are removing a substantial portion of the prey base that supports native species. Additionally, there is the potential transmission of novel diseases from exotic cats to native close relatives. This adds one more stressor on wild animals already struggling to survive in the face of habitat loss, pollution and other human impacts.

For all these reasons, cats are on the "100 of the World's Worst Invasive Species" list published by The World

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Conservation Union.

So what can be done?

The first step is to control the housecat population, and the best way to do this is to keep cats indoors! The American Bird Conservancy has promoted the "Cats Indoors!" campaign since 1997, a program to educate citizens on the benefits to native wildlife, and the cats themselves, of keeping cats inside (see <http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/>).

More difficult is the issue of what to do with burgeoning feral cat populations. The most popular solution, mainly because it is publicly accepted not because it works, is capture-neuter/spay-release programs in which the wild cats are caught, sterilized and released. The belief is that over time, the feral cat population will begin to decline as reproductive rates decrease and old animals die. The problem is that these are not closed populations. Immigrants are constantly

entering the system every time a pet escapes and doesn't return or someone drives their cat out into the country and releases it. It is probably mathematically impossible to sterilize enough animals to keep up with the new recruits.


A confounding factor is that although the released individuals will no longer reproduce, they still eat. This fact has caused a number of professional and environmental groups to call for capture-euthanize programs. The Wildlife Society, the largest professional organization for wildlife managers and researchers, "...strongly supports and encourages the humane elimination of feral cat colonies." These programs have met with stiff resistance from the general public, but most professional biologists believe such measures have the best chance of reducing native wildlife kills. However, such efforts are expensive and require commitments from governments and citizens if they are to have any chance of even limited success.

Regardless of your opinion about cats, this certainly sheds some light on the damage caused by non-native animals. Invasive species are one of the biggest threats behind the global biodiversity crisis, and we must be proactive in our conservation strategies.

Cats are not evil, just a further reminder of the large role humans have played in the degradation of our natural world, and the large role we can play in making it right. So remember, get outdoors, take a walk and experience the beauty of nature! Just leave your cats at home.

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