

Tucson Audubon on Domestic and Feral Cats

February 2008

Background

Domestic cats (*Felis catus*) were brought into North America by humans. They are domesticated descendants of wild cats of northern Africa. Cats that escape to the wild at an early age or that are born of wild cats are unsocialized and are referred to as feral cats. Stray cats are house cats that can be caught and resocialized. Free-ranging house cats are those that live with people but that are allowed to go outside.

Cats that spend time outdoors, whether feral or socialized, kill hundreds of millions of birds and other small wildlife each year, including endangered species. They do this even if they are well fed, wear bells, and are declawed. This has been documented in many areas, and a small study in the Tucson area shows similar results. According to the Arizona Game and Fish Department, a University of Arizona study of five suburban house cats found they killed a total of 113 animals in just 12-15 weeks. The bird species they killed included not only common suburban birds but also Gambel's Quail, Inca Dove, Black-throated Sparrow, Lark Bunting, and Gila Woodpecker. Cats are documented to have killed a Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. For information on feral and free-ranging cats in Arizona, see the Arizona Game and Fish Department brochure at www.azgfd.gov/pdfs/w_c/abci/KeepingCatsIndoors.pdf.

The lives of outdoor cats are generally difficult and much shorter than indoor cats. They are killed by diseases, cars, poisons and predators such as coyotes.

It is the view of the Conservation Committee of Tucson Audubon that we need to address the deleterious effect of cats on wildlife in our region. The two main approaches have been government registration and control of cats (similar to how dogs are regulated) and the trap-neuter-release (TNR) strategy. Tucson Audubon understands there are well-reasoned arguments on both sides. Advocates of TNR suggest it is more humane to maintain and feed colonies of spayed and neutered feral cats than to capture them. They argue that these cats live out their lives without reproducing, and can be protected from disease by inoculations at the time they are spayed or neutered.

Tucson Audubon believes the bulk of the evidence suggests that TNR is less effective at mitigating the effects of predation on already stressed native wildlife populations and diversity than municipal control efforts. While we do not argue with trapping and neutering, we do not believe that releasing cats into free-ranging colonies and feeding them is a responsible way to steward our environment. In addition, feeding wildlife, feral cats included, is not legal in Arizona. Managed colonies attract new feral cats that may reproduce before they are neutered or spayed. Managed colonies often do not decrease in size as hoped. And while cats in managed colonies may be protected from hunger and disease, they are not protected from predators, parasites, poisons and being hit by cars.

General Recommendations that Tucson Audubon can promote

Support the American Bird Conservancy's *Cats Indoors!* campaign:

www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/.

Keep cats indoors. To allow cats time outdoors, walk them on a harness and leash, or create an outdoor enclosure. Encourage others to keep cats indoors. Domestic cats that are accustomed to going outdoors can be converted into indoor-only cats. There are many ways to keep indoor cats active and occupied; see the Arizona Game and Fish Department pamphlet at www.azgfd.gov/pdfs/w_c/abci/KeepingCatsIndoors.pdf.

Keep your cat healthy, inoculated from disease, and tagged or microchipped.

Spay or neuter your cat before it can reproduce. If you feel you want more cats in the future, consider adopting them from a shelter rather than allowing your cat to breed.

Do not feed stray or feral cats. Do not abandon a cat you cannot care for. Find it a home or take it to a shelter. For the shelter nearest you, see the directory at www.aspca.org (click on “Adopt”).

Support shelters that treat cats humanely and that make every effort to find non-outdoor homes for them.

Conduct an American Bird Conservancy “Cats Indoors!” campaign in your community, conduct a media campaign, or print an article or PSA in your organization’s newsletter. More information and free materials are available at www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/.

Support efforts of public land managers to humanely trap and remove cats from habitat managed for wildlife.

Work for local cat ordinances that prohibit cats from roaming off their owner’s property. Encourage municipalities to adopt other measures to reduce predator activity, including bans on feeding feral cats and prohibition of TNR programs.

Where existing TNR managed cat colonies are threatening local wildlife populations, work with cat advocates to develop a plan and a timetable for permanent removal of those cats.

Specific Recommended Actions for Tucson Audubon

1. Promote the American Bird Conservancy’s two sets of recommendations upon which the above was based: *Recommendations for Resource Managers* and *Recommendations for Conservationists* that appear in the American Bird Conservancy’s Report “The impact of feral and free-ranging cats on bird species of conservation concern.” Available at <http://www.abcbirds.org/newsandreports/NFWF.pdf>
2. Implement the recommendations contained in that report.
3. Initiate work with the University of Arizona to collect information on the effects of cats on wildlife populations in southern Arizona.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESOURCE MANAGERS

Federal and state wildlife biologists provide the first line of defense in protecting rare birds from predators, including cats. However, their ability to protect rare birds is often hampered by inadequate funding and unwillingness by some staff to deal with potentially controversial issues such as predator control. The following recommendations may be helpful to resource managers.

- Identify predator threats at specific sites, including the use of nighttime monitoring.
- Increase efforts to trap and remove predators or undertake additional predator management where warranted.
- Increase predator removal measures where enclosures and/or electric fence are not effective or feasible.
- Conduct public outreach efforts to reduce detrimental human activities near nesting birds, including the distribution of informational brochures,

such as ABC's "Keeping Cats Indoors Isn't Just For The Birds," placement of interpretive signs at nesting sites, informal on-site contact with the public, formal group presentations, and staffing of informational booths at local events and festivals.

- Coordinate management efforts, such as predator removal, with municipalities and other landowners.
- Encourage municipalities to adopt ordinances or other measures to help reduce predator activity, including bans on feeding of domestic or wild animals, and a prohibition of TNR programs.
- If managed cat colonies are threatening local wildlife populations, work with cat advocates to develop a plan and a timetable for permanent removal of those cats.
- Conduct research on developing more effective predator control measures.
- Increase state and federal funding requests for predator management.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSERVATIONISTS

Conservation groups and individuals have an important role to play in helping to educate the public on responsible pet ownership and in generating support for predator management projects. Here are some tips that can help protect birds from free-roaming cats in your community.

- Keep your own cats indoors, and walk it outside on a harness and leash, or in an outdoor enclosure. Encourage others to keep their cats indoors.
- Spay or neuter your cat at an early age before it can reproduce.
- Do not feed stray cats and never abandon a cat you can no longer care for. Instead, find a good home for your cat or take it to an animal shelter or humane society. For a shelter nearest you, see the National Shelter Directory at <http://www.aspc.org>.
- Work for passage of local cat ordinances that prohibit cats from roaming off their owner's property.
- Conduct a *Cats Indoors!* campaign in your community. For free downloadable materials and more information, see <http://www.abcbirds.org/cats>.

- Support efforts of public land managers to humanely trap and remove cats from habitat managed for wildlife.
- Conduct a media campaign in your community using print and radio Public Service Announcements (PSAs) found at <http://www.abcbirds.org/cats>.
- Sponsor a children's poster competition for National Keep Your Cat Indoors Day, held on the second Saturday in May. For more information see <http://www.abcbirds.org/cats/NKYCID.htm>.
- Print an article or PSA in your organization's newsletter.
- Ask your state wildlife agency to print an article in their magazine and/or produce a Web page on the issue for their Web site.
- Ask your state wildlife agency to adopt the *Cats Indoors!* campaign and distribute brochures and other materials to the public through their visitor centers, educational programs, and displays.