



WILDLIFE AND CATS

DOMESTIC CATS AND WILDLIFE HEALTH: A QUESTION OF ANIMAL WELFARE

THE ISSUE

In North America, many households allow their domestic cats to go outdoors without supervision. This practice, which may seem trivial, has a considerable impact on wildlife biodiversity, as well as on the well-being of cats. Indeed, after habitat loss, predation by cats is identified as the main cause of bird mortality related to human activities. It is estimated that in Canada cats kill between 100 and 350 million birds per year, in addition to a large number of small mammals, reptiles and amphibians!

In addition to companion cats with owners, it is estimated that there are between 1.4 and 4.2 million stray cats in Canada. Through their predatory activities, these abandoned cats have a considerable impact on wildlife. It is also important to understand that the life of stray cats is not easy. In fact, for a cat, the outside world is associated with significant risks of trauma (by collision with road vehicles, predation by wildlife or interactions between cats), illnesses and risk of being lost. In fact, the life expectancy of an unsupervised outdoor cat is 2 to 5 years compared to 10 to 20 years for an indoor cat with supervised outdoor access. Cats supervised during their outdoor activities have a longer and healthier life.

By predation on rodents and birds, unsupervised outdoor cats can also participate in the transmission of diseases that can affect wild animals and people, such as salmonellosis and toxoplasmosis.

Therefore, the presence of unsupervised outdoors companion cats and stray cats is a welfare concern for wildlife, but also for the cats themselves.

SOLUTIONS

CATS OUTSIDE: UNDER SUPERVISION ONLY

The solution to this wildlife health problem remains relatively straightforward. First, we should only take our pets (including dogs and cats) outside under supervision. By doing this, we will protect them from injuries and diseases, while minimizing the risk of predation and disturbance to wildlife. On the other hand, it has to be remembered that it is essential to enrich the interior living environment of our feline companion. For example, play accessories, such as scratching posts, access to a window and interactive play sessions should be provided to the cats. Food (kibbles) should also be hidden to favour search behaviour. An outdoor enclosure, known as “catios”, can also be a very good addition to a simulating environment for a cat. Note that since they only reduce the risk of predation by less than 50%, bell collars and coloured collars are not sufficiently efficient to be an alternative to direct supervision.



WILDLIFE AND CATS

DOMESTIC CATS AND WILDLIFE HEALTH: A QUESTION OF ANIMAL WELFARE

CONTROL OF STRAY CAT COLONIES

Stray cat colonies are a significant concern for the welfare of cats and wildlife. In order to avoid abandonment of cats and overpopulation, it is recommended to sterilize cats at a young age, before their first heat cycle. In addition, stray cats should be captured so they can be adopted when possible, or kept in managed indoor sanctuaries. For humane reasons stray cats in poor health should be treated or euthanized. In recent years, trap, neuter and release programs and stray cat colonies support have been proposed as a solution to the problems of free-roaming cats. According to the scientific literature on this topic, these programs as such do not appear to be a durable solution to the problems of abandoned cats which have a significant impact on biodiversity and the well-being of wildlife. Therefore, in a wildlife health perspective, the maintenance and nutritional support of these colonies are not recommended. We must also add that even with some external support, stray cats from these colonies are often in a sub-optimal health, which also represents a welfare issue.

Bird populations face several other threats that contribute to their declines, such as habitat loss, urban development, climate change and exposure to pesticides. The issue of predation by cats is an important problem for several avian species and remains, in relation to other complex environmental concerns, easy to alleviate. Let's live in harmony with wildlife: let's keep our cats healthy under supervision, save birds and save cats!

SUGGESTED READING

Blancher, P. (2013). Estimated number of birds killed by house cats (*Felis catus*) in Canada. *Avian Conservation and Ecology*, 8(2), 3.

Longcore, T., Rich, C., & Sullivan, L. M. (2009). Critical assessment of claims regarding management of feral cats by trap-neuter-return. *Conservation Biology*, 23(4), 887–894.

Cats and Birds – Nature Canada (<https://catsandbirds.ca/>)

Cats Safe at Home (<https://www.catssafeathome.org/>)

Stewardship Center BC (<http://stewardshipcentrebc.ca/cats-and-birds/>)