

Feral cats are NOT wildlife in need of support

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Wild birds and free-ranging cats are not a good mix. As a Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary manager, you most likely keep your cat confined and talk to cat-owning neighbors about doing the same.

But what about homeless cats? “Feral” cats, which are usually strays that are untamed or wild, are estimated to range from 60 to 100 million throughout the United States. They are NOT wildlife. Feral cats are non-native predators that can, and have, seriously damaged wild bird and other wildlife populations.

While domestic cats are solitary animals, colonies of feral cats often form around food sources like bird feeding stations, garbage dumps, or places where people deliberately leave food for them. In fact, many colonies of feral cats are supported by well-meaning, but misinformed, advocates of what’s become known as “TNR” management: Trap, Neuter, Release.

This wrong solution to a tragic problem works this way: Feral cats are trapped and taken to a clinic or veterinarian for disease testing. Those that are seriously ill or test positive for contagious diseases are usually euthanized, otherwise they are simply spayed or neutered. Then the feral cats are released back to where they were trapped and where they are supplied with food and water daily.

The theory behind TNR programs, which are funded by both private and public entities across the country, is eventual reduction of feral cat colonies. But sadly, such claims are not substantiated. Cat colonies often serve as dumping grounds for other unwanted cats. The food provided usually attracts more cats. Contrary to TNR proponent beliefs, colony cats do NOT keep other cats from joining the colony. As time goes on, some colony cats become too wary to be caught, so rarely are all spayed or neutered. With females capable of producing up to three litters of four to six kittens each every year, it doesn’t take long to grow a feral cat colony.

Well-fed cats, either feral or domestic, are “super-predators” of birds and other wildlife. The need to eat and the instinct to hunt can and do function separately. Any cat owner can attest to this fact with stories of “gift birds” laid at their feet by feline companions.

There is extensive documentation that free-roaming cats are prolific and efficient predators, even if, and especially when, they are regularly fed. Almost one-fifth of all injured wildlife brought to Washington’s wildlife rehabilitators across the state was harmed by cats.

Some TNR advocates believe that feral cat colonies are “wildlife” themselves. Some groups have even fought for (and so far lost) accommodations for feral cats on wildlife refuges and other public lands.

In addition to their threats to wildlife, feral cat colonies pose human health risks. Even TNR-managed colonies can spread disease such as ringworm, toxoplasmosis, cat scratch fever, and rabies, since every cat is not captured regularly for health care. Feeding stations attract raccoons and skunks, the two most common wildlife carriers of rabies, along with the cats, which are the most commonly reported rabid domestic animal.

Free-roaming cats of any kind are their own worst enemy, too. They usually have short, miserable lives, due to collisions with motor vehicles, attacks by other domestic and wild animals, accidental poisoning or trapping, and parasites and diseases.

The Humane Society of the United States reports that the expected life span of an indoor cat is at least triple that of cats that spend their lives outdoors.

TNR management of feral cats is clearly not in the best interests of anyone, and it often overwhelms the ability of well-meaning people who genuinely want to help animals. It also undermines efforts of responsible pet owners who keep their cats indoors.

The National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, American Bird Conservancy, American Ornithologists' Union, and Cooper Ornithological Society oppose TNR practices. In addition, the Humane Society of the United States, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, and American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals have expressed concerns about this practice.

So what should be done to protect wildlife and treat all animals humanely? First and foremost, spay or neuter your own cats and help promote community wide spay/neuter information campaigns and low or no-cost spay/neuter clinics. The fewer kittens produced and possibly abandoned, the smaller feral cat colonies will be.

Second, keep your cat indoors. Spread the word to other cat owners that indoor cats live longer lives and avoid harassing wildlife. Un-spayed or non-neutered cats kept indoors also won't add to the feral cat population explosion.

Help inform and educate others that practicing TNR is not the solution for feral cat management. Initiate or support local ordinances that prohibit cat abandonment and feral cat feeding. Humanely trap and remove feral cats, especially in public areas that provide habitat for wildlife, and take them to an animal shelter for possible adoption or humane euthanasia.

For more information contact the American Bird Conservancy's "Cats Indoors! The Campaign for Safer Birds and Cats" at 1834 Jefferson Place, NW, Washington, DC 20036 (www.abcbirds.org).