



Cats and wildlife - how you can protect both

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Where is your cat at the moment? Could it be attacking wildlife or crossing a road? Is it safe from dogs? Is it identified so it can be returned to you if it gets lost? The information in this Note will help you to better protect your cat and wildlife.

Background

Cats are present throughout Victoria, as domestic pets, free-living strays, or as truly feral animals. Estimates in all these categories suggest that there are well over one million cats in the State.

Cats are obligate carnivores, that is, they must feed on animal protein. Each cat requires a minimum of 100-150g of protein each day, more if a female is nursing a litter. This means that an equivalent of at least seven small mammals, such as native Bush Rats, must be eaten each week by each cat.

Even cats that are well fed, apparently contented pets, will instinctively hunt and kill living creatures. An average of 32 wild animals may be killed by each pet cat every year. Each feral cat can kill many more. The potential impact on wildlife is enormous.

What impact do cats have on wildlife?

Cats are known to kill and eat more than 100 native Australian species of birds, 50 mammals, 50 reptiles, three frogs and numerous invertebrate animals. As more knowledge is obtained more animals continue to be added to the list.

Cats are a major threat to wildlife in the bush, where they are common and occur in most habitats, as well as in towns and cities. For example, in 1992, in response to a plague of native rats in south-west Queensland, where the endangered native Bilby survives, feral cat numbers were observed to be at high levels. The Australian Army was called in to assist with control and, to the amazement of wildlife managers, shot 417 cats in four days within 20 km of the Bilby site. Up to six cats were shot out of a single tree in one day! Of interest is that the high cat numbers were on a cattle station on which dingo control was rigorous. Neighbouring stations, with more dingos, had

less cats. Cats can survive on water from prey in areas where drinking water is unavailable.

In Australia, cats (and dogs) have no natural predators. The hunting methods of cats are different to native predators, such as quolls, and so native wildlife has few inbuilt defences against cats.

Cats are most active at night, and especially at dusk and dawn. This coincides with the activity periods of much of our Australian wildlife, placing native animals at risk.

Cats kill prey of up to their own body size; most of Australia's endangered and vulnerable mammals are in this size category.

Cats can significantly control bird populations. Studies in South Australia indicate that domestic cats probably kill the 'standing crop' of birds, (i.e. the same number are killed as are produced each year).

Cats are significant predators on small mammals. In 15 months one wildlife shelter in Melbourne received 272 native mammals with injuries that resulted from cat attacks; 242 of these were Common Ringtail Possums. Almost all died as a result of the attacks.

Cats have also been responsible for the death of at least 25% of all Sugar Gliders registered in the CNR Wildlife Management Section collection.

Cat's mouths can carry bacteria to which wildlife has little resistance, and wildlife that has been injured by cats usually dies - if not from injuries, then from infection.

Cats are the definitive host of the blood protozoan disease *Toxoplasmosis* which can affect wildlife, sheep and humans. It can cause unco-ordination, blindness, erratic movement and unnatural daytime activity. *Toxoplasmosis* is often fatal for infected wildlife. It can have effects on reproduction (the disease can cause abortion in sheep and humans). Endangered Eastern Barred Bandicoots are at threat not only through direct predation by cats but from infection with the disease. It probably predisposes affected bandicoots to predation by cats or dogs and to road trauma.

Research into the reintroduction of rare mammals onto mainland Australia has found that, when foxes are controlled, cat numbers increase, continuing the attack on native species. Similarly, because rabbit is a significant

part of feral cat diet in many (especially rural) areas, rabbit control without cat control may lead to increased predation on wildlife. Hence, an integrated pest animal control program is essential.

Cats also have an indirect impact on plant pollination by reducing numbers of native birds.

Although habitat alteration and hunting are also important factors, cats have been responsible for the extinction of over 30 species of birds around the world.

Cats have been the cause of decline and extinction of many bird species on a large number of islands including New Zealand, Macquarie Island, Socorro Island (Mexico), Ascension Island, the Kermadec group, Marion Island and many others. There are also records of mammals and reptiles being similarly affected - for example the endemic rodents of the Galapagos are now only found on islands without cats, and in Western Australia at least two species of now-endangered species of marsupial (Banded Hare-wallaby and Golden Bandicoot) have become extinct on the Monte Bello Islands due to cats.

Pet cats kill an average of 16 mammals, 8 birds and 8 reptiles every year. 900 000 pet cats by 32 wildlife each per year = 29 million wildlife.

Feral cats each need to eat the equivalent of seven native bush rats or ten native birds each week. 200 000 feral cats by 10 wildlife by 52 weeks = 104 million wildlife.

Stray cats in cities kill on average 5 wildlife each week. 300 000 cats by 5 wildlife by 52 weeks = 78 million wildlife.

GRAND TOTAL = 211 million wildlife killed by cats in Victoria each year!

On farms

Toxoplasmosis in sheep, spread by cat faeces, can result in abortions, stillborn lambs, and a reduced lambing percentage. It is the most common cause of infectious abortions in sheep flocks in south-eastern Australia. Cats also carry the stock disease *Sarcosporidiosis*. *Sarcocystis* infection can result in carcass condemnation at the abattoir. Cats spread these diseases by contaminating pasture, hay and other animal foods with the parasite via their faeces. They in turn are contaminated by eating rodents, birds and wildlife which contain cysts of the parasite. Farmers who wish to avoid the risk to livestock of *toxoplasmosis* should not let cats near their pastures.

Pet cats - what can I do to protect my cat and wildlife?

Clearly, there is a need to act to reduce the impact of cats on wildlife and a range of measures are available that can also lead to safer living conditions for pet cats.

It may seem like a major change to the way you have viewed the life and entitlements of your pet cat to consider placing restrictions on it. Improving the care of your cat by limiting its behaviour is comparable to placing

restrictions on children for their safety and to teach them to live alongside others.

The path to improved cat care can be direct or you may choose to improve control over time (see How else can I help protect wildlife?). You may choose not to replace your cat when it dies or to change to a breed more suited to confinement at this time.

Why keep your cat confined?

By keeping your cat confined to your property at all times, and indoors or in a special enclosure or cattery between dusk and dawn, you will protect your cat and Victoria's wildlife better. Confining your cat will ensure its safety and well-being.

Cats not kept at home can be killed or injured - on roads, in fights, through disease or by acts of cruelty. They can catch feline AIDS from stray or feral cats. Wandering cats may mate and produce unwanted litters and are easily stolen. Why expose your cat to these dangers?

Cats are wonderful companions - they are affectionate and intelligent and they enjoy your company. Yet, in Melbourne alone, over 45 000 cats end up in animal shelters each year. Few have identification and only 1% are reclaimed by their owners. Most are humanely euthanased.

Is it cruel to confine my cat?

No - because suburban and rural environments pose too many risks to allow pet cats complete freedom. The average life span of a cat kept inside is 12 years. That of a cat allowed to roam at will is just three years.

If you provide all their needs, desexed cats are happy to live in a suitable enclosed area. Cats don't have an 'innate' need to roam - they need exercise and play as well as around 19 hours of sleep each day.

Many cats become better pets and live long, healthy and contented lives inside a house or flat, often for 24 hours a day.

How can I confine my cat?

Keep it inside (especially at night). Train your cat by feeding it inside before dusk and not letting it out before dawn.

Build a cattery

There are a great many options. Free-standing or attached enclosures can be constructed. Alternatively, use can be made of existing structures such as the garage or an unused aviary. Commercial cat enclosures are available. The diagram (above) provides some suggestions. If you wish to observe a cattery before building, contact a *Land for Wildlife* extension officer, local veterinarian or other contacts listed in this Note to see if they can assist you.

What are my cat's needs when enclosed?

Overnight - food, water, a litter tray and a warm, dry, draught-free sleeping area.

For longer periods - facilities for exercise, climbing, several resting places at various heights, and shelter from wind, sun, rain, cold and hot weather. A scratching and climbing pole is a must - up to 2.5m tall, with 2-3 perches. Provide cat toys (available at good pet shops) and help your cat to exercise daily by encouraging it to play, run and jump. Install window perches for your cat to sunbathe on, or a cat-door for access to an enclosed area outside.

The RSPCA and Cat Protection Society can provide more advice on confining your cat.

Why should I desex my cat?

Desexing your cat is one way you can show you care for it and wildlife. There are numerous benefits including:

- A desexed pet is easier to own and care for. Desexed male and female animals are less stressed by reproductive or territorial demands and make better pets. Many people say a desexed pet is more pleasurable to own. Cats won't wander or fight as much and are less noisy and odorous if desexed.
- A desexed pet does not tend to have the occasional unwelcome habits of entire animals, such as urinating on the carpet in the corner of the lounge room.
- Desexing is better for your cat's health. Female cats can suffer physical and nutritional exhaustion if continually breeding.
- More desexed cats means fewer unwanted litters of kittens.
- Fewer strays also means more protection for humans, other companion animals, wildlife and the environment.

Uncontrolled breeding results in large numbers of unwanted cats joining the stray and feral populations. Most suffer through disease and injury, and many prey on native wildlife to survive.

Are some cat breeds better suited to indoors?

Yes. The good old moggie, and many other long and short-haired breeds, like the Russian Blue, are happy being indoors at all times.

The 'Selectapet' computer program (03-329 5438 or 008-33 1783) will help you choose the right cat, as can your local vet or an animal welfare agency.

What can be done about feral cats?

Cats that belong to someone are legally recognised as chattels. It is illegal to harm or damage another person's belongings under common law. Therefore, if you wish to take action against cats on your property that are presumed feral, you must advise your neighbours in advance of your

intention to control cats so that they can prevent their cat wandering onto your property. A means of permanently identifying cats would obviously help solve this problem of ownership (see page 4). Spotlight shooting or cage trapping, (followed by humane euthanasia by a veterinarian), are the main methods used to control feral cats. Pet food can be used as a bait in the cage trap. Research into baiting techniques is continuing. Cats can legally be controlled in areas designated under the *National Parks Act 1975*.

CNR undertakes target-specific control where there is an urgent problem (e.g. endangered species threatened). Because feral cats are continually being replenished by lost pets we need to effectively separate pet populations from unowned cats (by desexing and identification) to achieve control.

How else can I help protect wildlife?

Put bells on your cat's collar.

One bell is not enough. Put three large bells on the collar, two under the cat's chin and the other opposite. Bells do not stop cats killing wildlife - they only make a difference in one out of three attacks. Keeping your cat inside stops all cat attacks on wildlife.

Use a harness to walk your cat outside.

Training your cat to walk with a cat harness (dog leashes are not suitable) is fun, easy and rewarding for you and your cat.

Provide cat-free environments.

If your cat uses the backyard because you have a cat-proof fence around the property, provide cat-free environments by enclosing shrubs and trees with 'floppy wire' fences. This provides a safe haven for native wildlife and you'll find that lots of birds use the area, especially if you include nectar-producing plants and water.

Choose to not replace your cat when it dies.

This is a cheap option but has no effect in the short-term unless other control measures are adopted.

Spread the message about better care for cats and protection for wildlife.

Only increasing community awareness through education will change attitudes toward management of cats. You can play an important role by spreading the message and discussing the issues. Obtain free pamphlets or copies of this Note from major CNR offices.

Answers to other commonly-asked questions

Why put all this effort into cats when dogs, habitat destruction and foxes cause a greater impact?

Because cats DO kill millions of wild animals each year and contribute significantly to wildlife losses AND because this is a problem we can all do something about.

Aren't foxes more significant wildlife predators than cats?

Possibly. However, cat predation is a significant component of the overall toll on wildlife by introduced predators. When foxes are controlled feral cat numbers can build up and continue the damage caused by foxes. Action is also being taken against foxes (see LFW Note 24).

Haven't cat and native wildlife numbers reached a new equilibrium?

No. Overall, wildlife numbers and species diversity continue to decline, and cats are a significant contributor to this trend.

What native wildlife is most affected?

Small ground-nesting and feeding animals.

How can we protect all the wildlife that is active during the day?

Keep your cat confined during the day as well as at night.

I live 2km from the nearest patch of bush, so why do I have to confine or curfew my cat?

Wildlife is everywhere, and often those populations protected by parks and reserves depend on areas outside reserves for their future. Cats, especially males, can travel many kilometres if they are permitted to do so.

Are cats effective ratters and mousers?

No. Cats will kill some rats and mice (including native rodents) but are unlikely to eliminate these pests from an area. Rodents are a source of the disease *toxoplasmosis* (see page 1 and 2). Around the home and farm the presence of accessible food sources is a major attractant for pest rodents. Store grain in rodent-proof silos or cupboards, contain garbage and clean up any spills. Poisons, available in supermarkets, from Department of Agriculture offices and elsewhere, are an efficient short-term way of treating a localised rodent problem. Plagues of rodents are linked to environmental variables, not to the degree of cat predation.

Do cats control snakes?

No. Having a cat is no deterrent to snakes and cats can be killed by snakes. If you are concerned about snakes around your house you can reduce your chance of encountering a snake by making the local environment less attractive for them; remove piles of rubbish and other shelter, keep grass near the house short and locate garden ponds (which attract frogs, a favourite food of snakes) away from children's play areas. ALWAYS BE ALERT in areas where snakes may occur.

Isn't a cattery just another word for a cage or a jail?

No. A well-designed cattery will provide all your cat's needs and protect it from the many dangers of living outside.

Don't catteries cost an arm and a leg?

No. Catteries can be as expensive or cheap as your design imagination. Low-cost catteries can be made using chicken wire and stakes.

What diseases is my cat exposed to while roaming?

Feline Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Feline AIDS), *toxoplasmosis* and others.

What is Toxoplasmosis?

Toxoplasmosis is a disease caused by the protozoan blood parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. Cats are the definitive host, and intermediate hosts include many species of wildlife, and humans (see page 1). Affected cats do not show any visual external signs of the disease.

How adaptable are cats to being inside at night and at other times?

As adaptable as their owners. After a short adjustment period, cats are content to remain indoors. Often owners don't believe their cat will adjust happily and so do not proceed with training. Many cats become better pets and establish a new relationship with their owners when kept inside.

How often does a cat come 'in season'?

Cats may come into season six or eight times a year depending on whether they mate or fall pregnant. There is usually a short break in the breeding cycle in winter.

What is desexing?

Desexing is the surgical removal of a female animal's ovaries or a male animal's testicles. This results in permanent sterility for the animal. A desexed cat cannot reproduce.

Isn't it cruel to have a cat desexed?

No. It is cruel to subject your cat to unnecessary health problems associated with pregnancy. An entire cat kept inside will suffer frustration and may become neurotic. It is cruel not to desex your cat.

How much does desexing cost?

Costs vary and increase as pets get older and/or fatter. Rates for vets in private practice are about: male cat \$40, female cat \$80. The RSPCA, through its immature animal desexing clinic, offers professional desexing at lower rates. For more information, call the RSPCA on (03) 808 5111. Enquire about the Dog and Cat Desexing Voucher Schemes offered by the Australian Veterinary Association.

Who can desex animals? When is the best time to desex an animal?

Desexing is a surgical procedure performed by a registered veterinary surgeon. Females are best desexed at age 5 - 6 months and males age 6-8 months.

Will my pet cat get fat if it is desexed?

Not necessarily. A desexed animal will only get fat if it is fed too much and not given enough exercise. The calorie intake requirements of cats are lowered by desexing so do not over-feed your cat.

Shouldn't I allow my cat to have a litter before desexing it?

Desexing should be performed before full maturity is attained. Having a litter neither adds to, nor detracts from, a male or female cat's personality.

Why do we need registration as well as identification?

Registration will help you find your cat and others to return it if it gets lost. It also provides a way to offer incentives for owners to desex their animals by way of differential registration fees. Identification is necessary so that we can separate owned and unowned cats for control.

How can registered animals be identified?

By microchip implant, or tattoo and collar and tag. The microchip provides registration details and collar and tag allows for visual identification.

What if I no longer want to keep my cat?

If owners find they are no longer able to keep their cat, they should seek to rehouse it themselves, or take it to an animal shelter for rehousing or humane euthanasia.

*Contacts*

Cat Protection Society (03) 434 7155, Lort Smith Animal Hospital (03) 328 3021, Lost Dogs Home and Western Suburbs Cat Shelter (03) 329 2755, RSPCA (03) 808 5111, local veterinarians and councils.

References and further reading.

A detailed list of references is contained in 'The Cat Kit' - available to inspect at some CNR offices.

This Note was produced from material and comments supplied by the Cat Working Group, CNR.

1. 1. Build a cattery
A-frame catteries provide for climbing and sunbathing at height.
Adapt an aviary for your cat (available commercially) Connect to the house via a walkway from a window or a cat-door in the wall
2. Keep your cat inside with you
Then it can enjoy your company all the time!
3. Enclose a section of your home
Enclose a verandah with chicken wire or flywire
Enclose the 'dead end' section of your garden between your house and the fence
Provide cat access via a window or cat-door.
4. Use the garage for overnight confinement,
5. Use a low-cost enclosure or enclosure
Build a 'floppy wire' fence from small gauge chicken wire and angle it in slightly to the centre to enclose a section of your backyard on a temporary or permanent basis. Provide all your cat's requirements inside.
Build it in reverse i.e. angle the wire outwards to keep cats out of your safe haven for wildlife.
6. Build a cat-proof boundary fence
Attach either small gauge chicken wire or aluminium flashing to the top of an existing fence and angle it into your property, or
Attach 'floppy' chicken wire to the top of your fence.
Remember to secure any trees which may overhang the fence by either enclosing them with wire or erecting a 'cat barrier' at a suitable height up the tree.

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