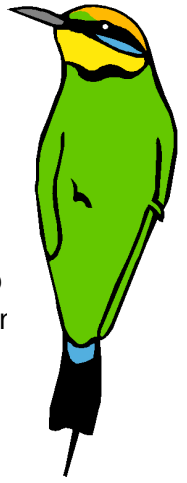


GARDEN FOR WILDLIFE

Cat: companion or killer?



It's a well-worn topic: Cats, gardens, native wildlife. However there is no clear-cut divide: being a cat-owner and native wildlife enthusiast are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to recognise the joys of companionship cats can provide, as well as the damage they inflict on native wildlife.

A study published in 2007 found that the domestication of cats occurred much earlier than originally thought. Combining the fields of genetics and archaeology, scientists have found that cat domestication occurred near the beginning of human civilization, long before many previous estimates. Earlier theories speculated that Egyptians were responsible for cat domestication 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, based on the animal's appearance in art and tombs from the era.

Cats were first domesticated in the Near East, some 12,000 years ago. This is when the first agricultural societies began to flourish in the Middle East's Fertile Crescent.

Humans began to settle, till the earth and store surplus grain. Wild cats moved in, seeking the supply of regular prey in storehouses. Cats provided two things to early farmers: companionship and the ability to dispatch rodents that were attacking grain stores

Within Australia, wild cats had been around for hundreds of years before Captain Cook arrived. They may have arrived with Dutch shipwrecks in the 17th century. By the 1850s, feral cat colonies had become established in the wild. Intentional releases were made in the late 1800s in the hope that cats would control rabbits, rats and mice.

It is now believed that Australia is home to around 5 million feral cats, and 3 million domestic cats.

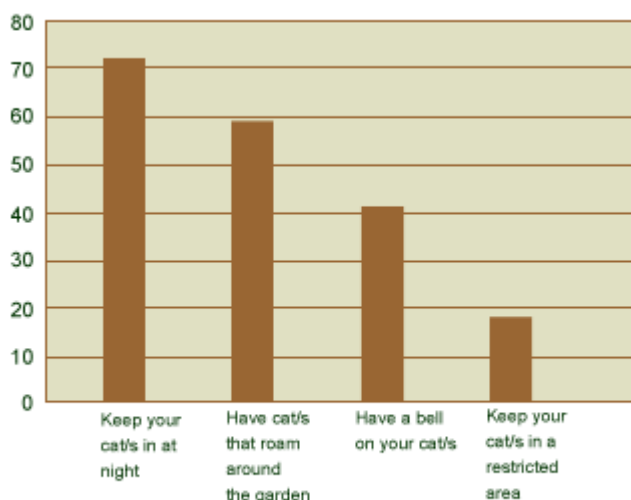
There are strong opinions on both sides of the cat adore/abhor divide: those of defenders of the cats, and vocal cat haters. There are abundant internet sites devoted to debunking the 'wrongful vilification' of cats. In contrast, John Walmsley of Earth Sanctuaries, attempting to draw attention to the problem of feral cats in Australia, once famously wore a hat made of skinned cats to the Adelaide tourism awards and declared *"Do your bit for the environment. Go home and hat your cat tonight."*

This division has occurred throughout history, with cats being alternatively worshipped and hated. From being deified to being branded as familiars of witches and instruments of the devil, it is inevitable that these differences in opinion will remain.

Cats will inevitably prey on native wildlife. Even well-fed domestic cats will prey on and kill native wildlife because of their natural hunting instincts. Domestic cats kill an average of 19 mammals, 8 birds and 8 reptiles per year. Most cat owners who allow their cats to roam outdoors will attest to finding a chewed up lizard or bird on their doorstep at some point in time. Given there are an estimated 3 million domestic cats in Australia, these figures are far from insignificant

A WildWatch survey <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/wildwatch/archive/whatitallmeans.htm> recently revealed the following interesting information:

How people control cats



For cats, by far the majority (71%) of respondents kept their pet inside at night (compared to only about half of dog owners) and about 40% placed a bell on their cat's collar. About one pet owner in five restricted their animal's movements to particular area, ostensibly as an attempt to minimise contact with wildlife.



And finally, WildWatch demonstrated clearly that managing your pets does work: respondents who restricted the movements of their dogs and cats saw significantly more birds and mammals than any other style of pet management. [See Fig 34-37] Interestingly, the well-known technique of putting a bell on cats was reported to work very well for frogs and reptiles and birds but not for mammals.[See Fig 43-45]

Keeping this in mind, some tips for ensuring your cat keeps its paws off the locals:

- Register and desex your cat. Desexed cats are less likely to spray, fight, wander and get into mischief. This helps them to live longer and be less of a threat to native fauna. It also assists to prevent health problems that may be difficult and expensive to treat.
- Cats can be perfectly happy indoors, or with access to a protected outdoor play area (See 'Envirocat' Garden for Wildlife newsletter for ideas <http://www.lowecol.com.au/lfw/gfwnews.htm>), provided they are supplied with adequate amusement and attention. Fresh air and sunshine should be available, as well as toys which somehow resemble real prey: furry, feathery toys that can be made to hop and fly. If you want to transform your outdoor cat into an indoor cat, make sure it's done gradually to avoid the development of behavioural problems. See the brochures 'Keeping Cats Happy Indoors' and 'Helping an Outdoor Cat Adjust to Life Indoors' in your Garden for Wildlife resource folder. They can also be found at <http://www.dlg.nsw.gov.au/Files/Newsletters/catfsht1.pdf> <http://www.dlg.nsw.gov.au/Files/Information/catfsht2.pdf>
- Put a bell, or two, or three, on your cat to warn native animals of their presence.
- Some notes from Alice Springs Town Council: On-the-spot fines may be issued to owner of a nuisance cat. Unregistered or unclaimed cats may be sold or euthanised after 48 hours at the animal pound. Keeping three or more cats without a license is an offence. Unlicensed breeding of cats is an offence; however unplanned litters may be dropped off at the pound without penalty.

For those wishing to discourage cats in their backyard:

- Spray visiting cats with a hose or water pistol. They'll soon get the message that they're unwanted. This deterrent, as well as being effective and harmless, is quite therapeutic!
- Make sure any bird baths and bird feeders are well out of a cat's reach. Provide dense, prickly shrubs around birdbaths to provide shelter should cats choose to visit.
- Make your own cat repellent, using a number of scents that cats dislike. A mix of ground black pepper and chilli, or scatter citrus peels around the garden.
- Ensure your pets food is not left outside to attract cats.

Feral cats cause far more damage compared to domestic cats, eating the equivalent of 10 native birds each week. There is little room here to discuss the ecological consequences of Australia's estimated 12 million feral cats. However if you sight a feral cat in your backyard, the Council lends out cat traps. Council officers deliver a cat trap to residential houses anywhere in the Alice Springs municipality (including rural residential areas). The resident sets the trap on their property with instructions provided by council. When a cat is caught ,

Council officers collect the trap and impound the cat. See http://www.alicesprings.nt.gov.au/astc_site/community/resident_kit/owning_a_cat for more details.

http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/brief_cats.html

And in conclusion, two quotes:

"Whilst it is true that some household cats do kill wildlife, by far the biggest threat to native animals is habitat destruction by humans".

- Urban Wildlife

"For a man to truly understand rejection, he must first be ignored by a cat."

- Anon

And a photo: sometimes the wildlife gets its own back at the cats



Belly full: Emma, 3, and Lucas McAuley, 4, watch as their vet father Wade checks out the python that ate a family's cat.
www.cairns.com Saturday, March 1, 2008