



Issue Statement

Feral and Free-Ranging Domestic Cats

Perhaps no issue has captured more of the challenges for contemporary wildlife management than free-ranging domestic cats and their negative effects on native wildlife (Loss et al. 2018; Loyd and DeVore 2010). Feral and free-ranging domestic cats (*Felis catus*) are among the IUCN's *100 of the World's Worst Invasive Alien Species* (Lowe et al. 2004). Globally, domestic cats have contributed to the extinction of 63 species and are responsible for at least 14% of bird, mammal, and reptile extinctions on islands (Medina et al. 2011; Doherty et al. 2016). Invasive species present unique challenges for wildlife managers because the harm they cause to native species is often poorly understood by the public.

As a domesticated species, the domestic cat has no native range but has been introduced by people to all continents except Antarctica and many of the world's islands (Medina et al. 2011). The domestic cat's nearest wild ancestor is the Near Eastern wildcat (*Felis silvestris lybica*; Driscoll et al. 2007). Free-ranging domestic cats, regardless of ownership status, are domestic cats that are outdoors and not under the control of people (Schweitzer and Gillin 2020). Although a robust, global estimate is not available, free-ranging domestic cats certainly number in the hundreds of millions. Loss et al. (2013) estimated 32-61 million owned and 30-80 million unowned, free-ranging domestic cats in the United States. In Australia, the number of feral domestic cats was estimated to range from 2.1 to 6.3 million, depending on environmental conditions (Legge et al. 2017).

Domestic cats are significant predators of small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. A study by scientists from the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that free-ranging domestic cats kill 1.3–4.0 billion birds and 6.3–22.3 billion small mammals annually in the United States (Loss et al. 2013). In Australia, feral and pet cats annually kill an estimated 609 million reptiles, 399 million birds, and more than 1 billion mammals (Stobo-Wilson et al. 2022). Although unowned domestic cats are estimated to kill more wildlife, the broad geographic distribution of owned domestic cats, combined with their proclivity to hunt wildlife, can result in an ecological impact many times greater than native predators can (Kays et al. 2020).

Additionally, feral and free-ranging domestic cats may serve as reservoirs for toxoplasmosis, bartonellosis, salmonellosis, rabies and other diseases that can negatively affect wildlife, domestic animals, and humans (Schweitzer and Gillin 2020). Domestic cats accounted for 19% of confirmed cases of rabies across Florida in 2022 (Florida Health 2024). Rabid cats have been documented to disproportionately expose more people to rabies than do native wildlife and can lead to large human exposure events (Roebeling et al. 2014). Domestic cats are also a definitive host for and contribute to environmental contamination with the parasite (*Toxoplasma gondii*) that causes toxoplasmosis (VanWormer et al. 2013). *T. gondii* can infect a wide range of birds and mammals and has been linked to the deaths of at-risk species, such as the endangered Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*), and is the second leading cause of death in humans from foodborne illnesses in the United States (Scallan et al. 2011; NOAA Fisheries

2024). These diseases are examples of the significant harm free-ranging domestic cats can have on wildlife and human health.

Pet-owner attitudes toward wildlife and wildlife management are important issues that can make managing free-ranging domestic cats challenging, despite the many studies demonstrating their harms to native wildlife (Deak et al. 2019). Because they are obligate carnivores, domestic cats hunt by instinct, and even owned domestic cats that are fed regularly but are allowed outdoors will kill, but not necessarily eat, wildlife (Loyd et al. 2013). Additionally, while collar-mounted devices (e.g., bells, bibs, sonic devices) in some instances result in reduced predation on wildlife, depredation is not eliminated (Cecchetti et al. 2021a, b). Moreover, such management actions are not feasible for unowned domestic cats.

Trap-neuter-return (or release; TNR) is a controversial and usually ineffective strategy to manage free-ranging domestic cat populations that has been increasingly adopted by local governments (Debrot et al. 2022). For TNR to be effective, several assumptions must be met, such as a confined population and high capture and sterilization rates. However, these conditions are rarely met in real-world scenarios, meaning TNR is unlikely to succeed (Longcore et al. 2009). In many published studies evaluating TNR, there is ongoing immigration and not enough of the population can be captured and sterilized for TNR to result in attrition of the colony (Crawford et al. 2019; Hostetler et al. 2020). Additionally, a strong argument can be made that returning (or re-abandoning) domestic cats to range freely is not an ethical strategy because of ongoing risks to the cats, other domestic animals, wildlife, and people (Crawford et al. 2019; Hostetler et al. 2020; PETA 2022).

Keeping domestic cats indoors, on a leash, or otherwise contained eliminates harmful interactions with wildlife. This management strategy also benefits people and domestic animals, including domestic cats. Free-ranging domestic cats engage in risky behaviors and face numerous threats outdoors, including trauma caused by attacks from wild and domestic animals, automobile collisions, harsh weather, starvation, and exposure to diseases, parasites, and poisons (Loyd et al. 2013; Tan et al. 2020).

CONCLUSION

Wildlife professionals can serve important roles in their communities to support responsible and effective domestic cat management. The public needs to know about the varied harms that feral and free-ranging cats cause to wildlife and the harms cats face. People's emotional attachment to pets as companion animals can be strengthened if pet owners recognize that their cats will be healthier and safer if not allowed to roam unconfined. Wildlife professionals should set an example by not allowing their own cats to roam unconfined and should take opportunities to explain to the public through outreach about the serious repercussions from free-ranging cats. TWS members are encouraged to use this science- and ethics-based issue statement at public meetings and to promote laws that control and manage free-ranging cats.

The policy of The Wildlife Society regarding free-ranging domestic cats is to:

1. Recognize that domestic cats are not native anywhere in the world, but that cats have a long association as companions to humans.
2. Support and encourage the humane elimination of free-ranging domestic cat populations, including feral or so-called “community cat” colonies, through adoption into indoor-only homes, placement in long-term holding facilities (such as cat sanctuaries), or humane euthanasia of unadoptable cats. TWS members are strongly encouraged to provide adequate indoor or confined care for their pet cats.
3. Advocate for the passage and enforcement of local and state ordinances prohibiting the feeding of feral domestic cats and the release outdoors of unwanted pet or feral domestic cats.
4. Advocate for the passage of local or state ordinances that prohibit domestic cats from roaming outdoors, except under the direct supervision and control (such as a leash) of an owner.
5. Provide educational programs and materials about scientific information on domestic cats, including the negative effects to and harms caused by domestic cats living outdoors, and encourage pet owners to keep domestic cats on a leash, in an enclosure, or otherwise under direct owner control when outdoors.
6. Promote programs to educate and encourage current pet owners to sterilize their pets and require all pet adoption programs to ensure all domestic cats in their care are sterilized before adoption.
7. Support the development and dissemination of information on what domestic cat owners can do to minimize predation by free-ranging domestic cats and to minimize potential disease transmission to humans, wildlife, and other domestic animals.
8. Work with the conservation and animal welfare communities to educate the public about the effects of free-ranging domestic cats on native wildlife.
9. Advocate for efforts to reduce risks to the health of humans and other animals posed by pathogens and parasites of free-ranging domestic cats, including but not limited to removal of free-ranging domestic cats from the landscape.
10. Encourage researchers (including TWS members) to develop, obtain, and disseminate information on the effects of free-ranging domestic cats on native wildlife populations, relative to predation, competition, and diseases, as well as effective management strategies.

*The Wildlife Society’s **Position Statement on Invasive and Feral Species** states that the Society opposes “introduction or maintenance of invasive species to maintain native biological diversity, and to support ecosystem integrity, resilience, and function” (TWS 2021).*

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