Effects of an Invasive Species: Domestic Cats

Though originally bred from wild cats, the domestic cat (*Felis catus*) has no native range and is listed among the 100 worst non-native invasive species in the world by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).¹

### What is a domestic cat?

Domestic cats are one of the most popular pets in North America and can be categorized into three management groups:

- **Indoor cats**: Owned pets that spend all of their time within the home—house cats.
- **Free-ranging cats**: Owned pets that are habituated to humans but spend all or a portion of their time roaming outdoors.
- **Feral cats**: Unowned animals that live entirely outdoors. These cats are not socialized to humans but descended from domesticated individuals.

### Disease Transmission

Domestic cats can serve as vectors for multiple diseases, including zoonotic diseases—diseases that can spread to humans.² Threats to human and wildlife health from domestic cat disease include:

- **Rabies**: A potentially fatal viral disease transmitted through bite wounds. In 2014, cats accounted for 61% of rabid domestic animals recorded in the U.S.³
- **Toxoplasmosis**: Caused by a microscopic parasite in cat feces. Can result in birth defects, behavioral disorders, or illness in people with weakened immune systems.⁴ Can also cause death or other severe negative effects to wildlife.

### Predatory and Behavior Effects

All cats are carnivorous; and even well-fed domestic cats will continue to hunt if given the opportunity.⁵ While feral cats pose the biggest threat to wildlife, all domestic cats, regardless of their habituation to humans, will hunt prey if released outdoors.⁶

A study published in 2013 estimates that domestic cats kill between 1.3–4.0 billion birds and 6.3–22.3 billion mammals in the U.S. per year; making them the largest human-influenced source of mortality for birds and mammals in the country.⁷ Globally, domestic cats have caused the extinction of several mammals, reptiles, and at least 33 bird species.⁸

The graph below shows estimated bird mortality from cats relative to other anthropogenic sources in the U.S. and Canada.⁹

(Credit: Wikimedia Commons User Alex T./Lxowle/Mark Marek)
Domestic cats are prolific breeders. A single female cat can reach sexual maturity at just six months of age and produce up to **three litters per year with two to four kittens per litter** (Up two 12 cats per year).\(^\text{10}\)

Limited empirical data exists for the total number of feral cats in the U.S., but estimates range from **30 to 80 million cats**—not including the roughly **40 million** pet cats with outdoor access.\(^\text{7}\) The size of feral cat populations, combined with their high reproductive potential, exacerbates concerns over **animal welfare, wildlife predation, and disease**.

### Problems with Trap-Neuter-Release

Trap-neuter-release (TNR) is often considered as a humane solution to reducing feral cat overpopulation, and involves catching, vaccinating, sterilizing, and then releasing feral cats. With a long-term commitment of resources—and the sterilization of approximately **71-94% of a population**—this type of high-intensity management can theoretically reduce feral cat colonies.\(^\text{11}\)

However, numerous long-term scientific studies have shown TNR programs to be **ineffective** or even **counterproductive** because they enable the abandonment of owned cats, thus resulting in the indefinite maintenance of feral cat colonies.\(^\text{11}\) This compounds the problems caused by feral cats and justifies the continued presence of an invasive species in North America. As a result, **TNR undermines the work of wildlife professionals and severely jeopardizes the integrity of native biodiversity.**

---

**Domestic Cat Reproduction**

Domestic cats: Things to Consider

- **Keep Cats Indoors**
  - Keeping cats indoors protects wildlife and the cats themselves. Cats that live or are allowed outside are exposed to cars, wild animal attacks, and diseases.

- **Don’t Feed Outdoor Cats**
  - Providing food for outdoor cats, even over-feeding, does not stop natural hunting behavior. It can also lead to larger feral cat colonies, thus compounding the problem.\(^\text{5}\)

- **Spay and Neuter Pets**
  - Educate cat owners to spay or neuter their cats and keep them indoors. TNR does not reduce overpopulation or prevent wildlife deaths.\(^\text{11}\)

- **Raise Awareness**
  - Encourage researchers to develop and disseminate information on the impacts of feral cats on native wildlife, relative to predation, competition, and diseases.

---


---

See our complete Fact Sheet Series at www.wildlife.org/policy

The Wildlife Society - 425 Barlow Place, Suite 200, Bethesda, MD 20814 - policy@wildlife.org

Updated: March 2017