

## Keep Your Fur Child & Wildlife Safe (aka. Apocalypse Meow)



We tend to love and dote upon our pets. We treat them as our children, and post photos of their silly antics. But what do you do if your fur child is inadvertently harming local wildlife? It is time for cat owners to address an unfortunate truth: your cat is (probably) a wildlife killer.

Bird numbers are in trouble throughout the world. Over the past 50 years some groups of birds in North America have declined dramatically. We have lost 57% of grassland bird populations and 59% of aerial insectivores (1). Recent studies have revealed the extended ecological and economic effects tied to the alarming reduction of bird numbers (2). Birds are natural seed dispersers and several trees rely on them to propagate. Forests will suffer without birds. Birds are also our best natural pest control. Hundreds of insect eating birds manage pesky mosquitoes and blackflies, and help our farmers by controlling crop pests. Cavity excavators like woodpeckers provide homes for secondary cavity nesters like wood ducks, chickadees, and some small mammals. The calls of songbirds keep out forests lively, and inspire musicians and artists around the world.

After habitat loss, the second largest threat to bird populations in Canada are invasive species – and these include domestic cats (3). Each year in Canada, an estimated **100 to 350 million birds** are killed by feral cats or those that are allowed to roam free (4). Within the Land Between, 17 species of birds are at risk of extinction, and another 8 species are listed as “Special Concern”, indicating that populations are declining quickly. But even common birds are fading from the region. Several of the species that are recorded as “at risk” are ground-nesters,

making them very vulnerable to predators like domestic cats. Cat predation is a listed threat for the Eastern Whip-poor-will, Wood Thrush, and Barn Swallow. Beyond direct predation, feral cats affect wildlife by spreading diseases, and the presence of “outdoor cats” also drastically changes the natural foraging and breeding behaviours of birds and small mammals.



The domestic cat (or *Felix catus*) is considered non-native wherever it exists since it did not evolve in the wild. Our love of pets can distract us from recognizing their broader ecological effect.

Domestic cats have contributed to the extinction of 33 species since the 1600s (3).

Luckily, there are some simple ways to become a more responsible cat owner - and also to protect both wildlife and your cat. The most effective action: keep your cat indoors. Outdoor cats are exposed to diseases, parasites such as mange and ticks, vehicles, and also wild predators.



The Cats and Birds website (5) provides several tips to transition your outdoor cat to an indoor cat. They recommend a slow phase-out of outdoor time. You can make the indoor environment more engaging for your fur child by building window seats, scratching posts, and giving them small toys. After the adjustment period, most cats will learn that hanging around the door won't get them anywhere. If this will not work for you and your cat, there are several ways to let your cat enjoy the outdoors more responsibly.

#### **How to safely let your cat outdoors:**

- Build an enclosed “catio”. Screened in play areas are becoming more common amongst cat owners. Cats can enjoy the fresh air in a controlled environment.
- Install an appropriate fence around your yard. See [www.CatsandBirds.ca](http://www.CatsandBirds.ca) for design tips.
- Train your cat to walk with a harness. Yes, it is possible!
- Give your cat a Bib or BirdsBeSafe collar to make your cat less stealthy.
- Keep your cat inside during peak bird breeding season (from May to September).

Beyond individual actions by cat owners, there are steps that municipalities can take to reduce risks for cats and wildlife. Most policies have focused on animal welfare rather than ecological impacts. For instance, “Tag, Neuter, Release” programs intended to control feral cats have been found to be ineffective. In most cities, almost three quarters of feral cats would need to be sterilized in order to see reduced bird kills over the long-term (6). Researchers suggest that municipalities instead introduce precautionary policies; that cats should always be registered and spayed or neutered. The first step is simply acknowledging that cats are causing a problem.



Wildlife numbers are declining drastically and natural wildlife habitats decreasing alarmingly in The Land Between region and across the world. There are many different threats to wildlife, and we should pay attention to all the ways we may be inadvertently contributing to them. While some problems are very difficult to solve, by applying simple solutions and by working together, we can substantially reduce the number of birds that are killed by cats.

#### **Quick Facts about Cats and Birds:**

- Cats are just as likely to hunt when they are well-fed. Cats will often kill and discard birds or rodents.
- Declining prey (birds) is also detrimental for their natural predators such as American Kestrels, Red-tailed Hawks, other birds of prey, foxes, weasels, and other mammals.
- Declining birds also means declining natural mosquito control, other pest control, or declining quality of forests and grasslands (through their innate capacity to spread seeds around).
- Birds have eyes 10-times as sensitive to light as humans and will confuse LEDs for stars or their flooded areas for twilight, meanwhile cats prefer to hunt at dusk or dawn
- The number of domestic cats in the United States has tripled in the last 40 years. 65% of them go outside at least part of the time.

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**References :**

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- (2) Rosenburg, K.V, A.M. Dokter, P.J. Blancher, J.R. Sauer, A.C. Smith, P.A. Smith, J.C. Stanton, A. Panjabi, L. Helft, H. Parr and P.P. Marra. 2019. Decline of the North American avifauna. *Science*: <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/366/6461/120>
- (3) American Bird Conservancy. 2006. Five state review - Impacts of feral and free-ranging cats on bird species of conservation concern: <http://abcbirds.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/NFWF.pdf>
- (4) Blancher, P. 2013. Estimated Number of Birds Killed by House Cats (*Felis catus*) in Canada: <http://www.ace-eco.org/vol8/iss2/art3/>
- (5) Nature Canada: [www.CatsandBirds.ca](http://www.CatsandBirds.ca)
- (6) Loss, P.P. and S.R. Marra. 2017. Population impacts of free ranging cats on mainland vertebrates: <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/fee.1633>
- (7) Dauphine, N. and R.J. Cooper. 2009. Impacts of free-ranging domestic cats (*Felis Catus*) on birds in the United States: A review of recent research with conservation and management recommendations: <https://abcbirds.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Dauphine-and-Cooper-2009-Impacts-of-free-ranging-cats-on-birds-in-US.pdf>

**Further Resources :**

- Tips for transitioning cats indoors: <https://catsandbirds.ca/research/tips-for-transitioning/>
- Birds Be Safe collar: <https://www.birdsbesafe.com/>
- Guidelines for municipal policies. The Calgary Model: <https://catsandbirds.ca/blog/the-calgary-model/>
- Portland Autobond's Cats Safe at Home campaign: <https://audubonportland.org/our-work/protect/habitat-and-wildlife/urban/cats-safe-at-home-campaign/>



(<https://www.fetchpetcare.com/blog/catios-can-built-three-hours-less-let-cats-enjoy-outdoors-safely/>)



(<https://www.birdsbesafe.com/>)