



Audubon Society of Portland

Living with Urban Wildlife



CATS & WILDLIFE

By Bob Sallinger, Urban Conservation Director

The first intake of 2007 at Portland Audubon's Wildlife Care Center was an adult female robin that had been caught by a cat. The cat's distraught owner had rushed the robin over to Portland Audubon in the hope that we could repair her injuries. We treated the robin for shock, cleaned her wounds, placed her in an intensive care unit, and started her on a course of antibiotics. However, by the time we arrived the following morning, she was dead. A post-mortem exam revealed that she had suffered numerous puncture wounds and extensive internal injuries. Sadly, this is a story that will repeat itself more than a thousand times before the year is complete.

Cats account for nearly 40% of the animal intakes at our Wildlife Care Center, the number one cause of injury by a wide margin. This statistic includes animals wounded in direct attacks by cats, animals orphaned after cats have preyed on their parents, and healthy youngsters removed from the wild by citizens concerned about imminent predation by cats. Cats are also the number one cause of mortality at our Center. Because of the trauma and infection associated with cat predation, animals injured in cat attacks have only a 16% chance of survival, less than a third of the survival rate of all other causes of injury combined. Wildlife rehabilitation centers across the state and the nation report very similar experiences and what we see is only the tip of the iceberg; numerous studies conservatively estimate that cat predation accounts for hundreds of millions of bird deaths each year.¹

What kinds of animals suffer cat attacks? A five-year review of Wildlife Care Center statistics revealed that cats accounted for injuries in 97 different local species, including the majority of bird species listed by Metro as experiencing "significant negative population trends in local bird breeding surveys."² While some individuals appeared to be in poor health or to have already suffered injuries prior to cat predation, the vast majority appeared on exam to have been healthy individuals. A significant number of victims are parents defending nests and fledglings, meaning that not only was the individual bird lost, but also more than likely her young as well.

In recent years the local impacts of free-roaming cats have extended beyond direct predation. Some citizens, concerned about wild animals preying on their free-roaming cats, have contracted with

professional trappers to kill or relocate native wildlife such as coyotes and raccoons. Although these operations are usually done secretly to prevent public outcry, the Audubon Society of Portland is contacted on a regular basis by citizens concerned about the proliferation of traps and poisons in their neighborhoods. The current situation with cats is a double-edged sword: cats prey extensively upon our native wildlife, but wildlife is eliminated when cats fall victim.

Why should we care?

Some have suggested that cat predation has an insignificant impact on wildlife populations and merely serves as a distraction from the primary causes of wildlife decline, which are habitat loss and fragmentation. Nobody would question that habitat loss is the number one challenge facing our nation's wildlife. However, efforts to protect and restore wildlife habitat can only be successful if we also address significant secondary causes of wildlife mortality such as pesticides, proliferation of invasive plant and wildlife species, and impacts from domestic animals.

Located on the Pacific Flyway, the Portland Metro Area hosts more than 209 bird species during some portion of their lifecycle. Portland is nationally recognized as a leader in protecting and restoring urban wildlife habitat, but those efforts are severely undermined by the proliferation of domestic cats across our landscape. Cat predation is especially devastating on fragmented landscapes where birds already have severely limited opportunities to feed, rest, and breed. One of the most common calls we receive at Portland Audubon is from urban property owners who have naturescaped their yards to provide wildlife habitat only to then find their yard suddenly overrun with domestic cats.

Cat predation bears no resemblance to natural predation. Cats are an introduced, domesticated species and have been able to establish themselves at densities that dwarf all other similarly sized predators combined. Unlike native predator species, studies have also shown that domestic cats will continue to hunt regardless of whether they are well fed or not. A well-fed pet cat is just as likely to prey on birds as a feral cat.

Those who would dismiss urban wildlife populations as ecologically insignificant fail to understand that the warblers passing through our back-

yards, neighborhoods, and parks are exactly the same birds that travel thousands of miles from their breeding grounds in the north to their wintering sites in Central and South America. Too often urbanites fall into the trap of believing wildlife is something only to be protected "out there" beyond our urban growth boundaries. When it comes to migratory birds, we need to be just as concerned about what is happening in our own backyards.

Ecological arguments aside, anyone concerned with animal welfare should be appalled by the carnage. Over the past 20 years, Portland Audubon's Wildlife Care Center can document over 20,000 cat-related intakes, almost all from the local community. If those injuries were attributed to traps, poisons, or poaching, local animal advocates would be outraged. Too many cat advocates, however, remain willing to turn a blind eye to carnage that is within their ability to help prevent.

Shouldn't the welfare of cats figure into the equation?

We hear from many cat owners — often the same people who are bringing us injured cat-caught wildlife — that their cat is only happy if it is allowed to roam free. This attitude has perpetuated a sickening cycle of death not only for wildlife but for cats as well. The average lifespan of an outdoor cat is less than 3 years, compared to 15–18 years for cats that are housed indoors.³ Cat owners who allow their cats to roam free are putting their pets at direct risk from cars, poisons, traps, conflicts with domestic and wild animals, and human cruelty.

Free-roaming pet cats are a primary source of feral cat populations (via breeding or going feral themselves). More than 7,000 stray cats were delivered to the Oregon Humane Society and Multnomah County Animal Control during 2005. The total number of cats delivered to shelters statewide during 2005 (strays and surrenders) was over 49,000 — the highest annual total since 1992. Of those, 48% were euthanized.⁴ The American Veterinary Medical Association has referred to the proliferation of free-roaming abandoned and feral cats as "a national tragedy of epidemic proportions."⁵ The Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon has written that "despite outward appearances, generations of domestication" have left feral cats "without many of the natural adaptation necessary for life outside. They do not 'regain their instincts' and they do not thrive. Starvation, disease, trauma and the stresses of continual reproduction plague their lives."⁶ Animal advocacy groups including the American Veterinary Medical Association, Humane Society of the United States, Washington Progressive Animal Welfare Society, and Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon all recommend housing pet cats indoors.

What's to be done?

Since the mid-1990s, Audubon Society of Portland has held the position that "whenever possible, cats should be converted to living indoors." We have not advocated for either increased regulation restricting the rights of cat owners or large-scale roundups of free-roaming or feral cats. We believe that such approaches would be counterproductive and would lead to an increase in the already obscene numbers of cats dying in shelters.

Instead we have adopted a long-term educational approach. It is our hope that with increased public understanding of the consequences of allowing cats to roam free, both on the environment and on the cats themselves, our community will move voluntarily toward an ethic that cats should be housed indoors. We recognize that this is a



Yellow Warbler - Photo © Don Baccus

long-term strategy; not all pet cats can be converted to living indoors, and not all cat owners currently have a housing situation that permits indoor pets. Feral cat populations will take even longer to address. With each successive generation of cats, however, it is our hope that we can move closer toward this objective. Moving pet cats indoors will reduce their direct impact on wildlife and stem the flow of new cats into the feral cat population.

We are frequently asked about our position on feral cats and specifically on “Trap, Neuter, and Release” (TNR) Programs advocated by groups such as the Feral Cat Coalition. Ultimately we do not believe that either TNR or cat roundups will be effective strategies for dealing with feral cat populations *until* a much higher percentage of pet cats are converted to living indoors. As long as large numbers of cat owners allow their cats to roam free, there will be a steady source of new cats entering the feral cat population and control efforts, whether lethal or TNR, are doomed to failure. In general, Portland Audubon has no objection to TNR as long as managed colonies are located away from designated wildlife areas and at-risk wildlife populations, and

the program is coupled with a strong message that cats should be housed indoors. The problem begins with free-roaming house cats and it is only by addressing the problem at its source that progress will be made.

Conclusion

Our community expends a tremendous amount of resources each year addressing cat-related problems through Trap, Neuter, and Release Programs, shelter operations, and wildlife rehabilitation centers. Yet we have failed to address the problem at its source. This is not about cats versus birds. It is about recognizing that tens of thousands of cats and birds suffer and die each year in our community because cat owners choose to allow their cats to roam free. Not every cat owner can make an immediate conversion, but a gradual transition by those who are able to make this adjustment is the only thing that is going to end the carnage.

¹ American Bird Conservancy: Cat Predation on Birds and Other Wildlife Report (1997).

² George Middle School Data Analysis Project (2000).

³ Humane Society of the United States: HSUS Safe Cats Campaign (2007).

⁴ Oregon Humane Society 2005 Oregon Animal Shelter Statistics.

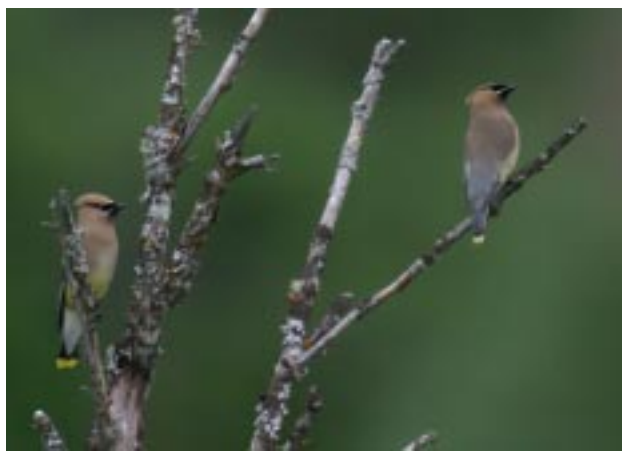
⁵ American Veterinary Medical Association Welfare Position Statement on Free-roaming Abandoned and Feral Cats.

⁶ Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon Brochure.

Tips for Happy Indoor Cats

The best way to convert cats to living indoors is to start young. Kittens who are raised indoors usually show no desire to go outside as adults. However, even cats that have spent their entire lives outside can sometimes be converted. The following tips will help make the transition easier for both you and your cat.

- Cats are creatures of habit, so be careful to *slowly* replace your cat’s old routine of going outside with the new routine of staying in. Bring your cat inside for increasingly long periods each day until you no longer let him outside at all.
- Provide a safe outside enclosure such as a screened porch for your cat.
- Provide window shelves to allow cats to see outside from the safety of indoors.
- Consider leash training your cat.
- Give your cat plenty of things to play with to keep it entertained.



Cedar Waxwings - Photo © Jim Cruce

- Plant kitty grass (available at most pet supply stores) in indoor pots so that your cat can graze.
- Clean litter boxes regularly.
- Just in case your cat does slip outside:
 - Spay or neuter your kitten.
 - Provide routine veterinary care, including annual check-ups and vaccinations.
 - Put an identification tag on your cat’s collar and consider micro-chipping.

Adapted from American Bird Conservancy *Cat Indoor!* Program

Audubon Society of Portland Recommendations

- Whenever possible, pet cats should be converted to living indoors. Belling cats and use of other “warning devices” have been demonstrated to be ineffective in protecting wildlife from cat predation.
- Domestic animal shelters should consider implementing policies of adopting cats only to owners who will house cats indoors.
- While Audubon does not support broad-scale removal programs for feral cats, we do believe that feral cats should be immediately removed from designated wildlife areas and that feral cat programs should ensure that caretakers working within their programs avoid designated wildlife areas.
- Multnomah County has a “no trespass policy” for free-roaming cats. Cats that enter private property can legally be trapped and taken to the shelter. We encourage private property owners concerned about impacts of cats on their property or their backyard habitats to attempt to work with neighboring cat owners to resolve conflicts before resorting to trapping. In the event that a cat is trapped, it is illegal to harm the animal, and the shelter should be informed if the trapper has any knowledge of the cat’s legal owner.
- Feral cat programs should adopt policies that encourage caretakers to provide feral cat colonies with food for only short periods of time each day to avoid habituating local wildlife to human handouts.
- Abandonment of domestic cats is a misdemeanor under the Oregon Animal Welfare Code (ORS §167.340), punishable by up to 6 months in jail and a \$2,500 fine. Animal abandonment situations should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.
- Predation of cats by native wildlife is an inherent risk of allowing cats to roam free and should not result in either the relocation or lethal control of local wildlife popula-



Animal Species Injured or Killed by Cats • Portland Audubon Wildlife Care Center Statistics 1995–2007

Birds:

Acorn Woodpecker
American Crow
American Goldfinch
American Kestrel
American Robin
Anna’s Hummingbird
Audubon’s Warbler
Band-tailed Pigeon
Belted Kingfisher
Black-capped Chickadee
Black-headed Grosbeak
Barn Swallow
Bewick’s Wren
Brewer’s Blackbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Bushtit
California Quail
Canada Goose

Canyon Wren
Cedar Waxwing
Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Chuckar
Cliff Swallow
Common Snipe
Common Merganser
Cooper’s Hawk
Dark-eyed Junco
Downy Woodpecker
European Starling
Evening Grosbeak
Fox Sparrow
Golden-crowned Sparrow
Green-backed Heron
Hermit Thrush
House Finch
House Sparrow
House Wren

Hutton’s Vireo
Lesser Goldfinch
MacGillivray’s Warbler
Mallard
Merlin Falcon
Mourning Dove
Northern Bobwhite
Northern Flicker
Northern Oriole
Northern Pygmy Owl
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Orange-crowned Warbler
Pine Siskin
Purple Finch
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Red-breasted Sapsucker
Red-winged Blackbird
Ring-necked Duck
Ring-necked Pheasant

Rock Dove
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Rufous Hummingbird
Rufous-sided Towhee
Sandpiper
Savannah Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Steller’s Jay
Swainson’s Thrush
Townsend’s Solitaire
Townsend’s Warbler
Tree Swallow
Varied Thrush
Vaux’s Swift
Violet-green Swallow
Virginia Rail
Western Meadowlark
Western Screech Owl

Western Scrub Jay
Western Tanager
White-breasted Nuthatch
White-crowned Warbler
Willow Flycatcher
Wilson’s Warbler
Wood Duck
Winter Wren
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

Little Brown Bat
Mole
Mountain Beaver
Northern Flying Squirrel
Opossum
Short-tailed Weasel
Townsend’s Chipmunk
White-footed Mouse

Mammals:

Big Brown Bat
Brush Rabbit
Bushy-tailed Woodrat
California Ground Squirrel
Douglas Squirrel
Eastern Gray Squirrel
Fox Squirrel
Gray-tailed Vole

Reptiles and Amphibians:

Garter Snake

*Assistance in data collection provided by George Middle School Data Analysis Project.