

## Cats Killing Birds

By Larry Hyslop



An un-owned cat with a dead house sparrow

According to a recent report, domestic cats kill billions of birds each year, a death toll that may account for 15% of the total bird population. The research published in the journal *Nature Communications*, estimates cats kill somewhere between 1.4 and 3.7 million birds, plus somewhere between 6.9 and 20.7 billion small mammals each year. Cats are responsible for the extinction of numerous mammals, reptiles and at least 33 bird species.

The world contains an estimated 600 million domestic cats, found on all seven continents although viewed as an exotic, or non-native, species wherever they live. The United States contains 148-188 million cats, a population that has tripled in the last 40 years. We have between a quarter and a third of all the world's cats and the largest population of any other country.

Perhaps 40 million cats in the U.S. spend part of their time outside and 40-60 million cats are "un-owned". Of course, some cats spend all their time indoors and do not contribute to the carnage. Outdoor cats, although fed regularly, still hunt and most cat owners do not see or realize the killing done by their cats. However, the most ecological damage is done by un-owned cats, strays and feral cats.

We have mixed feelings toward feral cats. In some areas, un-owned cats are seen as a scourge and attempts are made to remove these cats. In other areas, un-owned cats are cared for in cat colonies, where they receive shelter, food, water and even immunizations

Stray and feral cats compete with native wildlife and live protected lives since most larger predators have been eliminated. Cats compete with avian predators like kestrels, northern harriers, Cooper's hawks and red-tailed hawks. The study found native wildlife such as meadow voles and chipmunks suffer the greatest cat predation, while cat predation helps the spread of introduced rodents.

Florida realizes they have a huge problem with un-owned cats. Cat colonies can be found in 17 counties with the largest colony containing an estimated 1,000 cats. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission suggests mandatory licensing and tagging of all cats, and strongly encourages their spaying/neutering. They suggest the enforcement of a "leash law" for all cats. They also suggest prohibiting the abandonment and feeding of strays and prohibiting feeding of stray cats on public lands. New Zealand recently proposed a total ban on domestic cats.

"Free-ranging domestic cats are collectively one of the largest sources of bird mortality in the United States and present a special problem to conservation and control programs because their ecological impacts are often overlooked due to their status as popular companion animals" from the report titled "Impacts of free-ranging domestic cats on birds in the United States".

Elko Daily Free Press, "Nature Notes", 2/8/2013

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