



## Facts about **Outdoor Cats**

Understanding the habits and habitats of wildlife, and taking appropriate measures to prevent unwanted encounters, will help everyone to continue to enjoy the wonderful wild resources that still exist in New Jersey.

### **Cat Facts**

Perhaps the following answers to the most commonly asked questions about cats and wildlife will provide some food for thought as you make decisions about your own pets.

#### **Predation of Our Native Wildlife**

Many cat owners believe that their pet cannot possibly have a significant impact on local wildlife simply because it hunts. However, the cumulative devastation of cat attacks on wildlife is substantial. Many species are in danger due to habitat loss. Predation by our house cats is yet one more hardship that we humans impose on wild animals already struggling to survive.

Overwhelmingly, cat predation (including cat attack cases and animals orphaned by cats) is the single largest reason for admission to many wildlife centers. "Caught by cat" (CBC) outnumbers car collisions, window strikes, oil spills, pesticide poisoning, tree felling and all other miscellaneous causes of injury.

Unfortunately, the prognosis for recovery of cat attack victims is poor. Typically fewer than 10%-20% survive. Necropsies of cat attack victims admitted to wildlife rehabilitation centers reveal massive internal hemorrhaging and soft tissue damage from crushing, even when external damage appears minor or negligible. Even small puncture wounds expose the victim to more than 60 types of bacteria known to exist in cat saliva. As spring quickly approaches, now may be the time to start changing your pets' outdoor habits.

While we love to see you at MCWC, we would prefer if our patient load did not show an increase at the paws and teeth of your domestic cat.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act protects native birds from being killed or kept by people. Any person who willfully allows his or her cat to injure or kill migratory birds is, in effect, in violation of this federal law. Although this may seem like an extreme interpretation of the law, the sport hunting of wild animals by our well-fed pets is a waste of life and of our wildlife resources.

#### **When Are Birds Most Vulnerable?**

At anytime during the nesting season (March through October) both adults are at risk. They are harried with nesting duties and trying to defend their young. Often the female bird is taken while brooding her young on the nest, in which case the nestlings will starve to death if they are not killed with their mother. Young birds still unable to fly well (fledglings) are at great risk. All birds are at risk at night at any time of the year. Birds have night blindness and if surprised while sleeping are virtually helpless to escape a cat attack. In addition, birds are vulnerable at birdbaths and feeders if there is low vegetation near by in which the cat can hide.

#### **Q. Isn't hunting a natural instinct for cats?**

A. While it may be instinctive for them to hunt, house cats are not a species native to North America. They cause imbalances in the ecology of an area by killing so many native wild animals. Since free-roaming cats are active in an ecosystem at anytime of the day or night, they have an advantage over native wild predators that tend to be either nocturnal, diurnal or crepuscular. Because their population numbers are artificially large due to

being kept as pets, cats are also far more common than natural selection would normally allow other native predator species, such as the bobcat, to be. Predators are supposed to be rare, not abundant, in an ecosystem.

### Q. Will putting a bell on my cat's collar help?

A. Neighborhood adult birds may learn that the bell sound of the local cat represents danger—that is, assuming they escape the initial attack. Young birds and less common birds that are migrating through your yard will still be at risk. Also, many cats are bright enough to stalk silently in spite of the bell.

### Q. Are well-fed cats less of a threat?

A. No. Hunting is instinctive and even well-fed cats will hunt. A well-fed pet is apt to be more fit, and thus a more successful hunter, than a feral cat, which hunts to survive.

### Q. My cat just helps keep my garden free of chipmunks (squirrels, rabbits, woodchucks, etc.) How can this be harmful?

A. It may not. However, particularly in suburban and rural areas, the prey base for hawks and owls may be depleted. This may have far-reaching consequences. A study in Maryland found that Cooper's hawks, which during the nesting season depend heavily on chipmunks to feed their nestlings, were forced to prey more upon songbirds during this time if chipmunks were eradicated. Not only did this put additional pressure on the songbird population, but because of increased hunting time and difficulty (it is distinctly more difficult to catch a songbird) the hawks' nestling survival rates suffered.

### Q. Is there any way to protect birds at a feeder or birdbath?

A. Provide escape cover with brush piles and thorny shrubbery for birds to fly to for escape. Keep the ground clear under the feeder or birdbath so that cats are unable to hide within pouncing distance.

### Q. I feel terrible that my cat hunts, but my cat is used to roaming the outdoors and drives me crazy to be let outside. Can I train it to stay indoors?

A. It may be difficult to break an adult cat of the urge to roam outdoors. Let your cat out as infrequently as possible and gradually increase its stay indoors. When you let your cat out, keep it confined to your yard and under your observation. Spaying and neutering will also help curb the urge to roam. It is best not to let your cat roam from the beginning. A kitten that is not allowed to roam will not expect to do so as an adult. You will gain a loving pet for many more years. A cat that lives indoors has a long life expectancy. Cats that roam do not.

Researchers studying seventy cats in a small English village estimated that pet cats in England were responsible for killing seventy million native animals per year, including twenty million wild birds.

In a study of radio-collared farm cats in Wisconsin, researchers Stanley Temple and John Coleman estimated that each year cats kill at least nineteen million songbirds and 140,000 game birds in the state of Wisconsin.

A researcher at Point Reyes Bird Observatory in California, noting that there are approximately fifty-five million cats in the United States, of which forty-four million are permitted outdoors, suggested that the toll may be as high as 4.4 million songbirds each day.

Cat predation can also negatively impact our native predators, especially hawks and owls. A study in Illinois concluded that cats were taking 5.5 million rodents and 2.5 billion vertebrates from a 26,000 square mile area. This action effectively depleted the prey base necessary to sustain wintering raptors and other native predators.

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