



White Paper on Feral and Free-ranging Domestic Cats

The Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative is a coalition of 102 non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, and businesses that share a vision for the successful conservation of birds and their habitats in Ohio. Formed in 2004, OBCI coordinates the diverse skills and resources of its partners to deliver the full spectrum of bird conservation in Ohio.

Summary of Position

One of the most significant issues in wildlife conservation in Ohio is the impact of non-native invasive species, including domestic cats. A number of peer-reviewed studies strongly suggest that large numbers of small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians are killed each year by domestic cats¹. Additionally, cats act as reservoirs for several diseases that can sicken humans, native wildlife, and other domestic animals, such as rabies, toxoplasmosis, bartonellosis, typhus, and feline immunodeficiency virus¹. Based on this research, The Ohio Bird Conservation Initiative recognizes that feral and free-ranging domestic cats pose a significant threat to Ohio's biodiversity, as well as to human health and the welfare of other domestic animals. Therefore, OBCI supports efforts to encourage pet owners to keep domestic cats indoors, opposes the establishment of feral cat colonies, and encourages additional research into solutions to mitigate the effects that feral and outdoor, unattended domestic cats have on native wildlife populations.

Overview of the Problem

The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) originated from the European and African wild cat (*Felis silvestris*) and is found on all 7 continents. While not native to North America, it is estimated that there are currently 148-188 million cats in the U.S.¹. Of these, an estimated 70 to 100 million are free-ranging or feral^{2,3}. Because domestic cats are not a natural part of Ohio's ecosystems, their impact on native wildlife, including birds, is dramatic. It is estimated that free-ranging domestic cats kill 1.3–4.0 billion birds and 6.3–22.3 billion mammals each year in the U.S.⁴. In fact, cats are likely the single greatest source of anthropogenic mortality for birds and mammals in the country⁴. Importantly, even well-fed cats follow their instincts to hunt and kill wildlife. Therefore, owned or feral cats that are fed still pose a significant threat to birds and other wildlife⁵.

Free-ranging cats act as sources of dangerous diseases that have serious implications for human health. Through feces, fleas, bites, or scratches, cats have the potential to spread many diseases to humans, including rabies, tularemia, hook worms, or toxoplasmosis⁶. A recent study in Northeastern Ohio found more than half of sampled free-roaming cats were infected with *Toxoplasma gondii*, the parasite that causes toxoplasmosis⁷. Of particular concern in Ohio is that the parasite can also be transferred from cats to white-tailed deer, which in turn can infect humans through foodborne infection⁷.

In addition to the numerous negative impacts on Ohio's ecosystems and public health, allowing cats to range freely outdoors is dangerous and inhumane for the cats as well. During their time outside the home, cats are at risk for vehicle trauma, predation, disease, and severe weather⁸. Many do not receive adequate veterinary care, as a survey of Ohioans showed just 23% of those feeding free-roaming cats ever took those animals for any type

of veterinary care⁹. Higher rates of injury and disease lead to a 75% mortality rate for kittens born in an outdoor environment, and a life expectancy for a feral cat that is just half that of an indoor cat^{10,11}.

Managed cat colonies and trap-neuter-release (TNR) programs are often instituted to improve the quality of life for feral cats while leading to the elimination of the colony over time. Unfortunately, these programs are ineffective in reaching either of these goals. Managed cat colonies are not a humane solution for the cats because they remain in the outdoor environment where they continue to face a multitude of hazards and diseases¹². Most importantly, TNR programs are ineffective at reducing colony population sizes over time. In almost all cases, TNR programs have failed to substantially reduce cat numbers or eliminate feral cat populations¹³. Additionally, by being returned outside to roam freely, cats in managed colonies or TNR programs can continue to hunt and are often not able to be recaptured to maintain current vaccinations¹². Therefore, the released cats remain a threat to human health and native wildlife populations.

Recommendations

- 1) We support the development and implementation of educational efforts that foster an understanding of the biological and social impacts of allowing cats to roam outdoors, and that encourage cat owners to keep their pets indoors and to have their pets spayed or neutered and vaccinated.
- 2) We support the development and dissemination of educational information to municipalities, residents, and other stakeholders on the negative impacts of feral cat colonies, including information on the effects on wildlife, disease transmission, and the health risks to cats.
- 3) We oppose the deliberate establishment of feral cat colonies, including "managed" (trap/neuter/release) colonies, and the release of feral or unwanted cats outdoors.
- 4) We oppose the feeding of feral cats, especially on public lands, and the release of unwanted pet or feral cats into the wild.
- 5) We encourage research to provide additional insight and explore ways to mitigate the effects that unattended outdoor domestic cats have on native wildlife populations.

Resources

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