

Cat-astrophic Problem

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As conservationists, we often teach about the devastating effects invasive species have on native flora and fauna, such as Emerald Ash Borer, European Starling, and Bighead Carp. Another animal has been added to the list, and it might be in the same room with you right now...the domestic cat.



A common, beloved house pet and longtime pest control agent on family farms, is responsible for much more than afternoon catnaps in the sun.

In the U.S., [cats kill an estimated](#)

[2.4 billion birds every year](#). This alarming statistic is more than double the number of birds killed by cars, windows, power lines, wind turbines, and other man-made structures combined!

Now, we could deal with this problem more easily, if it wasn't for the overwhelming population size of our outdoor feline friends.

The Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service branch of the USDA estimates there are nearly 100 million stray and feral cats in the United States. This is not counting another 46.5 million cats that live inside our homes. Combine this with a female cat's ability to birth as many as five litters a year and that's a fast-and-simple recipe for a cat-astrophe!

So how exactly are these cats invasive species? To be designated an invasive species, there are two criteria cats need to meet. 1) They had to be non-native and 2) they had to "cause economic or environmental harm and/or harm to human health". Domestic cats were bred from small wild cats and introduced into North America. Free-ranging cats hurt native species populations and they have an even larger effect on the entire predator-prey ecosystem. This causes trophic cascades that can hurt prey abundance for other native predator species.

I know what you must be thinking...This is informational and all, but why should I care? Free-ranging and feral cats also pose risks to human public health and safety. Not only are cats the most

common vectors of rabies (in domestic animals), but cats can transmit other diseases and parasites including, cat scratch fever, ringworm, hookworm, and *Salmonellosis*. It is important to note, this is only concerning our free-ranging, unowned, and/or feral, outside cats.

So yes, cats are invasive species and yes, they are causing significant harm and decline to our native Iowa bird, small mammal, reptile, and amphibian populations. They are super spreaders of disease to livestock, our pets, and us, and their population size is only increasing! For the record, I love cats. I have cats at home, lazing around my house as I write this. But, as a naturalist and conservationist, I care about ecological diversity and the truth is, free-ranging, unowned cats are the largest human-caused threat to wildlife in the U.S.. But all hope is not lost!

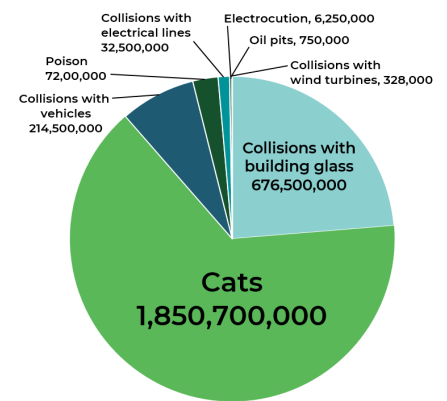
Keeping indoor cats as indoor cats is an easy first step. The primary source of predation is done by outdoor cats, including both pet and feral, so simply keeping your cat inside, will reduce the problem.

It is also important to prevent pet cats from becoming strays. You should never release any pet, regardless of species, into the wild (it can even be illegal), instead rehoming or giving them to a shelter, is always the better option. Finally, you could look into local TNR programs. Trap-Neuter-Return or TNR, is a method of managing feral cat populations.

The process, as simply put, involves live-trapping the cats, having them neutered/spayed, and releasing them back into the outdoors. This is a humane and effective approach to addressing free-ranging cat populations by ending their breeding cycle.

This method does not address the concern of outside competition and predation from feral cat populations but it does prevent reproduction among free-ranging cats and creates a slightly more stable and controlled population. There's no easy solution and no "right" way to do it, but educating yourself on the issues is a perfect first step!

LEADING CAUSES OF HUMAN-RELATED THREATS TO BIRDS



Source: U.S. Fish, Wildlife, and Parks - based on multiple studies <https://www.fws.gov/birds/bird-enthusiasts/threats-to-birds.php>