

# Living in the Gray Zone

**Neither pets nor fully wildlife, feral cats are becoming the scapegoat of choice for the damage that people are doing to the nation's ecosystems.**



► **By Estelle Munro**

On October 16, National Feral Cat Day launched a day of celebration and fundraising across the nation. In Inverness, Florida, kids and adults alike donned their favorite Halloween costumes and screamed through the Haunted House. Across the country in Venice, California, alley cat lovers took a leisurely stroll along the beach and boardwalk before gathering for a buffet lunch. In Ohio, it was a traditional Scandinavian dinner and dance; Oregon launched the Fall Feral Fix, a spay/neuter-thon; New York hosted a Natural Pet Fair.

With all the hoopla and goodwill to increase public awareness and provide hands-on help for feral cats, it's ironic that behind the scenes, they are the target of a nationwide smear campaign that blames them for the decline and death of millions of birds.

Are feral cats killing off the birds? Or is there another explanation? And if so, what? Cats can't mount a legal defense and, in many ways, feral cats are among the most vulnerable of animals because they find themselves caught in a gray zone – neither pet nor wildlife, yet a bit of both.

Cats, however well domesticated, are always just one step away from their basic wild nature. And when a stray house cat goes AWOL and gives birth to kittens who are not raised around people, this new

generation grows up as part of the local wildlife – wary of humans. In this “natural” state, they prey on rodents, scavenge for food scraps, and give birth to further generations of feral cats.

Up to the age of about three months, at most, feral kittens can be taken into households and socialized. But beyond kittenhood, the truly feral cat will never successfully make the transition back from the great outdoors to the fleece-lined cat bed. The confusion comes in their appearance. To the naked eye, they look like our own cuddle-friendly companions. Underneath, they are wild animals.

## Should feral cats be killed?

But the problem, according to some of the other wildlife organizations, is that feral cats are a non-native species – introduced to North America by European settlers. And the only solution to this alien addition to the ecosystem, many of them say, is to kill them.

Of course, nobody likes to use such blunt language. Instead, these campaigners wrap their arguments in more palatable covering. We don't want the cats to die, they say. We just want them to be adopted or removed to a sanctuary. But, yes, if that doesn't solve the problem (which it won't), then we might have to exterminate them.

So exactly why are feral cats such an ominous threat?



“They are killing endangered species,” argues Linda Winter, director of the Cats Indoors! campaign of the American Bird Conservancy (ABC). “On beaches there are birds that have evolved over thousands of years, that plunk their eggs down right on the beach. And there are stray and feral cats on those beaches. They kill the nestlings. They eat the eggs. They kill the adults. So we lose birds that way. It’s a real concern, and we have to do something about it.”

And what is the “something” Winter thinks should be done?

“Well, we believe they should be humanely trapped and removed. We don’t have a position on euthanasia, one way or the other. We just say humane trap and remove.

“There are several things that can happen to these cats once they’ve been removed. They can be adopted. They can be euthanized. Or, if people care about those cats and they are opposed to them being euthanized, then they should set up stray and feral cat sanctuaries on private property. There are plenty of abandoned places, empty lots, etc., in suburbs or whatever. I think it would be a really nice community effort to do something like that. That way, the cats live out their lives in the comfort of full enclosures. They don’t come to harm. They don’t harm anything else. The people who care about them get to feed them. They get all their veterinary needs met.”

Of course, there is no way of rounding up the millions of feral cats around the country, building sanctuaries for them all, and looking after them. And any that are not caught are going to continue to breed, quickly filling the vacuum that’s just been created – an endless cycle of cats being born and then being killed.

## The trap/neuter/return solution

Alley Cat Allies is America’s premiere feral cat care organization. They have mustered an army of volunteers across the country, whom they provide with the information they need to care for feral cats. After consulting for years with some of the world’s leading experts, they know that the only effective, long-term means of successfully controlling the feral population is a trap/neuter/return program: Trap the cats, take them to the vet to be spayed or neutered, and return them to their territory and make sure they’re fed and cared for.

In this way, the number of feral cats is gradually reduced over time, just as it gradually grew over time.

“It’s the only way that’s going to work,” says Becky Robinson, cofounder of the group. “There are millions of feral cats. There are campaigns that are being waged based on misinformation and half-truths by people who don’t understand that feral cats can’t go into sanctuaries or homes. And killing them doesn’t work either.

“What works is to spay and neuter them. That way, their numbers can be reduced in time very effectively. Their health can be contained just fine, and they are not disease-ridden, as is claimed.

“But they can’t just simply be brought in. When they are taken to shelters, the shelter workers know they can’t be adopted, so they are all killed – and many of them are killed the very day or minute they are brought in! So to lead the public to believe otherwise is quite shameful.”

## Who’s really killing the wildlife?

The underlying question is whether or not feral cats are truly the cause of diminishing bird populations.

“The clear leading animal that’s really putting wildlife at risk is the human population,” says wildlife biologist Roger Tabor. “We just don’t like to acknowledge that it is our fault. It’s not a case of the cat being the worst offender. It isn’t even remotely the worst offender. It’s us.



“We are causing the big, horrible loss of numbers in wildlife. We are shrinking habitats in the wild for economic interests. And we’re largely doing it through farming, and we are doing that because we want cheap food. So we’re taking vast areas and intensively applying insecticides, herbicides, and soluble fertilizers, and taking over good ground for our agriculture. If we were still using the old agricultural rotation systems, we probably wouldn’t be able to support anything like the population we do now.”

Winter admits that cats aren’t the only cause. “The key causes include habitat loss, fragmentation, pollution, pesticides, communication tower kills, long line fishing nets killing sea birds, window strikes, and more. That we do agree on,” she says, “and we’ve never said otherwise.”

## Myths and Facts About Ferals

**Myth:** The best way to prevent feral cats from harming birds is to remove them altogether.

**Fact:** All studies reveal that when a population of ferals is removed, it creates a vacuum effect. A new population moves in. If they are removed, still another population moves in. The most effective means of solving the feral cat problem is trap/neuter/return. This method causes the population to decline significantly over time.

**Myth:** The only people who care about feral cats are little old ladies in tennis shoes.

**Fact:** Studies show that feral cat caregivers come from all segments of the population, from professionals such as doctors and lawyers to students and people from lower economic groups. Approximately one in five households care for feral cats and caregivers develop close bonds with their charges.

**Myth:** Feral cats have a harsh life. The humane solution is to trap and kill them to prevent them from possible future suffering.

**Fact:** Life can be hard for all forms of life! Millions of feral cats are fed by kind people. Others find food for themselves. If we’re going to start rounding up animals and killing them to prevent possible future suffering, where will this end? Which animals will be next? Which people?

**Myth:** Feral cats carry diseases such as rabies.

**Fact:** Cats can occasionally be the victims of rabies, but they are not the cause. Raccoons are the most commonly affected species. All human cases of rabies in the U.S. in the past decade were contracted from other wildlife.

**Myth:** Feral cats are not native to the U.S.

**Fact:** Neither are several bird species, including house sparrows and starlings. And nor are most humans.

So why are cats taking the heat? It's the "smoking gun effect," says Tabor. "You see a hunter coming out of the forest, and he's automatically a killer, whether or not he's actually killed anything."

Tabor adds a serious warning. People need to take heed of the Law of Unintended Consequences and be extremely cautious in pointing the finger unless they have a full understanding of what their actions might eventually lead to.

"You have to be very, very careful when you're talking about doing anything that changes the ecosystem," he warns anyone who's talking about picking on an easy target like cats. "You have to look at the big picture. It's dangerous to leap to a reactive simplistic argument, because it can be wrong. And if it's wrong, it can be even more dangerous to the endangered species."

"This happened in New Zealand. People argued that wildlife there was at serious risk, and that the terrible cats were causing the problem. So they got rid of them. What happened? The more significant predator turned out to be rats, whose population exploded because you removed the one check on the rat population: the feral cats."



at feces; he would have probably radio-tagged cats; he would have done many other different things. If you're studying cat predation, you do other things. So the fact that he says only a couple incidents of cat predation were observed is irrelevant."

### Either way, TNR is the answer

Certainly, cats do kill birds. But no one has a clear handle on the numbers involved. And many cat experts note that house cats, rather than ferals, may be more of a problem. That's because birds are difficult to catch, and ferals are wary of wasting precious energy chasing them. Rodents are their natural prey.

But to the extent that feral cats are one element of the problem, what is the best method of dealing with this? The experts still agree it's the trap/neuter/return method.

Dr. Julie Levy a professor at the University of Florida Veterinary School and the founder of Operation Catnip, a TNR program, has spoken at conferences and before boards of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service addressing the feral cat issue.

"There are much more important pressures on bird populations [than cats] – primarily, pollution and habitat destruction. And those are harder areas for bird groups to be effective in.

"I think they are trying to do something positive. But I question whether their approach is going to have the desired outcome.

"The problem is that part of the campaign is an attack on humane control of homeless or feral cats. Most of us love songbirds as much as we love cats, so

we are not trying to choose one species over another. We're trying to come up with a solution that benefits everybody in the picture."

The goal, says Levy, is to reduce the feral cat population. "It's just that we can do it in a humane way that respects the animals, rather than in a 50-year-old vision of animal control, in which the only way you can help animals is by killing them." 🐾

“The animal that's really putting wildlife at risk is humans. But we don't like to acknowledge that. It's not the cat that's the worst offender. It's us.”

Winter is dismissive of Tabor's findings.

"I don't believe he is as familiar with wildlife in North America as he may be with wildlife in England or in Europe. I've seen his films and some of his transcripts and presentations. And it's clear to me that he doesn't have a good grasp on cat predation impacts on birds and other wildlife in the U.S."

But Tabor is considered by his peers to be one of the world's leading experts on cats. He's studied feral cats for over 30 years, and has a list of publications, television shows, and credentials as long as both arms. Currently chairman of the British Naturalist Association, he is a wildlife biologist with global expertise who has worked on feral cat projects in the U.S.

Winter also dismisses other statistics, like one finding from a study conducted in Florida by master's degree candidate Daniel Castillo, who observed the behavior of 80 cats for a year. There were over 11,600 recorded minutes of observation, during which time only two birds were observed to have been caught by cats.

Winter says those findings aren't reliable (although she quotes from other parts of the study to support her own views). "It was not a study about cat predation," she argues. "The cat predation he witnessed was incidental. If he designed a cat predation study, it would have been quite different. He would have killed some cats; he would have looked at stomach contents; he would have looked

### About Trap/Neuter/Return

Trap/neuter/return, often referred to as TNR, is a humane and lifesaving way to manage feral cat populations. Here's how it works:

Stray and feral cats, who are already living outdoors in cities, towns, or rural areas, are humanely trapped. The cats are then taken to a veterinarian who evaluates, vaccinates, and sterilizes them.

Kittens and any tame cats are placed in good new homes. Healthy adult cats who are too wild to be adopted are returned to their familiar habitat under the lifelong care of volunteers.

For more information on TNR, feral cats and wildlife predation, visit the No More Homeless Pets section of the Best Friends website at [www.bestfriends.org](http://www.bestfriends.org).