

THE FELINE-AVIAN WAR

*One of the most epic conflicts of our time is taking place right now.
It pits cats against birds...and cat lovers against bird lovers.*

BYE-BYE, BIRDIE

The setting: A suburban backyard. A small flock of starlings vie for a spot on a suet block that hangs from a limb. On the ground below, opportunistic dark-eyed juncos hop around, quickly eating the seeds that have fallen in the garden.

But there is a predator lurking.

Slinking low beneath a nearby shrub, a tabby cat inches closer, her tail twitching with excitement. Then—as a distracted junco pauses to ponder a seed that it has dropped—the tabby strikes! With lightning speed, her front paws pin the fluttering junco to the ground. The other birds scatter. With one well-placed bite, the tabby fatally wounds the junco. Biting again, she tears off the little bird's head...and then triumphantly carries the “trophy” to her owner's back door.

DRAWING UP THE BATTLE LINES

That gruesome scene is playing out in yards everywhere—as well as in fields, parks, alleys, and even on the balconies of high-rise apartment buildings. The domesticated cat has had a profound impact on the world's sparrows, warblers, swallows, and other small songbirds. But what exactly is that impact? The numbers are hotly contested, and emotions run high. Making it really confusing: It's nearly impossible to count all the songbirds and cats in the world, especially because many of the cats are strays. And determining exactly how many bird deaths are due to cat predation is even more difficult. That being said, here's a rundown of what each side says, and what part you may play in the Feline-Avian War.

MEET THE FLOCKERS

The leading avian advocate is the American Bird Conservancy (ABC), a nonprofit organization formed in 1994. They report that domestic cats kill roughly 100 million songbirds annually in the United States alone. Worldwide, that number is estimated to be

between 500 million and 1 billion per year. ABC senior policy adviser Steve Homer states that cats are having “population-level effects” on birds: “About a third of the birds in the U.S. are in decline, and cats have been identified as one of the more significant factors in this decline.” ABC says that house cats are primarily responsible for at least 33 avian extinctions since the 1600s. The National Audubon Society adds, “Cats kill not only birds that visit our backyards, such as the eastern towhee, American goldfinch, and song sparrow, but also WatchList species such as the snowy plover, wood thrush, and black-throated blue warbler, and endangered species such as the least tern and piping plover.”

As such, scientists have classified house cats as an invasive species, meaning that their mere presence throws the natural ecosystem out of balance. Songbirds are crucial to the survival of countless plant species as well as other wildlife because they spread seeds and keep pesky insect populations at bay. Also, they’re an important food staple for natural predators. ABC and Audubon even claim that cats are adding to the negative effects of climate change. How? As the world warms, insects’ numbers will grow. With fewer birds to eat them, the bug problem could get out of control.

MAN-MADE MONSTERS

But is little Fluffy really destroying the planet? And even if she is, whose fault is it? Bird advocates place the blame squarely on humans. Domestic cats did not exist in large numbers until our ancestors in Egypt tamed wild cats several thousand years ago (which is actually a very brief time biologically). Since then, humans have been breeding house cats to become lean, mean hunting machines. Historically, the cats’ primary targets were mice and rats (whose numbers are doing just fine, in case you were wondering). But the birds have proven to be the collateral damage. Wild songbirds, for the most part, have not adapted to outwit clever kitties. Before house cats came along, the songbirds’ fiercest predators were snakes and larger birds of prey. Today, house cats pose a much larger threat than anything wild.

As you might expect, classifying house cats as ruthless killers has made cat lovers’ fur stand on end. Their rebuttal: Cats aren’t even as big of a threat to wild songbirds as buildings are. Each

year, hundreds of millions of songbirds meet their end by flying into plate-glass windows. Add to that the bird deaths attributed to cars, airplanes, power lines, and wind turbines, and that number climbs to more than a billion—every year. But even those menaces aren't the greatest threat to birds. What is? Habitat loss due to human encroachment. That, say cat advocates, is more to blame than cats for the 33 recent avian extinctions.

THE CLAWS COME OUT

The posturing and accusations flung about from both sides can get downright nasty. Cat lovers accuse bird lovers of skewing data to make cats look worse than they are. Case in point: In 2010 scientists at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute tagged 69 catbird fledglings and observed them at three suburban parks over a few months. Their findings: "Predation caused 79 percent of the deaths of juvenile gray catbirds." Forty-seven percent of those were attributed to domestic cats. After the report was released in March 2011, cat advocates came out in full force to repudiate it. Cat activist and columnist Peter J. Wolf wrote, "The people responsible are far more interested in making scapegoats out of the cats than they are in any rigorous scientific inquiry." Basically, say Wolf and other critics, the researchers' numbers are way off. They point out that only six cat attacks were actually witnessed by the scientists, and that the rest of the dead birds were more likely killed by raccoons or owls.

According to a 2011 *Mother Jones* article by Kiera Butler titled "Are Cats Bad for the Environment?" scientists have actually been threatened for presenting findings that put cats in a bad light. Butler wrote, "In 2005 research by Stan Temple, an emeritus professor of wildlife biology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, was cited by a panel that proposed studying cats' impact on birds in that state. In response, he received several death threats. 'You cat-murdering bastard,' one activist wrote... 'I declare open season on Stan Temple!'"

STRAY CAT STRUT

What makes this such a fiery topic is that if the bird people get their way, a lot of cats will have to die. And if the cat people get *their* way, a lot more birds will die. But is it really that simple?

Before we go any further, it's important to understand that the war on cats is being fought on two fronts—against outdoor cats that have warm homes to sleep in at night, and against cats that don't.

The numbers vary, but stray and feral cats have been deemed even more harmful to bird populations than pet cats. What's the difference between stray and feral? A stray cat once had a home from which it was ejected or ran away. A feral cat was born free, but its feline ancestors had homes.

There are hundreds of millions of these houseless house cats roaming the world, and it's more than the birds' welfare that is at stake. Feral and stray cats threaten natural predators by stealing their food sources. They can also spread germs and disease...and not just to wildlife. Health officials at the Center for Disease Control are concerned that feral cats can pose a health hazard to humans due to the spread of rabies and a parasitic disease called *toxoplasmosis*.

QUALITY OF LIFE

The debate heats up even more when it comes to how to deal with all these strays. Most bird advocates say euthanize them. That notion is justified by the claim that, according to the American Bird Conservancy, strays “lead short, miserable lives.” By that notion, killing them is doing them a favor. Strays certainly do have it tougher than their cared-for kitty counterparts—facing daily dangers from speeding cars, malicious humans, dogs, coyotes, foxes, wild cats, birds of prey, and the aforementioned diseases.

But even with these shorter lives—which some research posits is less than half the life span of pet cats (about 12 to 15 years)—each feral cat will take down hundreds, if not thousands, of little creatures in its five or six years. What these free-roaming cats eat varies greatly by region, but on average, about 70 percent of their wild diet consists of small mammals, about 20 percent is birds, and the remaining 10 percent is reptiles, amphibians, and insects. On some islands, birds make up nearly 100 percent of the feral cats' diet.

THE BIG FIX

The cat lovers dispute this “short, miserable” notion about ferals'

lives, but they do concede that these cats need our help. There are three alternatives to killing feral cats: Leave them alone so nature can take its course, adopt them, or spay and neuter them to keep the population in check. Because the cats are not a natural part of the ecosystem, it's unwise and almost impossible to just ignore them. It's also impossible to adopt them all (as a walk through just about any animal shelter will prove).

The third solution—fixing them—is more realistic. There are about 250 feral cat advocacy groups in the United States pushing for this solution. The biggest player is Alley Cat Allies (ACA), founded in 1990 by Louise Holton (who prior to that had studied cheetahs in Africa). “It is not ethical to protect one innocent animal by doing something cruel and inhumane to another,” says Holton. “Lethal control of cats cannot be ethically justified. Birth control and altering human behavior are both proven methods of humane control that work. Alien, exotic, feral, or invasive species of animals—whatever you choose to call them—are just as much the victims of human greed, neglect, and ignorance.”

CANNED CONSPIRACY

To make this matter even murkier, there's another big player in the Feline-Avian War: pet food companies. In Kiera Butler's *Mother Jones* article, she reports that feral cat groups have “enjoyed generous grants from cat food vendors like PetSmart and Petco.” Business-wise, it makes sense: More people feeding stray cats means more pet food sales. And this is a multibillion-dollar industry that isn't about to give up on a major slice of its market. Does that mean feral cat protection groups are in the pockets of the pet food companies? The accusations are certainly out there, and money does flow. But Holton and her contemporaries maintain that they have one goal in mind, and it isn't to sell pet food.

HERE KITTY, KITTY...

One cat-saving method you may have heard about is called Trap-Neuter-Return, or TNR. It's been put into place in several U.S. cities, including San Francisco, Miami, and Chicago, and many more cities are considering it. Here's how TNR works:

- Humane traps are placed among feral cat colonies.

- Captured kitties are taken to a vet to be spayed or neutered. Most are given rabies shots; some are given other vaccinations.
- The cat is then returned to the wild. (Its ear is also tagged so trappers won't capture it again.)

The effectiveness of TNR depends largely on who is presenting the findings. The cat people say it is working great. Alley-Cat-Allies points to many success stories, including an 11-year study on a Florida college campus: "At the end of the study, the [feral cat] population had decreased by 66 percent."

The American Bird Conservancy doesn't agree: For the practice to actually start to reduce the feral cat population, they claim that 71 percent of the world's free-roaming cats would have to be captured and fixed. That adds up to tens of millions of cats at cost of about \$100 per cat, all paid for by the cities where the animals live. That's a pretty tough sell in harsh economic times, especially in lieu of a recent conclusion by the American Veterinary Medical Association that fixing feral and stray cats will have virtually no impact on their overall numbers.

There is one other possible solution: a drug that will sterilize feral cats through ingestion. One big problem: No such drug exists, and researchers aren't even close to discovering it. But the Oregon-based Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs has teamed up with orthopedic surgeon Gary Michelson, who made a fortune inventing medical devices. Michelson founded a nonprofit group in 2005 to help end America's feral cat (and dog) overpopulation and has offered a \$25 million award called the Michelson Prize to anyone who does manage to synthesize an edible pet prophylactic. So far, no takers.

TIME TO COME IN

So how do bird-admiring cat owners go about living with the fact they may be subsidizing a killer? The solution for outdoor pet cats, obviously, is to bring them inside and keep them there. (Too bad cats don't really do leashes.) That's the main goal of ABC's Cats Indoors! campaign. The group contends that indoor cats are much healthier, safer, and do not pose a threat to wildlife.

However, if you take a walk through just about any neighborhood, you'll see that the human custom of owning outdoor cats

isn't likely to go away anytime soon. It's one thing to raise an indoor cat from kittenhood to stay inside, but to adopt a stray and then try to keep it inside is much more difficult, if not impossible. That being said, there are a few things you can do to help reduce the effects of this very serious and complicated problem:

- Spay and neuter your pets, whether they're indoor or outdoor.
- Don't feed stray cats. This may seem illogical: If you feed a stray, doesn't that mean it will kill fewer birds? Not necessarily. Studies show that the hunting instinct is independent of hunger. Stray cats should be dealt with just like other wild animals. Game officials are pretty clear on this one: Keep your food inside. (Besides, cats won't be the only animals coming to your yard for the free meal.)
- If there is a TNR program where you live, you can report stray cat sightings, and someone will come and take the animals and fix them.
- Put a bell on your cat's collar. That might give its potential prey an extra second of warning. However, ABC argues that this trick doesn't work that well. Why? Birds have thus far not adapted to perceive a ringing bell as a threat.
- If you want to let your cat go outside, but don't want it to kill birds (and you have a lot of money), construct an enclosure that keeps your cat in the yard, but doesn't allow birds to fly in.
- Conversely, if you want to create a cat-free bird zone, build a fence that keeps the cats out but lets the birds in.
- There are a few cat repellents that you can buy, including oil of mustard (*allyl isothiocyanate*), citronella, citrus oil, eucalyptus oil, geranium oil, lavender oil, lemongrass oil, menthol, and even nicotine. These work to varying degrees.
- Other ways to keep cats out of your yard: Get a dog, or install motion-activated sprinklers to get the feline hunter all wet.
- Can you train a cat *not* to kill? No. Cats are biological predators. If they are outside, they will hunt...and then present to you the carcass as if you were a Mafia kingpin they hoped to impress. No wonder birds are so afraid of us.