

The Effects of Free-ranging Cats on Birds in Wisconsin: Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative Issues and Guidelines

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INTRODUCTION

Studies in Wisconsin and elsewhere indicate that free-ranging domestic cats (*Felis catus*) pose a threat to birds and other wildlife.

In Wisconsin, concern about free-ranging cats was first highlighted in the mid 1990s, when a study by Coleman and Temple attempted to study predation by free-ranging cats on birds in rural locations across the state. Extrapolating the results from this study indicated that millions of birds were being killed annually in Wisconsin by cats. Because of the difficulty in studying any species living outdoors across the entire state, the exact number of birds killed annually by free-ranging cats will never be fully enumerated. However, over the past decade additional studies in the Midwest and elsewhere have suggested similar problems with cat predation on birds and should alert us to the fact that free-ranging cats are killing large numbers of birds in Wisconsin each year. Moreover, other studies have shown that cats in some habitats may be directly competing with native avian predators, such as American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*), Northern Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*) and Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*) for prey. Finally, in some habitats and locales even very low cat depredation could negatively impact the breeding success and survival of a species, especially if that species is rare or endangered.

Because of concerns raised by these and other studies, a number of nationwide efforts have been developed to encourage responsible cat ownership, most notably the American Bird Conservancy's *Cats Indoors!* program and the Humane Society of the United States's *Safe Cats+* program. In our effort to address this concern in Wisconsin and provide assistance to both WBCI partners and the general public, we have outlined a set of recommended conservation actions and research needs pertaining to outdoor cats.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The reduction of cat predation on native birds and other wildlife will be achieved through the involvement of cat owners, WBCI partners, state and federal agencies, non-governmental conservation, animal welfare, and animal sheltering organizations. At the present time we recommend the following guidelines to reduce the negative impacts of free-ranging cats on birds in Wisconsin:

1. For the welfare of both cats and birds, keep your cats indoors or under your supervision and control when outdoors, and encourage others to do the same. According to the Humane Society of the United States, cats that are not allowed to roam outdoors typically live substantially longer than free-roaming cats. Indoor-only cats are much less likely to get lost, get parasites, become exposed to serious diseases, get hit by a car, attacked by a predator, or get in fights with other cats. Moreover, lost cats often go unclaimed at local pounds and animal shelters. For instance, in Milwaukee, only about 4% of cats that enter that city's animal control shelter are reclaimed by their owners. Help in converting your free-ranging cat to an indoor-only cat can be found at the HSUS's [Safe Cats+](#) website. Overcoming attitudinal barriers among the general public to keeping owned cats indoors or under their control when outdoors is one of the keys to long-term solutions to predation by cats on birds and other wildlife and reducing suffering for cats in our communities.
 2. To help reduce the numbers of abandoned/unwanted cats, spay or neuter your cats and encourage other cat owners you know to do the same. Support low-cost or free cat spay and neuter programs at your local humane society or animal shelter and support efforts to spay or neuter all cats adopted from your local animal shelter. Many animal shelters and humane societies are poorly funded and the only way such efforts can be undertaken is through public donations and support.
 3. Have your veterinarian microchip your cats to aid in their being returned to you should they become lost, and promote voluntary identification of cats in your community. A microchip is a rice-grain-sized identification device that is quickly and easily inserted under the skin of a cat's back and can be read electronically to determine the cat's owner.
 4. Support ordinances and initiatives in your community designed to humanely and effectively reduce the numbers of unwanted cats, decrease the number of homeless stray cats, increase the return of lost cats to their homes, increase the number of cats adopted into permanent homes and reduce the number of cats surrendered to shelters.
 5. Treat stray cats on your property humanely. Contact your neighbors to find out if the cats frequenting your property are owned. If they are, explain to the owners the impact their cats have on wildlife, the risks cats allowed outdoors face, and ask them to keep their cats indoors or under their control. If a cat's owner cannot be found, contact your local animal control agency for advice.
 6. Use habitat modification on your property to minimize the likelihood that free-ranging cats will cause problems for wildlife: avoid feeding birds on the ground where they may be more vulnerable to predation; place your birdfeeders at least several feet away from shrubs and other cover cats may use to stalk birds; utilize non-toxic commercial repellents designed for cats or humane scare devices such as the [Scarecrow](#).
1. Farmers and others in the agricultural community are urged to spay or neuter the cats on their properties to control their numbers, and instead of depending on cats for rodent control, control rodents by the use of pest-proofing and environmentally safe rodent control methods. Avoid the use of rodenticides (i.e. poisons), especially outdoors, since birds-of-prey (hawks and owls) can become ill or die when they eat rodents that have consumed rodenticides.
 2. Bird and wildlife conservation agencies and organizations, and animal welfare and sheltering agencies and organizations should work together to achieve common goals concerning cats and wildlife.

ONGOING RESEARCH AND ADDITIONAL RESEARCH NEEDS

While the overall impact of cat predation on specific bird species at the population level in Wisconsin has not been enumerated exactly, it is clear that many free-ranging cats prey on birds. Thus, there are legitimate concerns that free-ranging cats may be a significant cause of bird mortality. With bird populations under pressure from numerous other human-initiated or -controlled threats

(e.g., habitat loss and fragmentation, tower and building collisions, climate change, pollution, etc.), we need to reduce as many of these threats as possible. We have identified a number of research needs to help us better understand the effect of cat predation on birds in Wisconsin.

In an effort to enumerate numbers of cats allowed outdoors, and measure the success of educational programs that encourage people to keep their cats indoors, the WBCI Issues Committee is currently attempting to study the numbers of free-ranging cats within Christmas Bird Count (CBC) circles in Wisconsin. While covering an area of a CBC circle, participants record the number of cats seen **outdoors**, and note how many of these cats are seen close to a house, barn or farm outbuilding, and the number observed that are not close to such structures. If desired, the participant may simply record numbers of individuals. Collection of data began with the 2003 CBCs in Wisconsin. To include this cat survey in your Wisconsin CBC, contact Bill Mueller, Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative Issues Committee chair, at itlawas@earthlink.net.

The following information is needed in order to have a more complete picture of the impacts of free-ranging cats on birds and other wildlife in Wisconsin:

In 2004, Lepczyk, Mertig and Liu studied the effects of owned, free-ranging cats on birds across urban to rural landscapes in Michigan. Ideally, similar studies should be conducted across varying landscapes and communities here in Wisconsin. The level of bird predation by feral cats in managed colonies across varying landscapes in Wisconsin should also be studied. Nationwide, the animal welfare community is searching for humane and effective means of controlling feral cat populations, and the establishment of managed feral cat colonies is growing in popularity. It is not well understood what threat managed feral cat colonies might pose to native bird species across urban to rural landscapes. Conservation biologists lack data on how specific levels of cat predation depress wildlife populations and if there are thresholds at which cat densities become a biologically significant source of mortality. Relatively little information exists on the human rationale of allowing cats outdoors and what factors underlie this human behavior. Public education efforts on this issue need to be assessed over time to investigate if people's attitudes and behaviors change. What role bird window collisions play in the numbers of birds recovered by free-ranging cats.

These six points represent specific next steps for conservation research on the free-ranging domestic cat in Wisconsin, but by no means is an exhaustive list.

EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- ~ American Bird Conservancy's **Cats Indoors!** program: Public Service Announcements; poster competition; coloring page.
- ~ Humane Society of the United States **Safe Cats** program printable PDFs: Cat Care Basics; The Uninvited Cat; Guide to Cat Law; A Safe Cat is a Happy Cat.
- ~ **Project Bay Cat**. A cooperative effort between Sequoia Audubon Society, the Homeless Cat Network and Foster City municipal government to humanely manage feral cats along the scenic Bay Trail in California. This area includes habitat for the endangered California clapper rail. A tool kit for others who wish to take similar action can be obtained free from info@homelesscatnetwork.org or call (650) 286-9013.

POSITION STATEMENTS AND LINKS TO ONLINE RESOURCES

Organizations with Policy Statements and Guidelines

The American Bird Conservancy
Cats Indoors! Campaign
Resolution on Free-roaming Cats

American Humane Association (AHA)
Position statement on feral cats and their management

American Veterinary Medical Association
Position statement on feral cats and their management

Cooper Ornithological Society
Resolution on Public Policies Regarding Feral and Free-ranging Cats

Florida Wildlife Commission
Position Statement

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
Statement on Cats and Birds

National Audubon Society
Resolution on Cats
Reducing Threats from Cats

The Wildlife Society
Policy statement on feral and free-ranging domestic cats

Articles Available Online

University of Wisconsin Extension

Cats and Wildlife: A Conservation Dilemma (John S. Coleman, Stanley A. Temple, and Scott R. Craven)
Succinct discussion of the problem and what you can do to help.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Commission project to increase public awareness of the effects of free-ranging cats on wildlife.

Minnesota DNR

Minnesota's Killer Kitties

Conservation Commission of Missouri

Missouri Conservationist (Joan McKee)

University of Florida

IFAS Extension Impacts of free-ranging pets on wildlife (Joe Schaefer)

Wisconsin Natural Resources (John Coleman and Stanley Temple)

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