CATS: A HEAVY TOLL ON SONGBIRDS
A Reversible Catastrophe

Rich Stallcup

SONGBIRD POPULATIONS ON EVERY CONTINENT ARE IN SLOW DECLINE. WHILE POLLUTION, ACID RAIN, CLEAR-CUTTING OF TROPICAL AND DOMESTIC FORESTS, GLOBAL WARMING AND HUMAN SPAWNING ARE SERIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL ADVERSARIES, AN AGENT EVERY BIT AS DETERRENT TO SMALL BIRD LIFE IN NORTH AMERICA MAY BE CROUCHED IN AMBUSH IN YOUR BACKYARD OR CURLED UP ON YOUR LAP.

The problem is cats. How large a threat do they pose? Let’s do a quick calculation, starting with numbers of pet cats. Population estimates of domestic house cats in the contiguous United States vary somewhat, but most agree the figure is between 50 and 60 million. On 3 March 1990, the San Francisco Chronicle gave the number as 57.9 million, “up 19% since 1984.” For this assessment, let’s use 55 million.

Some of these (maybe 10%) never go outside, and maybe another 10% are too old or too slow to catch anything. That leaves 44 million domestic cats hunting in gardens, marshes, fields, thickets, empty lots, and forests.

It is impossible to know how many of those actively hunting animals catch how many birds, but the numbers are high. To be very conservative, say that only one in ten of those cats kills only one bird a day. This would yield a daily toll of 4.4 million songbirds!! Shocking, but true—and probably a low estimate (e.g., many cats get multiple birds a day).

In the British magazine Natural History (July 1989), it is pointed out that “Britain’s five million house cats enjoy both indoor comforts and outdoor hunting.” the healthier the outdoor house cat, the more small birds and other animals it will kill. After sleeping, hunting is cats’ favorite pastime; it is not a matter of hunger.

Most people who own killer cats—even people who claim to love small wildlife—manage to rationalize their pets’ behavior. “He doesn’t mean to hurt anything.” “He only gets a few.” “It’s his natural instinct!” Yet the situation is far from natural. The house cat has been bred by people over the centuries and is not a natural member of any food web. Its out-of-control population is vast—larger than all native predators put together.

Along the California coast, it is common to see 10 to 15 during a day’s outing (and these are nocturnal animals). Certainly there are many million, countrywide. What do they eat? Wildlife! Nothing but wildlife. In some places the native animals killed are mostly small mammals, a phenomenon proven (in places) to seriously deplete the prey base for wintering hawks and owls. Elsewhere, feral cats take mostly small birds. While most of the victims are “common” species (though seldom House Sparrows or Starlings), rare animals such as Black Rails and salt marsh harvest mice will also show up in the body count.

Beyond the fact that a single cat can extirpate native fauna from a given site, cats reproduce at alarming rates and, if uncontrolled, will affect huge areas. In the journal Wildlife (February 1976), Henry Tegner writes, “Compared to the truly wild mammalian predators...which in most cases breed only once a year, the domestic cat goes wild is a much more prolific creature, having several litters a year. To give an idea of the productive capacity of a cat, the RSPCA once reported that a single she-cat from Exeter produced more than 1200 identified progeny in the space of ten years—an average of 120 a year.”

On islands, where feral cats rapidly fill every niche, elimination of native fauna is thorough. In 1949, five cats were brought to Marion Island in the sub-Antarctic Indian Ocean to control mice at the new meteorological station. These were the only cats present. In 1975, a study estimated that the 2200 cats on the island (nearly 40 per square mile) were killing 600,000 seabirds (mostly prions and petrels) annually!

Attempts to control or eliminate feral cats—and the ensuing damage to wildlife—are few, are mostly haphazard, and re-

A Plague of Cats

ADD TO THIS the plague of feral cats. How many? No one knows, but they occur everywhere in temperate North America (except deserts and high mountains), and in some places are abundant. A few years ago Stanford University initiated a control program, because an estimated 2000 feral cats were living on (and eliminating bird life from) that small campus. In parks, foothills, and agricultural areas, feral cats hunting are a common sight.

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main unorganized. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal Damage Control program reported in 1988 the following selected animals killed by government hunters (numbers in parentheses were killed by licensed private citizens): coyote 76,033 (250,000); raccoon 5348; badger 939; porcupine 799; black bear 289 (21,000); mountain lion 203 (1500); feral cat 178. Licensed private hunters did not list the latter species.

Some parks and refuges eliminate some individual cats, but even those with regular removal programs probably are not keeping up with cat reproduction, even on a very localized scale.

**Proclaim a Sanctuary!**

Meanwhile, back in the city, gardens (which could otherwise be mini-wildlife refuges, making up a patchwork of significant habitat throughout the country) are only illusions of shelter, luring small birds to the threat of the claw. If you have a garden, why not proclaim it a wildlife sanctuary and protect it from non-native predators? If roaming cats come into your sanctuary to poach the wildlife under your stewardship, you have the right and perhaps even the duty to discourage them in a serious way.

If sanctions against the neighbors who allow their animal to trespass your property and assault your avian friends don't work, go the next step. Try calling the animal control officers (the pound) to have the animal removed. If they fail to respond, try a B-B or pellet gun. There is no need to kill or shoot toward the head, but a good sting on the rump seems memorable for most felines, and they seldom return for a third experience. Failing that, a "have-a-heart" trap and a trip to the animal shelter might work. Word in catland seems to travel fast. Soon you should have a safe place for small, wild visitors.

### What You Can Do To Help Save Birds From Cats

1. Implore agency officials like park rangers, game wardens, and wildlife agents to permanently remove (not relocate) feral cats from parks and other public lands. If they claim not to have the funds for the job, volunteer yourself.
2. Insist that local animal control units control local exotic animals by removing cats that are living off the land.
3. Give financial and emotional support to projects designed specifically for eradication of unnatural predators throughout the world, especially on islands. The 'ICBP' would be a good organization to support for their work in this area.
4. Support mandatory spaying and neutering policies and feline breeding moratorium issues when they arise, or instigate such action in your area. San Mateo County, California, has initiated one such program. According to a city official, "The response we have received from the public has been incredible — and 98% positive."
5. Proclaim your yard a personal national wildlife refuge. Plant it for wildlife, and defend it against marauding cats.
6. Physically discourage cats from attacking birds. If the cat is your own: A) Keep it in the house. B) Attach obnoxious bells to its collar. One little jingle bell is not enough. C) Sting if it even thinks about stalking birds; it will still love you.

If you truly care for birds and other small wildlife, please do all you can to intercept violence directed at them by cats.

### Farallon Patrol Log

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Skippers of the Farallon Patrol (joined by PRBO staff) held their annual dinner celebration on May 9, 1991, at Coyote Point Yacht Club. The program featured a videotape taken by PRBO biologists of white shark attacks on pinnipeds; a report on Farallon research by David Ainley, PhD; and unveiling of the Patrol's 1991 nautical flag by coordinator Dick Honey. Thanks to all the active skippers who attended (and especially for your kind donations).

Special gratitude from PRBO goes to skipper Peter Schultz, whose Farallon run last December in rough seas resulted in damage to his boat, the Hanseatic, when it was bumped by PRBO's Boston whaler under tow. The outstanding service provided by the Patrol seldom entails such mishaps, and we very much regret the costs to Hanseatic. (Apologies to the skipper for omitting this run from the last Log.)

In sad news, skipper Hal Reese passed away on April 15, 1991. Hal was an active sailor and a well-loved member of the Farallon Patrol for over five years — both sailing his own boat, Aphrodite, and crewing for other skippers. In a May 4 ceremony at sea, Hal's maritime friends released his ashes — together with those of his wife Gloria, who passed away in 1985 — outside the Golden Gate. Sea lions surfacing through flowers cast on the calm waters marked the occasion.

| Jan 19 | JACK KEITH            | On the Wing |
| Jan 21 | TOM CHARKINS          | Kumbaya     |
| Feb 19 | DAVE PLANT/TOM BAY    | Rampage     |
| Mar 7  | STUART KNOTT          | Krottylus   |
| Mar 16 | BILL FRASER           | Rausser     |
| Mar 27 | RON LEVINE            | Nausicca    |
| Apr 6  | TOM CHARKINS          | Kumbaya     |
| Apr 27 | DAVE HURLEY           | Limerick II |
| May 11 | BOB MECKLEY           | Menage a Trois |
| May 25 | LYMAN LACEY           | Shearwater  |
| June 8 | JOHN O'CONNOR         | Windsong    |
| June 15 | PETER SHRIVE         | Puffin'     |