



Cat Watch

Expert information on medicine, behavior and health from a world leader in veterinary medicine



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IN THE NEWS ...

Targeted Radiation Studied as Therapy for Oral Cancer

Treatment of oral squamous cell carcinomas (OSCC) has traditionally relied upon surgery, chemotherapy and/or radiation — with disappointing results. Cats with the rapidly spreading cancer, which accounts for 10 percent of all feline tumors, suffer pain when eating, drinking, grooming and breathing. Many are in such distress that they are euthanized.

A study at Colorado State University is testing a new treatment called stereotactic radiation therapy, used in human medicine. Susan M. LaRue, DVM, Ph.D., combines X-rays and special computers to deliver higher doses of radiation than usual over a shorter period of time. The targeted radiation seeks to limit damage to tissue, produce fewer side effects and, as a result, improve cats' quality of life during treatment.

Signs of OSCC include an enlarged jaw, red and swollen gums, bad breath, and difficulty chewing and swallowing. The disease is often recognized too late to respond to treatment. ♦

When a Sudden Disaster Strikes

Are you ready with an emergency plan, essential supplies and — a critical component — a sturdy carrier for your cat?

Disaster preparedness isn't only for earthquakes and hurricanes. It's also vital for everyday occurrences, such as an extended power outage or sudden wildfire racing over the hill. Every 23 seconds, a fire department rushes to a fire somewhere in the U.S., according to the National Fire Protection Association. Are you ready?

Planning is the most important element to keep your cat safe in any disaster.



A kitten fostered in Hurricane Sandy's aftermath.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

"A common myth is assuming that you are going to be back home in a short period of time. Nobody can predict when you may return after a disaster," says Gretchen L. Schoeffler, DVM, a specialist in emergency and critical care at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "It's obviously

a concern if you leave a pet in a house or in a yard that they will run out of food and

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The Year-round Threat of Ticks

They pose a serious health risk even to indoor cats because they could come inside on your clothes

Ticks pose a year-round threat to cats in every state — even if yours spends virtually all his time indoors. These minute arachnids have survived for millennia and often go undetected as they feed on their host's blood, often causing serious illness and even death.

"The major problem with ticks is that they are vectors for various infectious agents," says dermatologist William H. Miller, VMD, at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "Ticks are unable to fly or jump. They climb to the top of blades of grass and weeds and wait for a host to

pass when they move from the plant to the host — which could be your cat. Or they hop a ride on your clothes and you unintentionally bring them inside your home."

The Start of Signs. As soon as the tick attaches itself to your cat, bacteria start to reproduce in the area surrounding the bite. Pathogens pour into the bloodstream and symptoms, which can be as severe as paralysis, begin to develop.

The best weapons to combat ticks are new medications to prevent and kill ticks, and the education of owners so that they

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CatWatch

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SHORT TAKES

Singles Turn to Pets for a Sense of Family

An intriguing trend has developed among singles in the U.S. Single people — men particularly — are becoming pet owners at rates greater than families. They're "turning to pets for love and a sense of family," according to a survey by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

In a five-year period, pet ownership among the never married, widowed and divorced grew 16.6 percent. Excluding people who never married, growth in pet ownership among singles rose 17.7 percent during this same period.

The increase in both groups significantly outpaced the growth in ownership among pet-owning families. Although these family households predominate in pet ownership, from 2006 to 2011, the increase in ownership among families rose only 1.37 percent. Single female pet owners still outnumber single male pet owners, but the survey shows that may be changing, says AVMA President Douglas Aspros, DVM. Overall, pet ownership among men grew by 27.7 percent. The chart on this page shows the increase in cat ownership among them and other "non-families" from the AVMA's U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook.



Bigstock

Single female pet owners still outnumber men, but a survey shows that may be changing. Overall, pet ownership among men grew by 27.7 percent from 2006 to 2011.

"It's interesting to see that more and more single people are discovering the comfort and satisfaction that owning a pet can offer," Dr. Aspros says. "Pets are powerful, positive influences on our lives, offering unique emotional, psychological and physical health benefits to their owners."

Despite this positive trend, Dr. Aspros laments the decline in veterinary visits. More than a quarter

of pet owning households — 25.5 percent — didn't visit the veterinarian at all in 2011.

"That is worrisome, not only in terms of the pet's health but in terms of public health," Dr. Aspros says. "Families, no matter what size, need to bring their pets in to the veterinarian — at least once a year — to maintain optimal health."

Pet Food Recalls

Bravo, a maker of raw pet foods, has recalled three of its frozen foods for cats and dogs because of the potential for salmonella contamination. The recall involves specific tubes of Bravo! Chicken Balance and Bravo! Chicken Blend, and bags of Bravo! Beef Blend Burgers, all with expiration dates in 2015.

While the products tested negative for the bacteria in a pre-distribution analysis by a third party, the tests were run on the same

day or a consecutive day to a product that tested positive, the company says. "The product that tested positive has been 100 percent contained and is not subject to this recall," the company says. Information: www.bravorawdiet.com, 866-922-9222, weekdays, 9 to 5 (EST). ♦

CAT OWNERSHIP AMONG SINGLES

Type of Household	2006	2011
Male living alone	18%	23.6%
Female living alone	27.3%	34.8%
Male living with non-relative	35.1%	28.5%
Female living with non-relative	43.5%	42.1%

SOURCE: U.S. PET OWNERSHIP & DEMOGRAPHICS SOURCEBOOK

Study Puts Feral Cats in the Spotlight

They have an impact on birds and other wildlife but suffer more than their share of injury and illness

A study published earlier this year that found free-ranging cats annually kill an estimated 2.4 billion birds and more than 20 million mammals drew heated responses from both wildlife and cat advocates.

Lost in the controversy was the plight of outdoor cats themselves. They suffer from exposure to extreme weather and more injuries caused by cars, dogs, other cats and wild animals than those who live indoors, says Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., Associate Director for Education and Outreach at the Feline Health Center at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

"Infectious diseases are also far more likely to be spread among cats living in outdoor colonies," he says. "Diseases like feline panleukopenia virus, feline leukemia virus, feline calicivirus and rabies are all devastating — and all preventable — via vaccination."

Managing Colonies. Volunteer caretakers manage some feral colonies by trapping, neutering and releasing the cats to their outdoor environment, a practice

Should they keep their indoor/outdoor cat inside? Ask Elizabeth, Page 8.

known as TNR. Because cats are often vaccinated at the same time, TNR proponents say their work plays a vital role in maintaining healthy colonies.

However, humans also face potential health risks from feral cats, Dr. Kornreich says. "Humans may be exposed to rabies, a life-threatening illness, if they are bitten by an infected feral cat. Likewise, cat scratch fever can be dangerous if it gets into the blood. Fleas can transmit tapeworm to humans. Salmonella, and the parasitic diseases cryptosporidium and toxoplasmosis can all be contracted via the feces of feral cats, particularly by those who are immunosuppressed or pregnant."

Preventing pet cats from being dropped off in feral cat colonies is another important part of the solution to the burgeoning feral cat population. "We'd like to better educate cat owners on what it means to own a cat. Ideally, this means caring for cats for their entire life and keeping them indoors, where the exposure to a multitude of diseases and injuries is



Volunteers who trap, neuter, release and often vaccinate feral cats before returning them to their outdoor environment say their work contributes to healthy colonies.

significantly minimized," Dr. Kornreich says. "Abandoning an unwanted cat into a feral cat colony circumvents the work that TNR folks are doing in good faith."

Critics' Questions. TNR opponents, however, say the work threatens the conservation of other species. They question, given the 60 to 80 million unowned cats in the U. S., whether TNR is the best way to reduce those numbers. TNR has reduced some feral cat populations, especially when accompanied by adoption, says Dr. Kornreich. "In other cases, TNR has not worked, perhaps because a high percentage of the feral cat population needs to be caught and neutered before their number begins to decline. It is a daunting task."

The people doing TNR should receive credit for trying to address the problem, Dr. Kornreich says. "In turn, colony caretakers should do whatever they can to be good neighbors and improve perceptions of feral cats. Minimizing the impacts on local wildlife would go a long way toward achieving this goal. For example, it doesn't make sense to have TNR colonies within or adjacent to wildlife preserves."

For better or worse, the study on feral cats stirred debate, Dr. Kornreich says. "Clearly, cats have a very large impact on birds and wildlife. On the plus side, the controversy provides an opportunity for dialog between feral cat advocates and bird organizations. Perhaps it will enable these groups to move beyond an us-versus-them attitude and lead to greater communication to benefit both cats and native species." ♦

THE IDEAL: A SINGLE INJECTION FOR STERILIZATION

Feral cat and bird protection groups share the goal of reducing outdoor cat populations by finding more efficient means of sterilizing feral cats. "Darting cats with an immunocontraceptive would be less invasive and much more practical with regard to logistics, expense and the ability to sterilize large numbers of cats," says Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., at Cornell.

"A pie-in-the-sky achievement would be a single shot that would sterilize cats permanently without impacting their well-being. Unfortunately, it doesn't yet exist, but given the Cornell Feline Health Center's mission of promoting the well-being of cats worldwide, we want to keep moving toward that goal." The development of a contraceptive vaccine is underway at Cornell. This project is funded by the Feline Health Center.

TICKS ... (continued from cover)

can take the proper steps to protect pets, says Dwight Bowman, Ph.D., MS, professor of parasitology at Cornell.

"We are getting more ticks for three main reasons," says Dr. Bowman, immediate past president of the Companion Animal Parasite Council, an independent group that creates guidelines for the control of parasites threatening pets and people.

"First, we are much friendlier to wildlife. There are huge deer and turkey populations that help feed ticks. Second, we are doing away with manicured lawns and opting for lush backyards with streams or water fountains, trees, bushes and bird feeders that attract deer and squirrels. Third, we are more opposed to using pesticides in our backyards, which only puts out the welcome mat for ticks and rodents to come closer to our homes."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, these three serious tick-borne diseases affect cats:

- ◆ **Babesiosis:** Caused by a protozoa, this disease infects red blood cells and triggers fever, anemia and weight loss. The deer tick is the primary transmitter of this disease that also can affect dogs and people.
- ◆ **Cytauxzoonosis:** This potentially lethal infection is caused by a blood parasite. The natural reservoir host for this disease is the bobcat. It can be transmitted to your cat by bites from the lone star tick or American dog tick. Symptoms can include the sudden onset of a high fever, pale gums, respiratory distress and jaundice.
- ◆ **Tularemia:** Informally known as

"rabbit fever," this disease is caused by the bacterium *Francisella tularensis*. As its name implies, it's found in rabbits and rodents, and transmitted to cats — and people — through bites by the American dog tick. Symptoms can include fever, nasal discharge, loss of appetite and listlessness.

While dogs and people are at risk for Lyme disease from infected ticks, cats are highly resistant to the bacteria that cause it and rarely show signs of it, Dr. Miller says. "Currently, there isn't any one product that will be 100 percent effective for all dogs and cats. The number of products for cats is limited because they tend to be sensitive to commonly used ingredients."

For the past decade, topical monthly preventive medications applied between

be removed without releasing its bodily fluids.

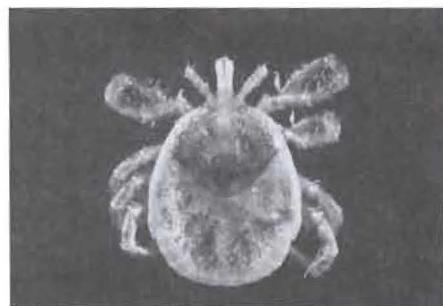
- ◆ Wear rubber gloves to avoid contracting tick-transmitted disease.
- ◆ Use fine-tipped tweezers or a tick-removal tool. Never use nail polish, petroleum jelly or, worse, a hot match. They're ineffective and can cause the tick to emit more of its disease-carrying saliva.
- ◆ Part the hair on your cat's coat to better locate the tick. Using the tweezers or removal tool, grab the tick by its head and steadily pull it away. Pulling close to the head makes it more likely the entire tick will
- ◆ For disposal, which is especially important if it's female with eggs inside her body, drop the tick into a bottle of isopropyl alcohol and tightly seal it. Alcohol kills ticks. Never drop the tick into the toilet — ticks have air sacs, enabling them to survive in water.
- ◆ Dab an antiseptic on the cat's skin at the removal site and reward him with a healthy treat for good behavior.
- ◆ Wash your hands thoroughly with warm, soapy water and rinse.

cats' shoulder blades have been the popular choice among owners, and several good ones are on the market. Flea and tick preventives for dogs may contain permethrin and should not be used on cats because of its toxicity. Recently an anti-flea-and-tick collar has been released for cats. Looking ahead, Dr. Miller sees merit in a new generation of tick preventives being developed in pill form.

For now, Dr. Bowman recommends preventing your backyard from becoming a haven for ticks by keeping your grass trimmed, clearing bushes and shrubs along the exterior walls of your home and discouraging wildlife, especially deer and squirrels. "If a pesticide is to be used, make sure the product is

(continued on bottom of page 5)

Ticks such as the lone star, left, deer tick and American dog tick don't jump or fly onto cats but drop onto them from the top of blades of grass and weeds.



CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

An Unmistakable Sign of Anal Problems: Scooting

The glands can become impacted, inflamed or infected if they're not emptying normally

Scent is one of the ways cats communicate, and their anal glands help in that effort. The pea-sized glands, or sacs, produce an odor that aids in establishing identity and territory. When a cat defecates, the scent glands empty through two ducts located at the 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock positions of the anal sphincter, the band of muscle encircling the anus.

"During defecation, the rectal musculature pushes the anal sac toward the stool in the rectum and squeezes out its contents — sort of like squeezing a tube of toothpaste at its bottom," says dermatologist William H. Miller, VMD, medical director of the Companion Animal Hospital at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. This allows the cat to send the message "I was here" or "This is my place."

Secretions Build Up. In most cases, a cat's anal glands cause little problem, Dr. Miller says. They can, however, become impacted, inflamed or infected, usually because they're not emptying normally. The thick, light gray to brown secretions build up in the sac. It's thought that inflammation causes the opening of the anal sac duct to swell, plugging the duct.

In other cases, the stools may not exert enough pressure on the glands dur-

ing defecation. Impacted anal glands can occur with chronically soft stools because the musculature has nothing to push the sac against. The same is true of cats with neurological disease. Cats with skin disease of the perianal region may also develop anal sac problems.

Inflamed or infected anal sacs are characterized by swelling and tenderness. To ease the discomfort, the cat may scoot on, lick or bite at his rear.

If left untreated, inflamed or infected anal glands may abscess or even rupture. An abscess is a red or deep purple swelling, accompanied by fever, as well as scooting, licking and biting. An abscess that ruptures drains fluid through the break in the skin.

Overactive or impacted anal glands can be relieved by emptying or expressing the glands manually. Your cat's veterinarian can express them or show you how to do it at home, but it's a malodorous process that most people prefer to leave to the professionals.

Change in Diet. In the case of a cat with chronically soft stools, increasing the amount of fiber in the diet may help firm them. The veterinarian may recommend changing to a food with higher amounts of fiber. If a food allergy is caus-



Cats who are overweight and sedentary may be more prone to anal gland infections.

ing soft stools or perianal itching, replacing the food with a hypoallergenic diet should help, Dr. Miller says.

Fiber supplements made for people or plain canned pumpkin are other ways to boost fiber. Ask the veterinarian about the type and amount to give.

If the sac is infected, topical antibiotics, with or without steroids and antifungal agents, are infused into the anal sac, Dr. Miller says. "In chronic or severe infections, oral medications may be given in conjunction with expressing the glands and the infusion of topical antibiotic."

Overweight and sedentary cats may be more prone to anal gland infections. Weight loss and increased activity may help prevent a recurrence.

In the case of an anal sac abscess, treatment includes applying a warm compress and giving oral antibiotics. If the abscess ruptures, the veterinarian may have you flush the area daily with an antiseptic solution and apply warm compresses for a week or two until the swelling and infection resolve.

If your cat has chronic anal sac problems, consider having these vestigial scent glands removed surgically. There can be complications to this surgery so it should be done by a veterinarian who performs the surgery regularly. You and your cat will both be relieved. ♦

TICKS ... (continued from page 4)

specifically licensed for yard use, used according to label directions and will not harm your pet," he adds.

Your best defense against ticks causing disease in your cat: "I believe that pets need to be on year-round flea and

tick control from birth to death," says Dr. Bowman. "Always make sure your cat receives a thorough physical examination by a veterinarian at least once a year, ideally twice a year. That visit should include health screen diagnostic tests." ♦

DISASTER ... (continued from cover)

water. Having to leave them behind evokes images of stranded animals struggling in the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. Early implementation of a well-thought out plan might very well mean the difference between life and death for all of your family members, including the furry ones."

Experts stress that you should:

- ◆ Have a plan of action. You may not be with your family when

disaster strikes. How you will contact one another? (Text messages often work when phone calls don't.) What will you do in different situations, such as a tornado or flood? What's best for you is typically what's best for your pets, the Federal Emergency Management Agency says. "The likelihood that you and your animals will survive an emergency such as a fire or flood, tornado or terrorist at-

tack depends largely on emergency planning done today."

- ◆ Keep your cat current on vaccinations and rabies shots to ensure he's healthy and can be accepted at a kennel or emergency shelter if necessary.
- ◆ Microchip your cat and register him with the microchip company. Be sure to update your information, including your cell phone, when you move. Less than 2 percent of cats without microchips in animal shelters reunite with their owners, the Humane Society of the United States says, but a study found reunifications soared to 63.5 percent for microchipped cats.
- ◆ Have a collar for your cat securely fastened with an ID tag and your phone numbers.
- ◆ Designate a willing neighbor or friend to serve as stand-in to evacuate your cat if you're at work when disaster strikes. Give him a house key and show him where you keep evacuation supplies.

Dick Green, chief of ASPCA disaster preparedness, has led animal rescues, including recovery efforts, during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita with the American Humane Association. The most obvious mistakes he's seen: Some owners don't take steps to have the necessary carrier, pet food, water and veterinary vaccination papers, so when they arrive at a safe destination, "They may only have a pet on a leash."

Others have arrived at emergency shelters and had to sleep outside with their pet because they didn't identify pet-friendly lodging in advance and the shelters were full, he says. (See GoPetFriendly.com, among other sites.) They also may not have called their local emergency management office, animal shelter or animal control office for advice on whether a last-resort, pet-friendly shelter would be available — pre-registration may be required.

Some evacuees of the 2009 Mississippi River flood in Cedar

THE ESSENTIALS OF YOUR CAT'S EVACUATION KIT

- ◆ A sturdy carrier big enough so your cat could be comfortable for hours; label it with your contact information.
- ◆ Can opener for canned food
- ◆ Flashlight
- ◆ A battery-powered radio or TV to listen for latest advisories
- ◆ A photo of your pet and another of you together to help prove ownership in case you become separated. Consider creating a waterproof "Lost Cat" sign with your cat's photo if he does become lost.
- ◆ Photocopies of key veterinary records to show proof of current vaccinations and results of key tests such as feline leukemia/feline immunodeficiency virus.
- ◆ Two forms in case a neighbor evacuates your pet: 1) A pre-signed letter that releases your designated friend from responsibility if your cat becomes injured in an evacuation, as advised by the American Veterinary Medical Association's "Saving the Whole Family" brochure. 2) A pre-signed veterinary medical treatment authorization so a veterinarian can treat your injured cat in your absence, also advised by AVMA.
- ◆ A five-day to two-week supply of water, food and medications (including dosage and feeding instructions), veterinary clinic phone number in case a neighbor does the evacuation or you have to board your pet, and emergency veterinary hospital phone number.
- ◆ Litter, litter pan (disposal pans are available), scoop and garbage bags for pet waste.
- ◆ Toy, treats, pet bed or familiar things to comfort your cat
- ◆ Food and water bowls
- ◆ Liquid dish soap and disinfectant
- ◆ First-aid kit, pet first-aid book



After floods in Yuba County, Calif., in January 1997, a study found one reason that owners abandoned their cats was that they had no carriers.



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Kittens rescued after flooding in Minot, N.D., in June 2001 were taken to an animal shelter.

Rapids, Iowa, had lived in their cars with their pets before a temporary animal emergency shelter opened at Kirkwood Community College and took in more than 1,000 animals. "There are so many common mistakes that are made at that [pre-planning] level," Green says. When owners try to wing it at the last minute, "They don't have time to plan properly."

A better bet: Start now by learning of pet-friendly motels outside your immediate area or lining up relatives who could take you in if you need to evacuate with your pets. Getting to know your neighbors and their pets can also be an advantage in an emergency, Green says. He suggests a block party as a beginning. "We really try to encourage folks to get to know their community. A lot of times, they don't know their neighbors' pets." If for example, a fire erupted while a neighbor is at work, you'd know to tell a firefighter that two cats and a dog are inside.

Training your cat to regard a crate as a safe haven will reduce his stress if he must be caged or crated during an evacuation or emergency treatment at a veterinary clinic. (Some owners have found success with "free-access" training in which you introduce the crate by leaving the door open with treats and toys inside.) "I always say that nobody's pet should be unhappy in a cage," says Dr. Schoeffler, who is Chief of Emergency and Critical Care Services at the Cornell Hospital for Animals. "They may need to live in a crate for a period of time or a cage. By not learning to like them, it makes them miserable beyond what they need to be."

DISASTERS BY THE NUMBERS

- ◆ An average of 1,253 tornadoes touch down across the U.S. annually, according to the federal National Climatic Data Center.
- ◆ Nearly 4,000 earthquakes — most small — struck somewhere in the U.S. last year, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.
- ◆ Damage caused by floods annually tallies in the billions of dollars, the National Weather Service says.
- ◆ In an average three-year period, about five hurricanes strike the U.S. coastline, killing 50 to 100 people from Texas to Maine, according to the weather service.
- ◆ Nearly 67,800 wildfires averaging 138 acres in size burned last year in the U.S.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- ◆ **"Saving the Whole Family"** is a 16-page downloadable brochure at AVMA.org.
- ◆ **Ready.gov**, a resource-filled website of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, outlines what to do for pets in its "Caring for Animals" section.
- ◆ **Thehumanesociety.org** and **MSPCA.org** (MSPCA Angel) offer step-by-step advice on creating a pet disaster plan.
- ◆ **At ASPCA.org**, you can get disaster advice and order a free Pet Safety Pack for a pet-rescue sticker to place on a window at your home entrance to alert rescuers to pets inside.

Worse, after the January 1997 floods in Yuba County, Calif., a study found that one reason some people left cats behind in an evacuation was that they had no cat carriers.

No Advance Warning. Disasters that occur without advance warning put pets at special risk, Green says. Wildland fires, earthquakes and tornadoes are the top three in his view. House fires are an easily forgotten peril, though Dr. Schoeffler sees firefighters, passers-by, neighbors and other family members take pet victims of fires to the Cornell hospital several times a year. "Unfortunately, people living in that house may have been injured themselves and have been transported [for treatment]," says Dr. Schoeffler. "As a result, we're not dealing with immediate family. We're dealing with people who are trying to help the family that suffered the loss."

All of which reinforces the advice that it's wise to enlist a neighbor to rescue your pets when you're not home and always keep a disaster kit ready to grab on the run. ♦



Elizabeth

Elizabeth is thankful for the assistance of **Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., DACVIM**, Associate Director of the Cornell Feline Health Center, in providing the answer on this page.

**PLEASE
SHARE YOUR
QUESTIONS**

We welcome questions on health, medicine and behavior, but regret that we cannot comment on prior diagnoses and specific products. Please write CatWatch Editor, 800 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT, 06854 or email catwatcheditor@cornell.edu.

COMING UP ...

❖
**URINARY TRACT
INFECTIONS**

❖
**BEST FOOD
FOR SENIORS**

❖
**CARE OF
THE EARS**

❖
WHY CATS BITE

Q We have a 7-year-old male domestic short-haired cat who lives his life both indoors and out. Given the recent media about the effect of cats on wildlife, my husband and I are conflicted about what to do. We want our boy to be happy, but we don't want to be contributing to ecological troubles. Do you have any advice?

Sincerely, Conflicted Parents

A I completely understand your thoughts on this matter, as recent developments have caused many owners (and cats ... believe it or not!) to reconsider their habits and the effects that their lifestyle may have on native populations. The recent study suggesting that domestic cats are contributing to the demise of billions of birds and small mammals points out the fact that the interaction of domestic species with native wildlife is an important issue, one that requires careful thought and action.

Responses to this recent study have ranged from thoughtful consideration to fervent calls for the wholesale banning of cats (perish the thought!). Being a cat, I understand that we cats are natural hunters. When we stalk and catch small prey, we are just acting upon instinct that has evolved over millions of years.

It is ironic that the very behavior that likely prompted our domestication (catching small prey like vermin that would invade vital grain stores) is now the subject of such hot debate. Cats will be cats, and while our predatory behavior may be viewed in a positive light in some circumstances, it can be a source of potential problems in others.

A major issue in this controversy is the size of the feral cat population, and the practices that contribute to this burgeoning trend. Estimates place the size of the U.S. feral cat population at between 60 and 80 million cats. This massive population raises a number of issues ranging from the well-being of feral cats, which can be less than optimal in some cases, to their potential effect on public health and, of course, native species.

Feral cats raise strong voices from both the pro and con camps, but I think that this debate provides an opportunity for us all to come together to address this important issue. Potential solutions to the control of feral cat populations are controversial, but continued research into the development of improved methods of population control, including, for example, a vaccine-based contraceptive, holds promise for the future.

One thing that I think we all agree on is that owners should understand that when they adopt a cat, it is a commitment for the rest of the cat's life. Too many owners are releasing their cats to become a part of the unowned cat population without thinking about the (numerous) consequences of this practice. Owners should also understand the importance of having their cats spayed and neutered, and they should make every attempt to keep their cats indoors at all times.

I know that you want your kitty to be happy, but it is a fallacy that cats can be happy only when they are allowed outside. Cats who are kept indoors are less likely to be injured by cars and other animals and are generally less likely to contract potentially devastating infectious diseases. Indoor cats also have no effect on native animal populations.

If you feel that you must let your kitty out, an enclosure is a great way to do this, and I have seen some very interesting ones, indeed (see www.paws.org)! If you insist on letting your boy out without enclosures and supervision, it would be best to at least keep him inside during times when native species are most vulnerable (i.e., when fledglings and young mammals are not fully mature). Fitting your cat with a collar with a bell on it may also provide potential prey with advance warning of an approaching kitty and time to escape.

I hope this has provided you with some options and some food for thought. We all want both cats and our native animal friends to thrive in their respective environments, and it is at the interface of these environments that we must focus together on solutions to these issues. ❖

—Sincerely, Elizabeth

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