Do our pets hurt wildlife?

by Anne Muraski

Most of us know that introduced species can damage ecosystems. They destroy habitat, eat available food and displace native animals. Harder to accept is that we might be aiding and abetting one of these "poachers" in our own homes.

Dozens of studies show that domestic cats can kill numerous birds and mammals each year, even when they are well-fed at home. While there is debate about predation estimates made from these studies, even the most conservative numbers put annual U.S. bird mortalities from cat predation in the hundreds of millions. (See bibliography for article reference and further reading.)

This is no news to SPCA Wildlife Center staff, who see many "cat-caught" animals annually. Dogs running at large or off-leash are also harmful when they raid rabbit nests, chase urban waterfowl, and attack fawns or other defenseless wild animals.

"In rural and urban areas, the cat population can vastly outnumber all the local wild predators combined," says Ron Jurek, a wildlife biologist who works in the non-game Bird and Mammal Conservation Program of the California Department of Fish and Game. Jurek points out that one out of three California bird species nests on or near the ground. "From the perspective of a nesting quail, a cat can be much more of a threat than a wild predator.

We love our pets. We care about wildlife. What can we do? As responsible pet owners, we can consider making changes in our animal's and our own behavior. But this takes conviction—conviction that conserving wildlife and preventing suffering is more important than our own temporary inconvenience or the perceived "happiness" of our pets. This is a decision we must make in our heads, as well as our hearts. Looking at some common misconceptions may help.

"It's only natural that cats and dogs hunt."

Cats and dogs are non-native species selectively bred by humans over thousands of years to produce traits that have no relation to the delicate balance of any natural ecosystem. A cat or dog killing a wild animal is no more the "natural order of things" than a car killing the same animal.

Wild populations are controlled by available food, weather, other predators and the carrying capacity of the habitat, while pets are largely unaffected by these controls. Wild predators kill in order to survive, whereas cats and dogs also kill for sport. While most wild predators breed only once a year, cats and dogs can have several litters annually. One female cat and her offspring can produce a staggering 420,000 cats in just seven years! The overpopulation of domestic cats is estimated at between 50-60 million in the United States alone—all are non-native predators.

"Wildlife has so many problems—why focus on pets?"

While habitat loss, ecosystem fragmentation and pollution cause much more wildlife mortality than predation by our pets, all these problems are directly caused by human population growth, and all can be minimized by choices we make everyday. Even if you don't believe that cat or dog predation has much impact on any wildlife species as a whole, there is still the suffering of the individual songbird fledge, baby brush bunny or tree frog to consider—suffering which is in our power to prevent.

Native birds and their nests are protected by federal law. With the help of some simple behavior changes, we may not need to sacrifice the lives of wildlife in exchange for the companionship of a pet.

"My pet doesn't hurt anything."

Are you sure? Do your neighbors agree? While it's true that not all cats hunt, cats who do hunt do not necessarily bring their kills home. The only way to be absolutely sure you're protecting wildlife is to supervise or confine your cat when he is outside, or keep him indoors.

Even if your cat is not a "sport hunter," can you be sure he doesn't: raid garbage, defecate in children's sand boxes, ruin bird watching at feeders, get locked in garages, claw plants, ruin peoples' sleep by caterwauling, wound other cats, dart in front of cars, or cause odor problems by spraying houses, yard furniture, tools etc.

Canines also kill wildlife and damage property; it is illegal to let your dog roam unsupervised. Even if your dog is harmless, he may be mistaken for a stray and picked up by a concerned passerby. If your dog does not respond to voice command, local ordinances require that he be on a leash when walked off your property.

"My cat only kills gophers—that's fine with me."

Since most cats only bring home a fraction of their prey, there is no way to guarantee that your cat is not killing other mammals and songbirds. Even if you consider gophers and other rodents to be less desirable than other wildlife, they are part of an interconnected...
web that effects the entire ecosystem. When cats kill rodents, there is less food for wild raptors and mammals that depend on this prey base. These wild predators then dwindle in numbers or, in an effort to avoid starvation and feed young, start exerting extra pressure on other prey sources, such as songbirds. As an overpopulation of introduced predators, cats can profoundly effect the balance of the food web.

"My cat wears a bell/is declawed."

The small, tingly bell commonly sold with cat collars is not loud enough to reliably prevent cat predation. Even three or four bells will only prevent predation a fraction of the time. A very loud bell, if coupled with a reflective I.D. tag which also protects your pet (use a break-away or stretch safety collar) may increase effectiveness, but bells don’t ring when a cat slowly stalks.

Declawing is not a solution either, as cats do not need their claws to capture or kill prey. A declawed cat will simply bat a bird to the ground and bite it. Also, a declawed cat is defenseless and should not be outside unattended. Supervising and confining pets is the only way to be sure you’re protecting wildlife.

"It’s cruel to keep a cat indoors."

If you’ve ever seen a cat-caught wild animal, you know that the exact opposite is true—it is common for cats to prolong suffering by playing with their prey. While the SPCA does not require that adopted cats be kept exclusively indoors, we encourage everyone to consider this option. Here are just a few things that indoor cats miss out on: speeding cars, rat poison, small bait, antifreeze, cat fights, costly veterinary bills, fleas, worms, dog attacks, BB guns, steel-jaw traps, rabies, feline leukemia, feline immune deficiency, getting lost or trapped—the list goes on and on.

Frequency of urination and the condition of your pet’s stool is a major indicator of health. If your cat uses the "outdoor bathroom" exclusively, you have no way to detect painful urinary blockage, digestive diseases and infections that may ultimately be fatal. Does your cat "disappear" for days at a time? Does your cat or dog wear an I.D. tag? If animal control or a well-meaning neighbor delivers your pet to the SPCA as a stray, he may be euthanized after only 72 hours.

We do our feline friends a favor by protecting them from this kind of "freedom." While indoor cats can live 17 years or more, the Humane Society of the United States reports that free-roaming cats live an average of only 3-5 years.

"My cat won’t stay inside."

Like children, our pets depend on us to set limits for their safety, and the well-being of society and the planet—we make the rules. Most dogs would probably like to run unchecked too. The myth that cats are "independent" has added to their suffering. Cats are domesticated and depend on us for every need. With perseverance and some effort to create a stimulating environment, virtually any cat can be happy indoors or with limited, supervised outdoor access.

"Keeping my cats hungry helps control rodents."

On the contrary, hungry cats range so far from home that they kill fewer rodents close by. The resulting depletion in the area’s food supply can effect hawks, owls and scavengers who depend on rodents and other small animals in order to survive. In domestic cats, the urge to hunt is independent of the urge to eat. Well-fed cats will stay closer to home and catch more rodents in the barn. Like dogs and cattle, cats are dependent on humans; if you expect them to "live off the land" like a wild animal you are burdening ecosystems.

What you can do:

- Support ordinances designed to decrease pet overpopulation. According to 115US, 35,090 kittens are born in the United States every day, as compared with 10,000 humans. Many kittens end up as feral cats who kill wildlife and raid dumpsters to survive. More than 8 million dogs and cats are euthanized in the U.S. each year because nobody wants them. Spay and neuter all your pets. This easy and relatively inexpensive surgery can reduce spraying and territorial marking, fighting, roaming, hunting and the risk of many cancers.

- If you have a cat that hunts, keep him indoors, provide an outdoor enclosure, or allow only supervised outdoor excursions (see attached Tips for Cat Owners).

- Never abandon unwanted pets: it is a violation of State law, and cruel to the pet and wildlife. When you set a cat or dog "free" in the country, you are releasing a non-native predator to kill wildlife. Domestic pets depend on humans to survive; a "released" pet is an abandoned pet who most likely will starve to death or get hit by a car. Bring unwanted animals to the SPCA where they will have a chance to find a loving home.

- Wildlife is especially vulnerable to attack during the spring and summer baby season. Baby birds are "sitting ducks" for cats since many leave the nest early to spend days, even weeks near the ground learning to fly. If you find a fledgling on the ground where free-roaming cats are a threat, it may be best to deliver the bird to the SPCA to mature safely. (Very young, totally flightless birds should be returned to the nest, but active fledglings probably will not stay there. See What to Do When You Find a Wild Animal.) Use a light towel to capture the bird. Keep the animal dark, warm and quiet inside a covered box and call the SPCA immediately. To minimize stress, avoid handling the animal. Never try to care for wild animals yourself; they have specialized diets and it is illegal to keep wildlife without a permit.

All cat-caught animals should be brought to the SPCA—never release one back to the wild. Puncture wounds are difficult to detect and cause fatal infections.

- Be sure bird feeders are inaccessible to climbing cats. Locate feeders away from brush that might provide cover for cats—this includes the area below the feeder where seeds may fall. Don't feed birds on the ground. If a cat threatens nests or your feeder, you can wrap a 2-3 foot wide piece of metal sheeting or other barrier around the tree trunk at approximately 4-6 feet off the ground to prevent climbing. (See side listing for sources.)

- If you see a cat stalking wild prey, chase him off or squirt him lightly with a hose.

- Share this sheet with friends and neighbors.