

# Cats vs. Wildlife

## How many cats are there in the United States?

The estimated numbers of pet cats in urban and rural regions of the United States have grown from 30 million in 1970 to 60 million in 1990. These estimates include only those cats that people claim to “own” as pets, not cats that are semi-wild or free-ranging. Nationwide, approximately 30% of households have cats. In rural areas where free-ranging cats are usually not regarded as pets, approximately 60% of households have cats. The combined total of pets and free-ranging cats in the U.S. is probably more than 100 million.

## What effects do domestic cats have on wildlife?

Although rural cats take the greatest toll, even urban house pets take live prey when allowed outside. Small mammals make up approximately 70% of these cats’ prey while birds make up about 20%. The remaining 10% is a variety of other animals.

Observation of free-ranging domestic cats shows that some individuals can kill over 1000 wild animals per year. Some of the data on kills suggest that free-ranging cats living in small towns kill an average of 14 wild animals each per year. Nationwide, rural cats probably kill over a billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds each year. Urban and suburban cats add to this toll. Some of these kills are house mice, rats and other species considered pests, but many are native songbirds and mammals whose populations are already stressed by other factors, such as habitat destruction and pesticide pollution.

Worldwide, cats may have been involved in the extinction of more bird species than any other cause, except habitat destruction. Cats are contributing to the endangerment of populations of birds such as Least Terns, Piping Plovers and Loggerhead Shrikes. In Florida, marsh rabbits in Key West have been threatened by predation from domestic cats. Cats introduced by people living on the barrier islands of Florida’s coast have depleted several unique species of mice and woodrats to near extinction.

## The effect on native predators

Not only do cats prey on many small mammals and birds, but they can outnumber and compete with native predators. Domestic cats eat many of the same animals that native predators do. When present in large numbers, cats can reduce the availability of prey for native predators, such as hawks. Free-ranging domestic cats may also transmit new diseases to wild animals. Domestic cats have spread feline leukemia virus to mountain lions and may have recently infected the endangered Florida Panther with feline panleukopenia (feline distemper) and an immune deficiency disease. These diseases may pose a serious threat to this rare species. Some free-ranging domestic cats also carry several diseases that are easily transmitted to humans, including rabies and toxoplasmosis.

Because many cats are protected and fed by humans, their population is not checked by the natural occurrences such as disease, predation and scarcity of wild game.

## The effect on cats

The average life span of an indoor house cat is 15 to 20 years. A free roaming domestic cat can expect to live only 4 years. This is due to disease, injuries and infection resulting from fights with wild animals and other cats, gunshots and automobiles. Domestic cats are also one of the favored foods of the Eastern Coyote and the Great Horned Owl. Keeping a cat indoors not only protects local wildlife, but the cat and (as you will see) the people with whom the cat comes in contact.

## The effect on people

Rabies is a virus that attacks the central nervous system of warm blooded animals, including humans. Once it reaches the final symptomatic stage, it is 100% fatal. Cats are one of the most common carriers of rabies and many rural cats are not vaccinated. Because of their close association with people and other domestic animals, cats pose a greater risk of transmitting rabies to humans and other pets than do wild rabies vector species such as raccoons, skunk, fox, woodchucks, coyotes and bats.

## How you can help

### Pet cats

- Keep only as many pets as you can control and care for
- Keep domestic cats indoors
- Spay and neuter all cats
- Vaccinate all cats regularly
- Place birdfeeders away from areas where cats can hide and stalk birds
- Leash train your cat for outdoor exercise

### Farmers that need barnyard cats for rodent control:

- Keep only as many cats as needed to control rodent populations
- Spay and neuter all cats
- Spayed female cats are more likely to stay close to farm buildings
- Vaccinate all cats regularly
- Place owl boxes near barns to attract natural predators

Your Rehabilitator