

BATTLING FERAL CATS

by Conor Doherty





Feral cats top the list of the most destructive species in Australia, costing the economy a huge \$18.5 billion over the last 60 years in damage and population control measures. In Western Australia, new technology and community-based action, backed by a nation-first strategy, are helping control feral cats to protect our precious wildlife and biodiversity.

Feral cats have a devastating impact on native wildlife, particularly small-to-medium sized mammals, and are considered the most destructive single species in Australia.

They are lethal predators, preying on billions of native animals in the Australian bush each year.

Here in Western Australia, 36 mammals, 22 bird and 11 reptile species are vulnerable to predation by feral cats, and a wide range of other native animals are also adversely affected, including threatened species.

Their prey includes threatened species such as the western ground parrot (*Pezoporus flaviventris*), Gilbert’s potoroo (*Potorous gilbertii*), chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*), woylie (*Bettongia penicillata*), numbat (*Myrmecobius fasciatus*), mainland quokka (*Setonix brachyurus*) and bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*).

A key project under the National Environmental Science Program Threatened Species Recovery Hub estimated a typical feral cat roaming the Australian bush can kill more than 700 small animals a year.

WHAT IS A FERAL CAT?

Feral, stray and domestic cats are the same species, *Felis catus*, however they differ markedly in how and where they live and their reliance on people.

Domestic cat ownership is regulated under the *Cat Act 2011*, which requires their identification and registration, and encourages responsible cat ownership.

Stray cats live in the wild fending for themselves because they have become lost or abandoned. They are found in and around towns, cities and rural properties.

Feral cats live and reproduce in the wild. They are not owned or socialised and survive on their own in the wild by hunting.

Feral cats are found across Western Australia in all types of habitats including forests, woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and arid areas. They were declared a pest animal in Western Australia in June 2019 under the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007*, allowing for the



humane management of feral cats to mitigate their impact on native fauna.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

The Western Australian Feral Cat Strategy 2023–2028 is the first of its kind to be implemented by a State or Territory Government in Australia. The strategy supports the National Threat Abatement Plan and was developed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA), the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) and a range of key stakeholders.

In a state with a total land area of more than 2.5 million square kilometres, coordinating landscape-scale management of feral cats presents a huge challenge to government, landowners, community and not-for-profit groups.

In response to the ongoing decimation of native fauna by feral cats, the Western Australian Government launched the state-wide strategy in July 2023 to mitigate impacts of this introduced predator.

The five-year plan encourages the use of new technology to help combat feral cat impacts on native wildlife and provides a framework to guide a four-year, \$7.6 million government investment and ensure there is a coordinated approach to feral cat management across the State.

The funding will enable research programs, conservation projects and landscape-scale management of feral cats in key conservation areas across WA.



Hear more about feral cats

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Left, clockwise from top Numbat (*Myrmecobius fasciatus*). Photo – Jiri Lochman. Slender tree frog (*Litoria adelaidensis*). Photo – Alice McGlashan/Sallyanne Cousins Photography. Western ground parrot. Photo – AlanDanks/DBCA **Right** Feral cat. Photo – alan1951/Adobe Stock

Above Feral cat caught on camera with a brush-tailed phascogale (*Phascogale tapoatafa*). Photo – DBCA

Grants

Feral Cat Management Grants are one of the initiatives funded under the WA Feral Cat Strategy. The grants are managed by the DPIRD's State Natural Resource Management Program in partnership with DBCA and are available for community-based projects to support feral cat management with conservation outcomes for WA's native fauna.

There is \$2 million available over four years to support Traditional Owners, community groups and non-government organisations to control feral cats and build community awareness.

Funding recipients from the first two grant rounds were announced in March and August 2024, with \$500,000 in grants allocated to five projects in round one and a further \$500,000 to three projects in round two.

Successful projects from the first two rounds have included an aerial baiting program to protect greater bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*) populations in parts of the Pilbara, trialling innovative trapping technologies to protect native species including malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*) and chuditch (*Dasyurus geoffroii*), undertaking strategic feral cat management to create buffer zones around priority areas in Dryandra Woodland National Park, and delivering a coordinated approach to feral cat management to protect threatened species including the chuditch, hooded plover (*Thinornis cucullatus*) and Australasian bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) in the Great Southern region.

Management options

Options to manage feral cats in Western Australia include:

- landscape-scale management: strategically using aerially deployed feral cat bait options such as Eradicat® baits
- supporting Aboriginal ranger programs to manage feral cats
- trapping and shooting: although labour intensive, trapping and shooting may be feasible for protecting native species at key sites
- using new technologies: new poison-delivery technology for use in specific situations, such as Felixer™ grooming traps.

Feral cat control must be humane and undertaken in accordance with the *Animal Welfare Act 2002*.

Robot technology

One new technology the strategy supports is the use of Felixer™ grooming traps, which received Commonwealth Government approval in 2022 for rollout after successful research trials.

Felixers™ use lasers and cameras to detect the shape and movement of a cat, before shooting a toxic 1080 gel. The feral cat will instinctively groom itself to remove the gel and, in doing so, ingests a lethal dose of poison.

While not effective as a means of landscape-scale feral cat control, Felixer™ traps provide a promising method for small-scale and targeted control of feral cats in locations such as islands, enclosures or localised areas of high conservation value.

In 2018, DBCA in collaboration with Roy Hill and Fortescue Metals Group commenced testing three Felixer™ units in photo-

only mode in the Pilbara region in the presence of northern quolls (*Dasyurus hallucatus*) and a variety of other species to test for target specificity.

Northern quolls, which are endangered nationally and in WA, were identified as a potentially problematic target-species for Felixer™ use due to their cat-like shape.

Felixers™ have been deployed in various parts of the State including the Southern Jarrah Forest, Pilbara and south coast and have shown promise as a complementary tool.



Above Powderbark Wandoo Track, Dryandra Woodland National Park.
Photo – DBCA

Below Feral cat feeding on a kangaroo roadkill carcass in South Australia.
Photo – 169169/Adobe Stock

Inset below A solar-powered Felixer cat grooming trap, on site at Chingarrup Sanctuary, as part of Bush Heritage's Fitz-Stirling Fauna Recovery Program.
Photo – Eddy Wajon/Sallyanne Cousins Photography





Almost \$2.7 million will increase aerial feral cat baiting through the Western Shield program, allowing the number of baits laid to increase by more than 45 per cent under the strategy. Another \$2 million went to the State Natural Resource Management Grants Program to support community-driven projects.

HELICOPTER MONITORING

On occasion, with the aid of helicopters, DBCA monitors feral cats fitted with GPS collars to gain valuable insight into their behaviour and habitat use to improve feral cat management.

The GPS collars used on feral cats have a limited communication distance for downloading the data. In some instances, the collared feral cats are too far away from roads, inhibiting access to the data from road-based vehicles.

By using helicopters, the team can survey large areas efficiently and quickly, successfully tracking the feral cats and downloading the data from the air.

A VHF antenna fitted to the front of the aircraft is connected to the receiver in the aircraft to roughly locate the cat. The receiver 'beeps' when flying over a collared feral cat on the ground.

Data collected helps to determine a feral cat's home range, how far they travel, and when they frequent these areas.

This information can then be verified against, and guide, on-ground monitoring

methods where cameras are used to assess activity trends for feral cats to gauge management effectiveness.

Aerial monitoring of collared feral cats via helicopter is conducted DBCA's South Coast and Midwest regions and in the Avon Valley.

SIGNS OF SUCCESS

1080 baiting is recognised as the most effective method for landscape-scale management of feral cats on mainland Australia. Landscape-scale baiting with 1080 poison through DBCA's Western Shield program is the primary tool used to manage feral cats on DBCA-managed land.

Funding allocated through the WA Feral Cat Strategy is enabling the area baited with the patented feral cat bait, Eradicat® to be significantly expanded to include new sites in the Wheatbelt and South Coast regions to reduce the impact of feral cats on our native fauna.

Despite significant challenges, there have been success stories. Managing introduced predators has supported the recovery of black-flanked rock wallabies in the Calvert Range and Cape Range National Park.

In the Goldfields, feral cat management in collaboration with the Wiluna Martu Traditional Owners has allowed the reintroduction of free-ranging bilbies and brushtail possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*).

Above left Dr Michelle Drew tracking feral cats from a helicopter.

Above Feral cat being fitted with a GPS tracking collar.

Photos – DBCA

Below Common brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*).

Photo – Sarah Comer/DBCA



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