

FERAL CAT MENACE

The New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service has produced a leaflet on feral cats. This leaflet explains the effects that feral cats can have on the wildlife in National Parks and Reserves, affecting the populations of such native animals as birds, mice, snakes, frogs, lizards and possums.

The leaflet provides the following information:

"Feral animals are domestic animals that live and breed in the wild and include cats, dogs, pigs, horses, donkeys, camels and goats.

All of these animals have been able to adapt their way of life to survive in the wild and may have adapted so well that they are now considered pests to agriculture and nature. Feral animals, such as pigs have become major pests to agriculture and have been declared noxious animals by the Department of Agriculture. They must be destroyed by all property owners.

The introduction of feral animals into nature's delicate balance has tipped the scales to the detriment of many of our native species. Some introduced species may prey on native species or compete for food. Others may graze an area so completely that the ground cover is removed, resulting in the vegetation structure being substantially modified or the soil being eroded by wind and rain. Still others become a reservoir and a vector for diseases of domestic stock and man. In all, the effect of feral animals on Australia has been uniformly disastrous.

Feral Cats

The domestic animal gone wild is a great destroyer of wildlife. It stalks small native animals, climbs trees and steals the young and eggs of birds.

As far back as the 1850s colonies of feral cats were established in the wild. These colonies were increased by strays and by the abandonment of unwanted pets. They found ample food and faced little competition from predators. The feral cat population was given a further boost in the 1880s when farmers liberated and encouraged cats to live on bushland properties to control rabbits, rats and mice. Their value in this capacity is hard to assess. In the case of rabbits, feral cats have proven ineffective in controlling their build up and spread. Feral cats also seem to do little to curb the frequent outbreaks of rodent plagues.

Habits: Feral cats are commonly found in almost all environments except rainforests.

When properly trained and supervised most household cats are delightful pets. Once roaming wild in the bush a feral cat becomes extremely cunning, ferocious and shy of people. It becomes a skilful night hunter, preying on small rats, mice and marsupials.

Foods: Feral cats are opportunistic predators and scavengers. They will prey on the most available and most easily caught animals in the area where they live. They eat a variety of small animals, including rabbits, birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects. They also feed on garbage scraps near towns and farm buildings and eat carrion of large dead animals.

Because of their difficulty of capture, birds are usually a minor part of the diet of feral cats, except on islands where many sea birds nest and migratory birds rest and breed in large numbers. The birds which nest in burrows are the most vulnerable. Significant declines in populations of these birds have been reported on islands infested with feral cats.

In forests and natural areas, feral cats feed mainly on *native* rats and mice, possums and lizards, while in agricultural areas where there are very few native animals, the introduced rabbit, black rat and house mouse make up a large proportion of their diet.

It is open to question whether the feral cat has been responsible for the decline of some native animals through predation or direct competition for food. The once common Eastern native cat (*Dasyurus viverrinus*) is now either rare or extinct over much of its former range and the feral cat may now be doing little more than filling a vacant ecological niche left by the disappearance of this native predator.

Even the most lovable of our house cats can prey upon wildlife if allowed to roam bushland areas.

Below is the record of one well fed domestic cat from Wahroonga, a bushland suburb of Sydney. This list, of course, represents the minimum of the destructive efforts of one cat as a large amount of prey would not be returned to be seen by the owner.

Year—Animals Captured

- 1969—1 skink, 3 frogs, tiger snake and house mouse.
- 1970—4 magpie larks, 5 red wattle birds, lesser long eared bat, common mynah.
- 1971—2 magpie larks, 1 red wattle bird, 1 rat.
- 1972—2 fan tail cuckoos, common mynah, grey thrush, bluetongue skink, 3 red wattle birds, magpie lark, 3 yellow winged honeyeaters, eastern spinebill.
- 1973—6 red wattle birds, 2 rats, 2 white eared honeyeaters.
- 1974—2 rats (different species), 3 red wattle birds, 2 little wattle birds, winged termites, 3 skinks.
- 1975—2 mynahs, 1 small bluetongue skink, 1 skink, 1 little wattle bird, 4 red wattle birds, grey thrush, 1 grey butcher-bird, 1 white eared honeyeater, 1 king cricket, 1 longicorn beetle.
(Based on A. B. Rose, 1976).

The effect of feral cats on native wildlife does not stop at competition and predation, it extends to disease. Although not well documented it is known that feral cats and dogs have introduced diseases, such as sarcoptic mange and toxoplasmosis, into native populations. The latter is a disease which can affect man and produce spontaneous abortion, ulcerations and blindness.

Control of Feral Cats

Feral cats are extremely difficult to control because they are shy, generally wary of traps and baits, and often frequent inaccessible areas.

There are two methods of attacking the feral cat problem. One is to eradicate feral cats living in natural and agricultural areas and the other is to prevent the release of more domestic cats into the bush-land areas.

To eradicate feral cats from the wild is very difficult because of the attitude which still persists among many landholders that cats keep rabbit and mice numbers down. This is only true when these introduced animals are already in low numbers and are not widespread. Consequently little has been done to effectively control feral cats.

Other techniques such as shooting and poisoning are highly selective and labour intensive. Trapping is difficult, but if a feral cat is caught it should be taken to the local veterinarian or the R.S.P.C.A. to be humanely destroyed. Do not remove the feral cat from the trap yourself as they are ferocious and can seriously damage your legs and arms.

Research is continuing into the use of pathogens and parasites, and pheromones are being investigated to control or attract feral cats to traps.

Other methods of preventing the release or dumping of household cats have centred on the legal requirements of the National Parks and Wildlife Acts, which contain penalties for liberating cats into the bush.

Perhaps the most useful approach is to educate the community of the dangers caused to wildlife and the health of stock by releasing or dumping domestic cats or kittens in the bush.

Your support is needed to make it work."

Further reading

- Anon. (1977). Domestic Animals gone Bush. *Ecos.* No. 13: 10-18.
- Frith, H. J. (1973). *Wildlife Conservation*, Angus and Robertson, p.414.
- Rolls, E. C. (1969). *They all ran wild*—the story of pests on the land in Australia. Angus and Robertson.
- Rose, A. B. (1976). *Cats, Parks and Wildlife* 1 (5) 170..
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