

OFTEN cats are an integral component of the farm scene. The ubiquitous moggie is seen patrolling hay or feedsheds for rats and mice, and presenting themselves at the homestead for delicacies such as a saucer of milk, offal from a freshly killed sheep or a scratch behind the ear. Unfortunately cats are introduced predators with which our native fauna can't co-exist. All cats possess a schizophrenic trait that enables them to transform from an innocuous Matthew Meow at home to a ferocious Matt the Feral Cat, beyond the confines of the farmhouse. All cats including pet cats hunt by instinct. The vast proportion of wildlife killed by them is killed within close proximity of the house.

Although our native fauna contains native predators, they have evolved in conjunction with the prey species and thus a sustainable balance between predator and prey has been struck. Cats are a relatively recent addition to the natural ecosystem and as a consequence, prey species have not been able to withstand the hunting pressure placed on them by cats. This can result in many native species becoming locally extinct, with a detrimental flow-on effect to the local ecosystem.

During a recent study by Martin et al., 18 known food categories were identified from stomach samples taken from feral cats. Cats from the pastoral regions were shown to have a dietary breadth two fold greater from cats in rural or urban areas. Stomach samples taken were broadly grouped within five major food groups.

Category	Rural %	Pastoral %
Mammal	68	90
Bird	9	36
Reptile	0	44
Amphibian	16	4
Invertebrate	52	72

Figure 1: Percentage occurrence of five major food groups in cats from rural and pastoral areas. (after Martin et al.)

PRACTICALITIES

THE CAT'S HOME, AL-CAT-RAZ

by David A Lamont

Have you noticed that there are no longer any small birds or lizards around the house ?



Do you miss the calls of the birds? Is there a moggie in your life ?



You can have your moggies and wildlife too!

Read how...



The stomach samples used in the study of Martin et al. were all taken from feral cats but even well fed pet cats can and do kill wildlife.

Rural	Pastoral
Introduced rodents	Native rodents
Rabbits	Crickets etc
Crickets etc	Small native carnivores
Birds	Birds
Frogs	dragon and monitor lizards
Spiders	Geckos
Honey Possums	Introduced rodents

Figure 2: The relative rank of the seven most important food categories for rural and pastoral cats (after Martin et al.)

Martin et al record that a study of the diet of urban cats in Canberra revealed that it consisted of $\approx 64\%$ introduced mammals, 27% birds (10% native species), 7% reptiles.

It is estimated that on average, each pet cat kills 25 creatures annually. Whilst it is difficult to quantify the population of cats in Western Australia, it can be appreciated that at 25 kills per cat annually they are responsible for the loss of many millions of native species of fauna each year. Often birds and animals birds or animals "saved" from cats may appear uninjured but invariably still die shortly afterwards from shock.

With the wide variety of foods eaten by cats it is not surprising that their mouths carry high levels of bacteria. Consequently a relatively minor bite can manifest itself as an infection to native animals. The infection spreads rapidly as native fauna has little resistance to these infections. Another effect that cats have on native fauna is as vectors of toxoplasmosis, a protozoan disease which can devastate wildlife populations.

Clearly cats and wildlife cannot live together, and even the presence of cats can inhibit wildlife. Nevertheless many families still enjoy the companionship offered by cats and this can be achieved by erecting a cat enclosure. About six months ago we erected a cat enclosure (now referred to as "AL-CAT-raz") and the effect on the local wildlife has been remarkable. The birdlife has always been prolific but wrens and honey eaters are now coming right up to the house secure in the knowledge that the moggies are doing time behind bars.

We erected an aviary type of structure but with heavier wire mesh as our cats were able to break through normal birdwire. That is in fact how this whole exercise started as the cats broke into the budgie cage one night and ate the budgies. So the budgie cage was repaired and the cats took up residence in it until we built a larger enclosure.

The cat enclosure is approximately 5 x 4 m with an enclosed shed in one corner. A

number of logs and stumps have been provided in different locations to catch the sun and shade at various times of the day. Our cats are brought inside to be fed and stay there most of the time but instead of allowing them to roam free outside they are locked safely away. The initial response from many people has been one of horror when they learn of our incarcerated cats but after a very short time our moggies have settled into their new home and seem quite well adjusted to it.

So now we are able to enjoy our beautiful birds and be confident that they will not come to any harm from our feline friends. The only negative aspect of this exercise has been an initial increase in mice and for a

short time they almost over ran the place until we baited for them with anti-coagulants. If you would like more details of the design please ring me.



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References

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- Martin, G. R., Twigg, L. E., and Robinson, DJ. 1996. Comparison of the Diet of Feral cats from Rural and Pastoral Western Australia. Wildlife Research 23; pp. 475 - 84.*

*Cartoons by John Alison
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