

CATS: THE ROAMERS AND THE HOMERS



Cat catching warbler at bird-bath

I'll try not to be biased, but...

Over the past 29 years my readers—readers of my books, articles and particularly my newsletter, *Notes and Anecdotes*, know how deeply I feel about cats killing wild birds, chipmunks, and so on, when so much of this maiming and slaughter is preventable. You may remember that we have had 570 *proven or witnessed* cat-mangled admissions, and an unknown number of probable/possible ones. Cat damage is heart-wrenching to see when you are holding the bleeding, terrified victim in your hand, and it often overwhelms the little creature with pain, shock and infection.

The following are dollops of information I have read about or heard from veterinarians, and some are backed up by the many anecdotes that have been told to me by people who have neighbours with wandering cats, but cannot diplomatically find a way to tell these neighbours how angry they feel. Though I try not to be biased in this article, there are few positive things to be said for wandering cats; on the other hand, there are many positive things to be said about clean, safe, indoor pets.

The Dangers to the Roamer

- **Bacterial infections** from aggressive encounters with other cats or wild animals. These may result in painful abscesses and infected wounds needing (expensive) veterinary treatment. One sign to look for is flies around the cat, seeking the wounds in which to lay their eggs.
- **Viral infections** e.g., Chlamydia, Feline Leukemia, Feline Distemper, Feline Infectious Peritonitis, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, Feline Upper Respiratory Disease, and Rabies.
- **External parasites: fleas, ticks and mites.** Did you know that one flea can produce hundreds of eggs, and for every flea on your pet, there are at least 250 in your carpet? Fleas can spread infection too, such as Cat-scratch Disease and even plague (honestly!)
- **Internal parasites of the gut and liver:** hookworms, roundworms, tapeworms, flukes. Hook-

worms live in the cat's digestive tract; their larvae are excreted in feces, and through contact with damp earth or sand the larvae burrow into human flesh and finally into human intestines. Children, electricians, plumbers and others who crawl beneath raised buildings are susceptible. And sunbathers!

- **Toxoplasmosis**, a protozoan parasite cats get after eating infected birds, mice, shrews, frogs, snakes. Up to 80% of roamers get sick from this. *Also see Dangers to Humans*
- **Angry neighbours** may take matters into their own hands. Trespassing roamers mysteriously disappear; shot (*bang!* the 25-cent solution, one annoyed person told me) stoned, or poisoned perhaps with mouse or rat bait which causes internal haemorrhage, or poisoned with antifreeze – lapping up as little as a teaspoon of this sweet fluid is fatal.
- **Live-trapping** of cats on personal property is legal where by-laws do not permit roamers
- **Natural predators:** Fishers, coyotes, and some Great Horned Owls can, and do, eat cats
- **Vehicle encounters** (“pancake pussies”). Over 1.5 *million* cats are road-killed each year with many more maimed. Accidents are often caused by attempting to avoid a cat
- **Under the hood** They climb up to relax over a warm vehicle engine in winter. Then when the engine is restarted, the fan....



Another story sent to me was of a cat dropped by a Great Horned Owl (Oak Bay, July 2006). The cat suffered three broken legs and several deep punctures.

The Dangers to the Human

Try to imagine what the wandering cat has licked up, walked over, dug into, rubbed against and chewed on, when it hightails in to cuddle with the family and be kissed by the children. Puss has had close encounters with other animals, bitten into raw meat (mice) and repeatedly paw-stroked over fresh feces when covering them up

- **Tetanus spores** can be carried on the feet of cats and enter the human system by a small scratch or bite. Survival is rare
- **Cat-scratch Disease** caused by *Bartonella henselae*, may send people to hospital after being clawed by an infected cat
- **Lyme Disease**, a bacteria carried by ticks, causes serious illness in humans and dogs when cats or dogs transport infected ticks home
- **Plague** In the American southwest, cats now transmit plague from wild rodent fleas
- **Rabies** usually fatal to both man and the animal. ***Cats are the domestic animal most commonly rabid***, and this disease often makes them aggressive. The post-exposure treatment of a person bitten or scratched by a cat even *suspected* to be infected is costly
Ask your doctor *and* your veterinarian about these parasites, infections and diseases. Also look them up online, eg. www.medline.com
- **snare and leghold traps**. There are thousands of hidden ones set by trappers, and should a cat survive such an ordeal, it usually ends up with one leg less
- **Herbicides and pesticides sprayed on lawns and garden plants** where cats walk and dig. These toxins are absorbed through their pads, and are easily transferred to handlers—and children, where the toxins are absorbed through the skin, through the mouth, and the eyes
- **Overpopulation and The “Barn Cat” issue**. Many country people dismiss all of the above (including spaying/neutering and vaccinations) saying, “They are just barn cats.” Do they, then, deserve less care? Outside in rain, snow, storm and ice, often unfed? If it is perceived that they are useful in a barn area, they should still be spayed, and fed too. Again, there is a thinking that if they are not fed they will be better hunters, but this is not so. Going without regular nutrition will not reduce their hunting instinct; the better-fed they are, the better hunters they will become. The hungrier they are, the farther they roam to hunt, often ending up bothering the neighbours.
Another point about “keeping down the mice”: with cats present, natural predators don’t hunt there. Even little year-round owls like the Screech Owl and Long-eared Owls (both too small to bother chickens) are great mousers. But cats kill them too.
- Finally..... Oh, no! 62 days after a roamer’s adventure: up go the signs **“Kittens for Sale.”** Every cat should be spayed or neutered to help control the burgeoning population of stray cats, as well as for their own health, especially males because (like males everywhere) they will get into nasty fights.
- **Toxoplasmosis**. See *Dangers to Roamers*. and article from *Scientific American* next page. People get this nasty parasite from cat feces in litter-boxes, and worse, ***children get it from cat feces in earth and sand-boxes***. Toxoplasmosis can cause death in people with weakened immune systems, and is particularly

dangerous for pregnant women, as the organism can cause fetal defects such as blindness, retardation and epilepsy. **Only cats host this parasite's full cycle.** In B.C. in 1995, 110 people acquired acute toxoplasmosis infection from outdoor cats whose feces had contaminated the drinking water supply.

Of Cats, Mice and Toxoplasma

From Scientific American Mar 2003. "Bugs in the Brain; Time for a Bit of Humility," by Robert Sapolsky. How microorganisms get into brains and manipulate neural circuitry better than scientists can. Re the protozoa toxoplasma gondii:

This protozoa gets eaten by a rodent (mouse, rat, chipmunk, squirrel, etc) and forms cysts in its body, and especially in its brain. The now-cystic rodent gets eaten by a cat, in which the protozoa then reproduces. Cat sheds the parasite in its feces, which are then nibbled by rodents to complete the cycle of the protozoa's reproduction.

Though *toxoplasma gondii* can only sexually reproduce in cats, it can, and does, infect other animals. If protozoa in cat feces gets into a pregnant woman it can potentially cause brain damage in the fetus. That is why pregnant women are always advised to avoid indoor-outdoor cats and litter boxes, and even gardening if cats are about, as neatly dug flower-beds are Kitty's favourite depository. All this is well-known.

But get this! What isn't well-known is that all healthy rodents, even lab rodents, are born with an instinctive aversion to the smell (pheromones) of cats, and this "smoke alarm" gives them advance warning of a hunting cat. Yet somehow, toxoplasma in the rodent's brain "knows" how to blank out the aversion and with it the rodent's natural fear of cats, so the mice Kitty chews on or brings home headless are much more likely to have toxoplasma cysts in their brains. The rest of the rodent's brain capacity is apparently unaffected. In his fascinating article Sapolsky writes, "This is flabbergasting. This is akin to someone infected with a brain parasite that has no effect whatsoever on the person's thoughts, emotions, SAT scores or TV preferences, but to complete its life cycle generates an irresistible urge to go to the zoo, scale a fence and try to French-kiss a polar bear."

Are Cats Killing Sea Otters?

in Oct. 2, 2006 issue of *Time* magazine there is a report that toxoplasma eggs released in cat feces are flowing into the runoff to the sea, and even into drains because people flush their cat litter down the toilet. The latest proven victims are sea otters. Parasite eggs in the ocean are ingested by mussels, clams and oysters which are the main diet of Sea Otters. The eggs infect the otter's brain and organs, and slowly kill it.

This is such an environmental concern that California just passed a Bill that raises the maximum fine for harming a sea otter to \$25,000 and requires that all cat litter to have a warning label – do not dump cat droppings into toilets or storm drains.

And What Do the Neighbours Think?

Because of the code of community politeness, neighbours rarely speak out to cat-owners directly about their anger at the trespassing cats, but we at Avian Care hear about it, hot and strong.

- **Paw prints** hey, all over my clean car!
- **The Night Life: ‘Singing’ and spraying.** Those hair-raising nocturnal duets and smelly volleys of urine, especially near open basement windows on summer nights. People allergic to cats are unwillingly exposed to them this way as well.
- **Inciting frantic barking of restricted dogs.** Many cities have fines for barking—and by-laws restricting cats.
- **Hunting.** It is simply ducking the truth to say, “My cat never catches anything.” Maybe it doesn’t bring its trophies home, but all cats are instinctive hunters, especially in the dark; do you accompany it on its nocturnal forays? Neighbours are especially incensed at trespassers that raid their bird nests and feeders, killing their chipmunks and so on. Cats sometimes kill chickens too.

•**Little wild lives.** Cat destruction of small wildlife is enormous. In Britain, a well-respected study showed *20 million birds and 50 million small animals killed by cats each year.* Small mammals such as mice, moles and shrews are a necessary and important part of most habitats. In parts of Australia cats have nearly wiped out rare small marsupials. In North American marshes, cats are a particular menace, preying routinely on ground-nesters such as baby bitterns, snipe and woodcock, Bobolink, Meadowlarks and Vesper Sparrows. Some species of small sparrows are now in serious decline and cat predation is a reason for this. Others species killed by cats include everything from hummingbirds to small owls, and the endangered Loggerhead Shrike.

Just here at ACRF 85% of those 570 cat-caught birds were too badly mutilated to survive. The commonest victims are ground hunters, especially robins, with a 96.2% unreleasable rate. Cripples cannot be returned to the wild. Incidentally, it is worth remembering that many of these little songbirds that are killed in spring and summer are parents, caring for their young. What happens to their orphaned offspring?

NOTE. It is also a fallacy that being well-fed, having a bell or being declawed reduces hunting success: cats just learn to move more sinuously, making no tinkle, and jump and use their strong forefeet to whack birds down before toying with them and then chewing them to death.

Homers: the pets of people who Care

Homecats are healthier, safer and live longer - 5x longer. They adapt well to the relaxed comforts of indoors where families get more closeness with their clean, parasite-free pet. Neighbours are relieved and vet visits are reduced.

“But my cat keeps meowing at the door— I just have to let him out.” (Meow— I wanna come in!) The key to a converting an outdoor cat to indoors is patience, gradually replacing one routine with the other. A good time to



Simple kitty house, coarse mesh hardware cloth on 2x2s with shelves and ramps. British Columbia

start is in the chilly and wet fall. Give lots of affection—cats love to play— toys, a scratching-post, and grow some fresh greens to graze on instead of your indoor plants. Perhaps provide a companion pet. I have a friend who trained her kitten early to harness and leash for daily outdoor walks. First, she left the harness on the floor for the kitten to get used to its smell. Then she had the kitten wear it around the house. After a few weeks, the kitten/cat accompanied her mistress outside without argument.

Why not a cat's "gazebo"?

Aha! If keeping kitty indoors seems impossible, an enclosed outdoor retreat is the solution. Instead of stereotyped ideas—ugly cages, sagging chicken-wire runs— think *gardens*; a gazebo, an enclosed porch or addition that catches the admiring eye, that you *and* the cat can enjoy. Use your imagination! It need not cover much ground, but should have shade, an elevated sunning-shelf, and a scratching-post. The enclosure can be man-made or purchased; temporary or permanent; free-standing, or attached to the house to let the cat to come and go via a "cat-flap" basement window or door. Kay McKeever in Vineland, nationally famous for the elegance of her large owl breeding facility, had a cat; it had a "catwalk" from an upper bedroom window into its own lofty, treed "aviary."

Our 16 hawk and owl aviaries would have made excellent cat enclosures! (see photographs in www.kitchubb.ca article called *Aviaries*.) They had bushes, trees, shelves, pools, and for us, each aviary had at least one sliding door; these never blew open in a wind or got frozen into snow. For you, chain-link or lattice walls support climbing plants such as clematis, climbing roses, Dutchman's Pipe, Morning Glories, Sweet Peas, Virginia Creeper or English ivy.

Whatever the arrangement, you can go away weekends and know that your pet is comfortable and safe, and your neighbours pleased with your consideration.



Front and side view of a more elaborate, two-storey "condo," using chain-link, attached to the house



This is a collapsible, portable tunnel that can be attached to other modules

The cat enclosure concept is very popular now and greatly encouraged by:

Humane Society (www.hsus.org/ace/13961)

American Bird Conservancy (www.abcbirds.org/cats)

The Audubon Society

American Bird Conservancy
po Box 249
The Plains, VA 20198

the Humane Society of the
U.S.
2100 L St NW
Washington DC 20037

Or just try Googling “cat enclosures” -- 1,730,000+ sites! One of the newer sites is

The Cat’s Den.net (Toronto) 866-484-0644 or 416-466-8930

Portable outdoor units include those for balconies and even for tree-houses

All offer brochures; and HSUS and ABC both have detailed sections on bringing an outside cat inside.



Kit Chubb