

ARE TOO MANY OF US MYTH-LED?

There's an ELEPHANT CAT in the room. Actually, the cat is not in the room. The cat is outside — and that's a major problem not only for the cat, but also for other creatures — especially birds and small mammals.

What follows are some discussion points — based on quantifiable facts and findings by people who have studied “the issues” surrounding cats.

I'm a “cat lover” myself. My wife and I have always had a domestic cat in our lives. I'm also an “animal lover” in general; a term which includes both domesticated “companion animals” and Mother Nature's “other animals.”

Most people, if asked whether they deem themselves to be animal lovers, will say “Yes.” Let's accept that self-description and, logically, include birds and small mammals in the mix. We commonly refer to these various creatures as “wildlife.”

Naturally, most of us would want to make sure “our” wildlife doesn't become the innocent victims of injury or death. But truth be told, there's a huge problem plaguing wildlife — one that all of us cat and animal lovers should work together to try to fix.

A long-standing but factually incorrect myth is held by too many cat guardians: that their cat “needs to go outdoors — to just be a cat.” For far too long, the general public has been “myth-led.” There is no such need.

Cats are perfectly fine with being indoors — and they should be kept in. Cats like to look outside, but that doesn't mean they have to actually be outside. Of course, they can be allowed outdoors, but they should at least be on a leash, and better yet, be in the presence of their guardian.

Beyond the leash, there are other ways to restrain or constrain our cats — by providing them with a catio, for example. Not everyone will be willing or able to provide a catio, but everyone should be willing to keep their cat out of danger. If our cats are left outside unaccompanied and unrestrained, they're in potential danger.

For example, they might get into a fight with another cat, a dog, or some other creature. They might get hit by a car or hurt by a person who doesn't like cats — especially if the cat is “doing his/her business” in a person's yard or garden. An unsprayed female cat may become pregnant, causing her guardian the problem of an unwanted litter and adding to the ever-existent issue of “too many kittens for too few homes.”

It's undeniably true that cats are at risk for injury, diseases like toxoplasmosis, and unplanned pregnancies when left out on their own. That scenario is obviously bad for the cats, but what about their natural predatory instincts — and the impact of those instincts on our wildlife?

So far, I've only been writing about “house cats,” which are, for the most part, kept indoors by responsible guardians. Adding to the “predatory problem” our domesticated cats can cause for wildlife is the fact that we have thousands upon thousands of community/feral cats in our area. So far, these multitudes of cats have been largely beyond effective community control.

You've no doubt heard the phrase “Trap-Neuter-Return”/TNR; a program orchestrated by some really good-hearted people and organizations. The basic idea is that volunteers trap a feral cat (quite an undertaking in and of itself) and get a female spayed or a male neutered.

Once the necessary surgery has taken place (another undertaking, with surgical costs which must be paid), the cat is returned to the location from which he or she originally came. Then, ideally, volunteers provide, at their cost, food for the cats and maybe minimal veterinarian care from time to time (less likely, though).

We need to note that even though these good-hearted volunteers do all they can for the “outside cats,” the cats will still “just be cats.” That is, even if they’re fortunate enough to be well-fed, they are still likely to prey on birds and other small mammals — our wildlife — because that’s just what cats instinctively do!



Cat bites on the neck of a Green Winged Teal

I give great credit to any people and organizations involved in the TNR methodology. They are trying to keep the number of community/feral cats in check. But TNR is doomed to failure.

I make that point because the current resources available to fully set up and administer volunteer-based TNR programs are woefully inadequate. There is not nearly enough trapping, and therefore not nearly enough spaying and neutering. As a result, we have an ever-increasing number of feral cats preying on wildlife, causing untold numbers of injuries, “orphan” situations, and death to the victims of their predation.



Puncture wounds from a cat bite on juvenile tree squirrel

All it takes is for us to look at “the math,” and we readily see the enormity of the true reality. This reality begins with the fact that a female cat can become pregnant at only 5 months of age, and she can have up to three litters per year. On 2-17-19, the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon (FCCO) published a “feral cat equation.” According to this mathematical formula, “one unaltered female and her offspring can produce 1.398 MILLION cats over the span of 10 years.”

Portland-based FCCO is a fine community-service-based nonprofit organization. Its work is critically important in our quest both to protect and preserve our native wildlife and to lessen other problems associated with community/feral cats.

Responsible for having already spayed or neutered over 97,000 cats, FCCO is on its way to 100,000 and more. As laudable as that accomplishment is, we should note that it has taken 24 years to get there. FCCO was founded in 1995, so it has “averaged” spaying or neutering just over 4,000 cats per year.

Back to the math. Using the feral cat equation, we can say that “Mama cat” and her offspring are capable of producing an average of 139,800 cats per year over the 10 year time period. So even if FCCO could spay or neuter 100,000 cats per year, it cannot keep up with, and certainly never catch up with, the rate of increase in the cat population.

Ideally, we could “clone” an organization like FCCO, and add their services to cities, counties, and states across the entire United States — since the cat-related problems exist wherever unaltered cats are free-roaming. The huge impact feral cats have on wildlife is easy to understand, but what else can and should we do about it?



Cat caught northern flicker

TNR proponents have expressed their concern for “the welfare of wildlife.” That’s commendable. However, while concern has existed for over a hundred years, too seldom has it taken the form of concerted human action “for” wildlife. Action for cats — generally yes. Action for wildlife — generally no.

Over 100 years?! During that period, it’s crystal clear that the numbers of community/feral cats have exploded exponentially. Their numbers are far from being held in check; rather, they’re increasing non-stop — every day.

It’s also crystal clear that the numbers of our wildlife species have been diminished by cats — and are being further diminished non-stop. One can find reports that the number of birds and small mammals lost, due to “cat trauma,” is in the billions.



Cat Caught Anna’s Hummingbird

Some people will argue that “Man” is primarily responsible for the adverse effects on wildlife — for example, causing habitat loss from land development associated with Man’s own population explosion and expansion. Man is problem enough. Why would we add to this immense adversity? Why do we irresponsibly allow our cats, domesticated and otherwise, to be such a large part of it?

Even “the government” gets it. While the Federal Government doesn’t take a specific position on the merits of TNR, it’s at least wise enough to oppose “TNR colonies” in or near wildlife conservation areas. Surely if government can readily understand the adverse impacts of cats on wildlife, we residents can understand the existing dilemma for “Mother Nature’s children” in our own communities.

In doing my research for this article, I learned that cats have been responsible for an estimated range of between 33 and 40 avian extinctions worldwide. This profound and permanent loss of birds is indeed tragic, given the fact that they are key to protecting ecosystems from the stresses of climate change. They save plants from marauding insects as the world warms up.

I also learned, from a 2004 study titled: “Use of matrix population models to estimate the efficiency of euthanasia versus trap-neuter-return for management of free-roaming cats,” that “All possible combinations of survival and fecundity values of free-roaming cats led to predictions of rapid, exponential population growth. The model predicted effective cat population control by use of annual (emphasis added) euthanasia of equal to or greater than 50% of the population, or by annual neutering of equal to or greater than 75% of the fertile population.”

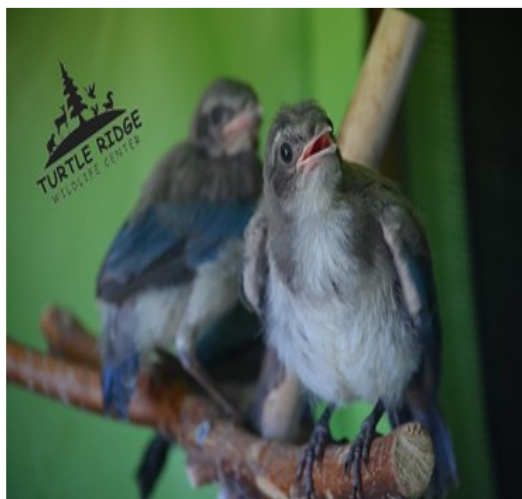
The majority of people who love cats and other animals, including me, don’t want to employ euthanasia to solve “the cat problem.” However, “the E word” is part of the study. If a person looks at the mathematics as presented by the study, euthanasia would prevail as the most expeditious and effective cure for cat overpopulation and the manifold problems for which unrestrained cats are responsible. In reality, though, most people favor TNR as the more “humane,” and therefore more acceptable, cure.

According to the study, to properly and effectively employ TNR means that “the community” must trap, neuter, and return approximately 75% of its feral cats — each and every year. Presently, we are nowhere near that percentage. So a really bad situation will clearly continue to get even worse — unless we change our modus operandi.

In the meantime, which organizations have “the injured and orphaned wildlife fallout” from cat-caused trauma thrust upon them — without taxpayer-provided compensation? For sake of discussion, I’ll call these organizations “Wildlife Centers.” They are few and far between across the entire country. We’re fortunate to have a local example in Salem-based “Turtle Ridge Wildlife Center”/TRWC, one of only two such full species wildlife rehabilitation centers in the state’s entire western region. TRWC’s mission is to provide care to injured or orphaned Oregon wildlife — with the goal to release the victims back to their natural habitat.



Hatchling Tree Swallows— orphaned after their mother was killed by a cat



Orphan Care of Fledgling Western Scrub Jays

TRWC is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charitable organization, relying principally on the generosity of the public to fund its far-reaching and life-saving work. Like many small NPOs, it’s under-known, under-appreciated, and underfunded. Surely it’s not fair for us to expect TRWC to do all that it does on what has been, ever since this community-serving nonprofit was founded in 2005, the proverbial “shoestring budget.”

In the big picture, Mother Nature's wildlife is "our" wildlife. We don't own it, per se, but we have a duty to do what we can to protect and preserve it. Yet, there is no public funding mechanism to help an organization like TRWC cover its substantial costs to rehabilitate and release wildlife back to our ever-diminishing natural habitat — where it belongs and where we want it to be.

We need to take some dramatic measures to cure our community cat problems, which include community discussion and action to create public funding for TNR. I believe we need to have at least two full-time employees to do the job of TNR; one employed by the cities of Salem and Keizer working in cooperation and the other employed by Marion County. Not only would these employees be paid to do the work of TNR, but ideally they would also keep an eye out for animal abuse, cruelty, and neglect situations as part of their duties.

Oregon Humane Society/OHS was a sponsor of House Bill 3377 in 1995, which allows OHS to have designated "humane officers" on staff to address animal abuse. While OHS doesn't receive, by choice, governmental funding for its work in this regard, it's worth noting that here in the Salem-Keizer-Marion County community, we don't have even one such humane officer.

Theoretically, we can call on OHS to help us as situations may dictate, but I suspect that OHS is plenty busy with what it has to do in the Portland area. We should be self-reliant here, and the need for self-reliance warrants public discussion and action on how to get from where we are to where we should be.

Here's one more point to consider, having to do with how, in general, animals are treated. To Oregon's credit, the Legislature passed ORS 336.067, a state statute which requires "Humane treatment of animals" be given special emphasis in instruction in public schools. Other states may have, or should have, a similar statute.

The humane treatment of our wildlife should be included within the scope of the statute. Our children should learn that countless birds, small mammals, and other wild creatures deserve to be treated humanely, both directly and indirectly. That means they must not be allowed to suffer undue and unnecessary cat attacks. We community residents share a collective responsibility — to take individual and community-based actions which prevent such attacks from happening in the first place.

It seems to me that "a life is a life is a life" — that the lives of our creatures are equal. In effect, that means the life of a bird is equal to the life of a small mammal, and the life of each of these precious creatures is equal to the life of a cat. It's unjust if we allow the life of the cat to be of greater value than the lives of our wildlife. We should remedy the injustice that presently exists.

I'm asking that all "animal lovers" take this subject up with their Mayor, their City Councilors, their County Commissioners, and their State Legislators. We're way overdue in properly and effectively addressing the ELEPHANT CAT issues and the enormous number of wildlife injuries and deaths tied inextricably to "cats on the loose."

Jane Goodall said this: "Only if we understand can we care. Only if we care will we help. Only if we help shall they be saved."

It's time for us to understand, care, and help. We mustn't let ourselves be myth-led. With a bit of personal action from each of us, we can work together as a community to save our cats and our wildlife from fates we don't want them to suffer.

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