

# Feral and unwanted cats

PEST ANIMALS  
EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

## *Felis catus*

### Why are feral and unwanted cats a problem?

Feral cats have been branded as 'the ultimate predators' in New Zealand and have been nominated as among 100 of the "World's Worst" invaders. New Zealand's unique native wildlife is particularly vulnerable to predation by cats. Having evolved without predators, many of our bird species nest on the ground, and are flightless or poor flyers.

### Threat to our wildlife

Feral cats:

- kill young and adult birds and occasionally take eggs
- prey on native lizards, fish, frogs and large invertebrates.

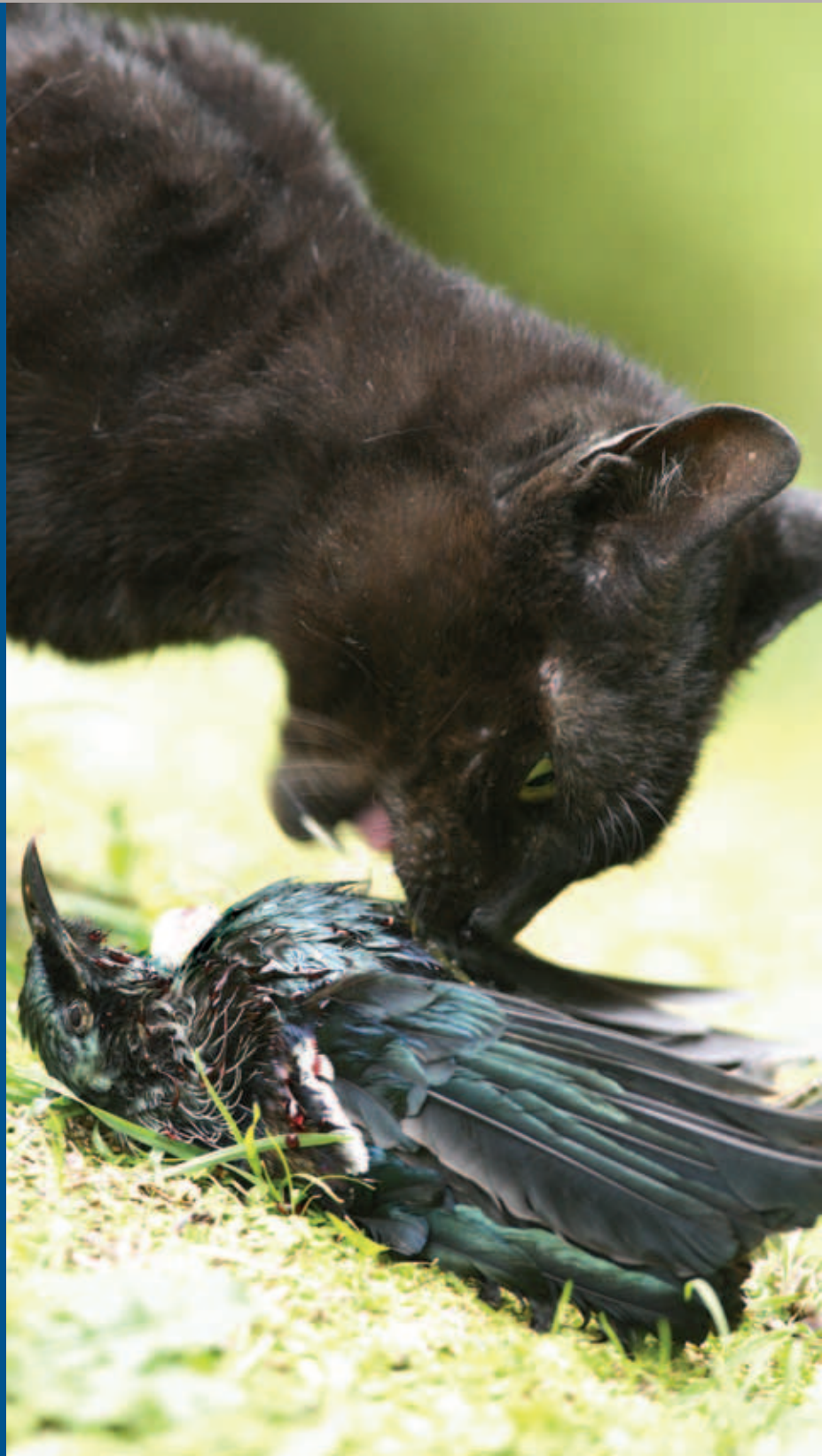
Cats are highly efficient predators, and have been known to cause local extinctions of seabird species on islands around the world. Both sea and land birds are at risk, particularly those that nest or feed on or near to the ground. Killing behaviour is independent of hunger. Feral cats will, if the opportunity arises, kill any suitable prey they can, and store the surplus for future use.

### Threat to stock, pets and humans

Feral cats are implicated in a small way in the spread of Bovine Tuberculosis, with the potential to infect cattle. They also carry parasites and toxoplasmosis that causes abortions in sheep and illness in humans.

Feral and stray cats can be aggressive towards pet cats. Through fighting they cause severe injuries sometimes resulting in the pet cat having to be put down. Stray cats are likely to interbreed with the un-neutered domestic cat population and may spread infectious diseases.

Cat preying on a tui





## How do I know if I have feral or unwanted cats?

The most characteristic and obvious signs are scats (droppings). Domestic cats usually bury their scats, but feral cats often deposit them in conspicuous places on tracks or clumps of grass. The scat usually consists of about 3-6 cm round to elongated segments, which contain matted fur, feathers and bones and is dark in colour.

Feral and unwanted cats are always timid around humans. They are usually short haired, slightly built, with a large head and have very sharp features. Once caught in a cage they will act aggressively, hissing, growling and spraying. Feral and unwanted cats do not meow or purr. This is a trait of contented domestic cats only.

## How do I control them?

There are two options available for control of feral or unwanted cats, trapping and shooting.

Before you undertake control talk to your neighbours and advise them to keep pets inside or well identified.

### Trapping

There are two types of traps, live capture cage traps and kill traps.

**Do not use kill traps near residential areas or if there is any risk of catching a domestic pet or farm cat.**

Live capture cage traps are the only safe method to catch unwanted cats in an urban environment. Cage traps provide a safety measure, as pets can be released unharmed.

How to use a capture cage trap:

- set the traps in areas frequented by the cats
- bait traps with cat food, fish, rabbit or other meat products.



Feral cat in dense bush

Feral cats can be difficult to trap as they are naturally cautious. When using cage traps, it is best to fix the door open for two or three nights until the cat is comfortable entering the trap. Then set the trap. Ensure the traps are set between dawn and dusk as cats are more active at night.

Do not attempt to remove a captured feral or unwanted cat from the cage trap alive. They are very aggressive especially once trapped. Do not attempt to touch or pick up a feral or unwanted cat or kitten. They bite and scratch and can spread disease. See a doctor if you get bitten by a feral or unwanted cat.

Captured feral or unwanted cats will need to be humanely put down. Contact your local veterinarian or RSPCA officer. They may be able to offer this service. Check that they will be able to offer this before you begin trapping.

**Once trapped, a feral cat must be humanely disposed of. Under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 all traps must be checked at least once every 24 hours.**

Traps are available from hardware and farm supply stores. In some areas, Greater Wellington and the Cats Protection League may loan or hire cage traps.

### Shooting

Shooting is an effective method of control in rural areas only. Feral cats can be hunted during the day as well as at night. Cat's eyes shine bright green at night in a spotlight beam. For effective hunting of feral and unwanted cats, concentrate in areas where suitable food and shelter is available for them, such as rabbit-prone land and farm sheds.



Traps are best set in areas where cats frequent i.e. near food sources

## Categories of cats

While all cats are the one species, *Felis catus*, they fall into different categories. Greater Wellington has assistance or management programmes for each category.

**Domestic cats** live entirely with humans as 'companion' cats. They rely on humans to provide food, shelter and veterinary care. Their opportunities to breed are largely controlled by humans.

**Stray or unwanted cats** are un-owned but have some of their basic needs indirectly supplied by humans. Stray cats rely on human populations for some of their food and shelter i.e. farm sheds. Stray cat populations often breed with abandoned domestic cats.

**Feral cats** are wild animals that have none of their needs provided by humans. They live far from human populations, and survive through hunting their food. Their population size fluctuates independently of humans.

## Greater Wellington's assistance and control programmes

Greater Wellington:

- provides financial assistance to domestic cat de-sexing programmes run by the RSPCA and some veterinary clinics
- will work with communities to remove populations of stray or unwanted cats
- carries out feral cat control in areas with high biodiversity value.

## Responsible cat ownership

Cats have been domesticated for over 3,000 years. They are spread throughout the world. Their role as a companion animal has long been recognised. In New Zealand, cats are the most popular domestic pets with nearly 50% of households owning at least one cat. Our cat per human ratio is one of the highest in the world.

Domestic cats that are cared for according to 'best practice' are welcome human companions. If these cats become unwanted or feral they develop into a major threat to New Zealand's native bird and reptile species. By following the principles of responsible ownership, the impact of domestic cats on native wildlife can be minimised.

## Always spay or neuter your cat

To minimise the number of unwanted or feral cats, all domestic cats should be neutered, even if they are farm cats. De-sexing of both male and female cats is essential. A single un-spayed female cat can produce three litters per year, with an average of four to six kittens per litter.

De-sexing:

- avoids unwanted behaviour such as spraying, yowling and roaming
- is better for the cat's health; males have less chance of being injured in fights and females will have a reduced chance of mammary cancer
- avoids unwanted litters of kittens.

Check with your local vet or SPCA for discounted services.

## Never abandon or dump a cat

If you don't want a pet any more or if it has kittens you can't keep, do not abandon them – contact the SPCA or take them to the vet to have them re-homed or put to sleep.

Abandoned cats suffer in the wild; most of them lead a miserable existence. They do not know how to fend for themselves and often starve to death. They also contribute to the stray and feral cat problem.

**It is illegal to abandon a cat under Section 29 (g) of the Animal Welfare Act.**

## Take responsibility – care for your cat

A pet cat is an ongoing commitment. They are likely to live for 12 years or longer. You need to provide appropriate food, shelter and water and ensure regular vaccination and de-worming.

In spite of being fed by humans, cats can range up to a kilometre from their 'homes' and will prey on wildlife, including native species if available. The predatory instinct is present in all cats. Even well fed domestic animals will hunt if given the opportunity. However, when cats are responsibly owned their negative impacts can be minimised.

You can help:

- do not give cats or kittens as gifts. It is a commitment that the new owner needs to make
- keep your cat inside from dusk till dawn
- identify your cat with a collar
- feed your cat indoors and do not leave food out for stray or feral cats.



Biosecurity officer with cat captured in live capture cage trap



## Where did feral cats come from?

The house cat, *Felis catus*, was domesticated in the eastern Mediterranean c. 3000 years ago. Cats were introduced to New Zealand in 1770 by ships carrying the early European explorers. Ships were infested with rats and so carried cats to control them. Despite this early introduction, cats did not become feral until at least 50 years later. They were established in the North Island by the 1830s and in the South Island, by the 1860s. When rabbits became a major problem, the feral cat spread increased because cats were bought in from the cities and released to control rabbit infested farmland.



Unwanted cat in cage trap

## Description

Feral cats resemble domestic cats in both size and colouration. Coat colours vary from pure black to orange tabby and some resemble the striped dark and pale grey of the true European wild cat. Feral cats commonly revert to black, tabby or tortoiseshell with varying extents of white starting from the belly and breast.

Adult male cats are generally larger than the females. Wild cats can weigh up to five kg. Domesticated cats may be considerably heavier.

Feral cats tend to be solitary and territorial while stray or unwanted cats tend to form colonies. Territory is marked by scent secreted from anal glands and by spraying urine. Feral cats are mainly active at night. Their vision and hearing are acute.

## Habitat

Feral cats live in most terrestrial habitats from sea level to the snowline. Habitats include agricultural areas, coast land, tussock, scrub, wetlands, exotic plantations and native forests. They are also present, or have been present, on at least 25 islands ranging from small (50 ha) to large biologically important reserves such as Raoul, Campbell and Auckland Islands.

## Food

Their prey includes fish, mice, rats, birds, lizards and rabbits. They prefer live vertebrate prey but animal carcasses may be scavenged and large insects taken occasionally.



Stomach contents of a feral cat showing 13 undigested lizards

## Breeding

Cats are sexually mature at one year old. Females usually come on heat in July or August when the males are noisy and wander extensively. Gestation normally takes 65 days. If conditions are favourable they can have three litters per year. Average litters are four to six kittens.

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Greater Wellington Biosecurity  
Pest animals  
P O Box 40847  
Upper Hutt  
T 04 526 5327  
F 04 526 4171  
E pest.animals@gw.govt.nz  
www.gw.govt.nz

Greater Wellington Biosecurity  
Pest animals  
P O Box 41  
Masterton  
T 06 378 2484  
F 06 378 7994  
E pest.animals@gw.govt.nz  
www.gw.govt.nz

Cats Protection League  
P 04 389 9668  
  
Wellington SPCA  
305 Mansfield Street  
Newtown  
P 04 389 8044

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Cat preying on a tui,  
biosecurity officer with trap  
and cat in trap – Rob Suisted  
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