

Debunking the Myths and Misinformation

In report after report, bird advocates blame cats for the decline in bird and other wildlife populations, and cats are depicted as enemies of the environment. Just as cats were hunted during the late Middle Ages under falsified pretenses, bird conservancy groups and wildlife organizations are creating a “witch-hunt” for modern times. The information these organizations are providing on the effect cats have on the environment often has errors, exaggerations, omissions, and bias. And perhaps worse yet, the groups making the reports completely ignore statistical information regarding the effectiveness of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), which has been gathered by numerous highly accredited veterinarians and cat organizations through years of research and rescue.



Troy Snow

The healthy appearance of this beautiful, ear-tipped feral goes against the misconception that community cats are unhealthy and diseased.

As seen in the previous chapter, the relationship between cat predation and prey populations is highly complex and very little research has been conducted on this topic. For conservationists to advocate for the killing of a species based on a lack of information and abundance of *misinformation* is irresponsible and unethical.

In a 2016 blog post on HuffPost, author Marc Bekoff was shocked by the book *Cat Wars* by bird advocate Peter Mara, head of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. He found particularly worrisome the statement in the book that: “...the most desirable solution seems clear— remove all free-ranging cats from the landscape by any means necessary,” (Marra and Santella, 2016)

Bekoff explains that humans are the cause for the unprecedented loss of wild animals and their homes, and humans are causing destructive climate change.

But bird advocates are determined to hold cats responsible and advocate for a war on cats, never mind the consequences. If all cats were removed from a continent, the effects on rodent species would be catastrophic. Rodents would overrun our cities and towns, plus removing cats would not stop the real culprits— habitat loss, fragmentation, and human overdevelopment. Removing cats would not help climate change, which is already having an effect on the world with heatwaves, drought, terribly destructive hurricanes, floods, towns and houses washing away, and human lives lost.

Dr. Niels Pedersen, Director of the Center for Companion Animal Health at the University of California-Davis, advocates for trap-neuter-return programs. Dr. Pedersen

points to the often-overlooked ecological consequences of removing cats from the landscape where they have existed for centuries. He writes, "What people don't understand is that cats are the dominant carnivore in almost all human-oriented ecosystems. Every attempt to take cats out of the equation has led to disastrous ecological shifts as far a buildup of rodents as well as other overpopulated species."

And Pedersen is somewhat skeptical of the recent Loss et al, study. "I'm not saying their conclusions aren't correct, but meta studies often start with a preconceived hypothesis and then cherry pick various published research studies to yield a preconceived conclusion."

Bekoff mentions that Marra and his co-author, Chris Santella dismiss the growing field of Compassionate Conservation by saying it risks "the lives and experience of wildlife," (Beckoff, 2016) Actually, Compassionate Conservation does the exact opposite, offering non-lethal solutions, which is what trap-neuter-return offers community cats.

The advocates for TNR have helped reduce feral cat colonies on every continent in a practical and effective manner for over 30 years. Whereas those who rant against feral cats do nothing more than cast feral cats in the role of villain, and ignore the real issue of environmental destruction at an unprecedented rate by humans. Few groups are courageous enough to tackle overdevelopment of the land for buildings, houses, roads and shopping malls, and of course our extremely destructive animal agricultural practices. World Wildlife Fund's 2022 *Living Planet Report* claims that wildlife populations have plummeted by 69% since 1970. Do the groups opposed to outdoor cats believe that cats did this? According to World Wildlife Fund, "we are living through the dual crisis of biodiversity loss and climate change driven by the unsustainable use of our planet's re-

sources."

Humans are to blame for this, not cats. To ignore this and continue to vilify cats is totally irresponsible.

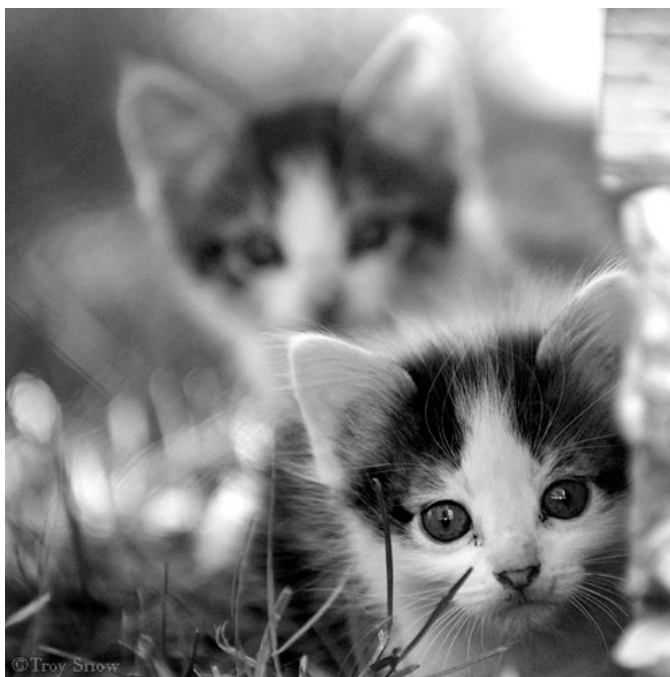
Infamous Studies and Extrapolated Numbers

It cannot be emphasized enough that *few* scientific studies have been conducted to accurately portray cat predation on prey populations. Most studies cited by conservationists have been on the dietary habits of cats, with little research dedicated to the overall effects of cat predation. And some of these studies are based on flawed, unpublished information with small sample sizes, poor data gathering techniques, and results that are extrapolated across continents and different types of environments (as presented with the island studies in the previous chapter).

One of the most infamous studies highlighted by conservationists to falsely accuse cats of killing billions of birds every year was conducted by Peter Churcher and John Lawton; the study has become known as the "English Village" study. Churcher asked his neighbors to collect any prey their cats brought home, and over the course of a year, 70 cats returned home with over 1,000 prey specimens. These findings were then extrapolated across all of Britain, based on the cat population size at the time, and it was concluded that cats in Britain were killing an estimated 100 million birds and small mammals each year (Tabor, 1991).

The flaws of this study are numerous. To start, it is based on a very small sample size — 70 cats over a period of one year. Secondly, recording the number of prey brought home by cats is not a very accurate

method of collecting data. As we have seen, cats are known to scavenge and eat carrion, so simply bringing prey home is not indicative of the number of prey actually *killed* by the cats. A lot of variables were at play in collecting data for this study, so how accurate can one say the results are?



Troy Snow

Flashy headlines about cat predation should be regarded with skepticism. Many have flaws and rely too much on estimation.

An error made by conservationists who cite this already-flawed study is that they are extrapolating data across an entire country. Roger Tabor examines this study in his 1991 book, "Cats: The Rise of the Cat," and says, "It is not realistic just to multiply the number of catches of these [70] rural cats by the entire cat population of Britain. Most cats are town cats with small ranges, and catch fewer items of prey than the village cats of this survey." Tabor continues on to explain that even though a high number of house sparrows were consumed by cats, their population doubled the following breeding season, and because most people assist birds (feeders, nesting boxes), their populations are "kept at well

above 'natural' levels. Even if there are a lot of cats in built-up areas, there are also a lot of birds" (Tabor, 1991).

In 1994, a reporter for the *Sonoma County Independent*, Jeff Elliott, investigated the growing claim that cats are responsible for killing millions of birds and the push for eradicating cats. In his article, "The Accused," Elliott remarked on the infamous English Village study saying, "Rarely are projections made with such limited data, except in junior high science projects." Later in 1995, Churcher himself cautioned against such projections stating, "I'd be very wary about extrapolating our results even for the rest of Britain, let alone America." He continued by saying, "I don't really go along with the idea of cats being a threat to wildlife. If the cats weren't there, something else would be killing the sparrows or otherwise preventing them from breeding" (Tufts, 1995).

Another study that is often presented as "evidence" by conservationists is the "Wisconsin Study," performed by John Coleman and Stanley Temple. The study is a survey of rural residents of Wisconsin performed to estimate the number of free-ranging cats living in the entire state. The results from this survey were published in the *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, where submissions are subject to a peer-review process. This survey in no way measures cat predation, but only estimates the number of cats in Wisconsin.

Subsequently, the authors published several additional articles in an attempt to predict the potential impact of free-ranging cats on the bird population in Wisconsin; however, these articles were never peer-reviewed and some of the estimates are based on unpublished data. One such article appeared in 1996 in the *Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine*, where Coleman and Temple make their "best guesses" (the term used by the researchers themselves)

of the number of birds killed by cats in rural Wisconsin. They concluded: 7.8 million birds as the low estimate, 38.7 million as the intermediate estimate, and 219 million birds each year for the highest estimate. In 1999, the authors published another article in *Wildlife Control Technologies*, extrapolating those guesses, stating, "Nationwide, rural cats probably kill over a billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds each year" (Coleman and Temple, 2005).

It wasn't until Jeff Elliott interviewed Temple that the truth was revealed. "The media has had a field day with this since we started. Those figures were from our proposal. They aren't actual data; that was just our projection to show how bad it might be," replied Temple (Elliott, 1994). Yet, almost 20 years later, these exaggerated and "guesstimated" numbers are still being used and they are becoming more and more accepted as fact.

Sticky Numbers

Peter J. Wolf, the voice behind *Vox Felina*, examines just how these sticky statistics have come to be viewed as actual data. In his 2010 blog post, "Repeat after Me," Wolf recalls a National Public Radio broadcast where *Wall Street Journal* columnist Carl Bialik describes the process by which such slippery figures gain traction:

An interesting phenomenon of these numbers is that they'll often be cited to an agency or some government body, and then a study will pick it up, and then the press will repeat it from that study. And then once it appears in the press, public officials will repeat it again, and now it's become an official number.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what has happened with the data from both the English Village study and the Wisconsin study.

Along with major newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, conservation organizations like ABC, the National Audubon Society, and the NFWS continue to repeat these sticky numbers as solid evidence.

Roger Tabor addressed this concern in regards to the English Village study saying, "The mesmeric effect of big numbers seems to have stultified reason" (Tabor, 1991). And Gary J. Patronek, VMD, Ph.D. of Tufts University said this about cat predation statistics in a letter to the editor of the *Journal of Veterinary Medicine* (1996):

If the real objection to managed colonies is that it is unethical to put cats in a situation where they could potentially kill any wild creature, then the ethical issue should be debated on its own merits without burdening the discussion with highly speculative numerical estimates for either wildlife mortality or cat predation. Whittling down guesses or extrapolations from limited observations by a factor of 10 or even 100 does not make these estimates any more credible, and the fact that they are the best available data is not sufficient to justify their use when the consequences may be extermination for cats.

If asking for reasonable data to support the general assertion that wildlife mortality across the United States attributable to cat predation is unacceptably high can be construed as 'attempting to minimize the impact,' then I am guilty as charged. What I find inconsistent in an otherwise scientific debate about biodiversity is how indictment of cats has been pursued almost in spite of the evidence.

As demonstrated here, it is very easy for a small, scientifically valid, peer-reviewed

study to be manipulated — thanks to the media and anti-cat groups — into a much larger, broader statement that can be used to push an agenda to kill cats.

Conclusion

As we've seen throughout the previous chapters, the few cat predation studies that have been carried out on continents have resulted in biologists stating (1) cats are no more harmful a predator than any other predator, (2) cats have been a part of the landscape for thousands of years, therefore birds and wildlife who could not withstand such predation from cats would have died off long ago, and (3) human activity (habitat loss mainly due to agriculture) is more devastating to bird and wildlife than any cat predation. Unfortunately, conservationists continue to cherry-pick studies, citing unpublished, unreviewed data, and equate guesses with reliable, scientific research in order to falsely accuse outdoor cats for declining bird and wildlife populations.

In March 2013, George Fenwick, president of ABC, clearly stated his position on outdoor cats and TNR programs when he wrote in a *Baltimore Sun* opinion piece called, "House Cats: The Destructive Invasive Species Purring on Your Lap:"

The only sure way to protect wildlife, cats and people is for domestic cats to be permanently removed from the outdoor environment. Trap-neuter-release programs that perpetuate the slaughter of wildlife and encourage the dumping of unwanted cats is a failed strategy being implemented across the United States without any consideration for environmental, human health, or animal welfare effects. It can no longer be tolerated.

Local governments need to act swiftly and decisively to gather the 30 million

to 80 million unowned cats, aggressively seek adoptions, and establish sanctuaries for or euthanize those cats that are not adoptable.

Dr. Julie Levy from the University of Florida's Veterinary School and co-founder of Operation Catnip was quoted in *Best Friends* magazine (2013) as stating, "There are much more important pressures on bird populations [than cats] - primarily pollution and habitat destruction. And those are harder areas for bird groups to be effective in." Levy said:

The problem is that part of the campaign is an attack on humane control of homeless or feral cats. Most of us love song-birds as much as we love cats, so we are not trying to choose one species over another. We're trying to come up with a solution that benefits everybody in the picture.

Levy concludes that the goal should be to reduce the feral cat population saying, "we can do it in a humane way that respects the animals rather than in a 50-year-old vision



Porch cat, sharing a shelter with an opossum. Feral cats usually live alongside most wildlife quite safely, except for coyotes. Although it has been found that coyotes and feral cats often avoid each other.

Louise Holton

of animal control, in which the only way you can help animals is by killing them” (Best Friends, 2003).

Alley Cat Rescue agrees that outdoor cat populations need to be reduced. But we also believe that because nonlethal methods exist and work, they should be used. The seemingly attractive “quick-fix” of killing does not work. Never has and never will. And more importantly, eradication will cause even more devastation to birds if these conservation groups ever convince the U.S. government to agree to such a plan.

For too long cats have received a bad rap and been blamed for the destruction of birds and wildlife. It is time for conservation groups to stop using exaggerated numbers to support these claims.. Yes, cats do kill birds, but for agencies, especially government-supported ones, to push for the eradication of cats based on falsehoods is horrifying and tragic...and it could have devastating consequences. Removing all outdoor cats — a mesopredator and a highly specialized rodent hunter — would be an unimaginable disaster for the American environment.

Killing Outdoor Cats is a Dangerous Game

One only has to look at the history of eradicating cats from small islands to see the countless flaws and devastating effects associated with this management approach: (1) it took many years to remove all or most of the cats (19 years in one case); (2) each case required several methods of control, including poisoning, shooting, trapping, and releasing a virus and predatory dogs; (3) after the cats were removed, rodents and rabbits took over and destroyed the environment, putting at risk the very animals conservationists were trying to save.