

Debunking the Myths and Misinformation

We've all seen the headlines: "The Evil of the Outdoor Cat," "Natural Born Killers: The Problem with Cats," and "That Cuddly Kitty is Deadlier than you Think." And we all know those sensational titles are having detrimental effects on community cats across the country. In some cases, these flamboyant articles continue to persuade governmental officials to oppose TNR and opt for eradication programs. When the media spouts out statistics, it doesn't take long for the public to accept the information as "official" or "fact" ... despite whether the information is even true or not.

It's one thing to dislike cats, but for groups like the American Bird Conservancy (ABC), the National Audubon Society, and the National Fish and Wildlife Service (NFWS) to misrepresent studies, skew data, and take statistics out of context in order to push their anti-cat and anti-TNR agenda is irresponsible and unethical ... especially since the cats are paying the ultimate price with their lives. So the next time you read a newspaper article or blog post, or some other mention, pointing blame at cats for declining bird populations, please take a few minutes to write a response in defense of our feline friends.

Use the below information and our new [Guide to Managing Community Cats](#) handbook to create thoughtful and educational responses, laying out the numerous benefits of TNR and dispelling the myths surrounding these animals. Take the time to submit letters to editors, leave comments on blog posts, and even call into radio stations. Remember, small steps create big change. You CAN give cats a voice for a better future.

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 have been performed on the dietary habits of cats, with little research dedicated to the overall effects of predation. And some of these studies are based on flawed, unpublished information with small sample sizes, poor data gathering techniques, and results that are being extrapolated across continents and different types of environments (as presented with the [island studies](#)).

The "English Village" Study

- Conducted by Peter Churcher and John Lawton
- Churcher asked his neighbors to collect any prey their cats brought home over the course of 1 year
- 70 cats returned home with over 1,000 prey specimen
- These findings were extrapolated across all of Britain, based on the cat population at the time
- They derived that cats in Britain were killing an estimated 100 million birds and small mammals each year

Debunked:

- Based on a very small sample size—70 cats over a period of 1 year
- Recording the number of prey brought home by cats is **not** an accurate method of collecting data; lots of variables at play
 - Prey "brought home" is not indicative of the number of prey actually "killed" by the cats; cats scavenge
 - Cats don't bring home *every* prey specimen
 - Assumes guardians accounted for *every* specimen brought home
- Inappropriate to extrapolate small sample size across an entire country
 - "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, 1991)

- “Rarely are projections made with such limited data, except in junior high science projects.” (Elliott, 1994).
- Churcher himself cautioned against such projections: “I’d be very wary about extrapolating our results even for the rest of Britain, let alone America.” He continued, “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).

The “Wisconsin Study”

- Performed by John Coleman and Stanley Temple
- Is a survey of rural residents of Wisconsin estimating the number of free-ranging cats living in the entire state
- Results were published in the *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, where submissions are subject to a peer-review process
- Authors published several additional articles in an attempt to predict the potential impact of free-ranging cats on the bird population in Wisconsin
 - *Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine* (1996): 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 (Coleman and Temple, 1996)
 - *Wildlife Control Technologies* (1999): Extrapolating those guesses again stating, “Nationwide, rural cats probably kill over a billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds each year.” (Coleman et. al, 1999)

Debunked:

- Survey does **not** measure cat predation, only estimates the number of cats in Wisconsin
- These articles were never peer-reviewed
- Some of the estimates are based on unpublished data
- Coleman and Temple make their “best guesses” (as referred to by the researchers themselves) of the number of birds killed by cats in rural Wisconsin (Coleman and Temple, 1996)
- During an interview, Temple stated: “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.” (Elliott, 1994)

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 whereby 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 American Bird Conservancy, the National Audubon Society, and the National Fish and Wildlife Service continue to repeat these sticky numbers as solid evidence.

Challenging these Numbers

In reference to the English Village Study: Biologist and Expert Feline Behaviorist, Roger Tabor states: “The mesmeric effect of big numbers seems to have stultified reason.” (Tabor, 1991)

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.

Conclusion

In March 2013, George Fenwick, president of the American Bird Conservancy, 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 cofounder of Operation Catnip was quoted in *Best Friends* magazine (2003) 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 is 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 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 controlled. We also believe that because nonlethal methods exist and work, they should be used. This seemingly attractive “quick-fix” of killing does **not** work. Never has and never will.

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 and bogus studies to base these claims upon. Removing all outdoor cats—a mesopredator and a highly specialized rodent hunter—would be an unimaginable disaster for the American environment.

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