

Trap, neuter, return programs make feral-cat problem worse

By **Ted Williams** | Guest columnist

MARCH 14, 2013

(Guest columnist Ted Williams on March 21 submitted this postscript to his March 14 column)

In my recent op-ed I reported that a common over-the-counter drug, an effective and selective poison for feral cats, had not been registered for this use because of pressure from feral-cat advocacy groups. While the statement was not inaccurate, it was unwise because readers might construe it as a suggestion to go out and start poisoning feral cats. What's more, the statement could be, indeed was, manipulated by feral-cat advocates into something I didn't write or intend. I should have used the generic, lesser-known name. Further, I should have explained that this feral-cat poison, if registered, would be applied only by the state and federal wildlife managers who are widely, legally and lethally (but not effectively) controlling feral cats with rifle, shotgun and trap. I urge people not to take the law into their own hands. They should leave it to professionals. Finally I should have explained, as was later explained by the Sentinel, that "editor-at-large" of Audubon magazine was a freelance, not salaried, title. I regret this slovenliness.

Feral cats are maintained in the wild by a dangerous, cruel, and illegal practice called trap, neuter and return. After these unfortunate animals are re-abandoned, they are regularly fed, which draws more feral cats and encourages more re-abandonment.

One intact male can impregnate dozens of females, so trying to reduce cat populations by TNR is like, well, herding cats.

It's dangerous — because feral cats are reservoirs for disease. Three studies reveal that 62 percent to 80 percent carry toxoplasmosis. Feral cats are now the most common domestic rabiesvector. In Florida, where rabid cats attack people, the state Department of Health warns that TNR "is not tenable on public health grounds because of the persistent threat posed to communities from injury and disease." A TNR colony at Point Pleasant Beach, N.J., was removed because rabid cats were biting children.

It's cruel — because feral cats lack vet care and suffer from injuries and the same diseases they spread. They infect lynx, bobcats and endangered Florida panthers with feline **leukemia**, distemper and an **AIDS**-like immune-deficiency disease.

It's illegal — because feral cats kill migratory birds and endangered species such as honeycreepers in Hawaii and lower keys marsh rabbits and silver rice rats in Florida. But the Interior Department lacks the spine to back its law-enforcement agents who want to prosecute TNR practitioners. Free-ranging cats have driven at least 33 bird species to extinction.

Four years ago when I interviewed Elizabeth Parowski of Alley Cat Allies for my column in Audubon magazine, she informed me that the American Bird Conservancy had been way off in its estimate of 500 million birds killed annually in the U.S by free-ranging cats.

She was right. In January 2013 the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute released a study showing that the real figure is somewhere between 1.4 billion and 3.7 billion birds a year and for wild mammals between 6.9 billion and 20.7 billion.

Arguing against euthanasia, Parowski asserts that "feral cats will keep other cats from moving into their territories." I get the same line from every TNR outfit I consult, along with "cats stop killing when their stomachs are full." Rubbish.

Cats kill by instinct. And if cats were territorial, they wouldn't form colonies.

"TNR is like a religion," remarks Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife biologist Fern Duvall, who gets death threats for such statements. "You can't sit down and reason with most of these people." Facts are dismissed, data denied, suffering of wildlife and cats ignored.

For example, the official policy of the No Kill Advocacy Center of Oakland, Calif., is that feral cats must be protected as "healthy wildlife." The Santa Monica-based Voice for the Animals Foundation actually stocks feral cats.

There is an effective, humane alternative to the cat hell of TNR: trap and euthanize. TE is practiced by state and federal wildlife managers; but municipal TE needs to happen if the annihilation of native wildlife is to be significantly slowed.

For my Audubon assignment, I inspected three odiferous feral-cat feeding stations in Honolulu. Scrawny, gimpy, semi-hairless, cloudy-eyed and single-eyed feral cats padded over rooftops, crouched, slunk and crunched kibbles. Dining with them were mongooses, another alien scourge sustained by TNR.

An otherwise literate professor who helped maintain the colony at the University of Hawaii bragged to me that TNR had worked because over the past decade, 80 percent of the feral cats on campus had been sterilized. In the same breath he estimated the current population at 400.

Ted Williams writes an independent column for Audubon magazine. His views do not necessarily reflect

those of the *National Audubon Society*.

Copyright © 2017, Orlando Sentinel

This article is related to: Diseases and Illnesses, Newspaper and Magazine, Biology, Leukemia, Endangered Species, Conservation, National Audubon Society