

# Feral Cats Kill Billions of Small Critters Each Year

**A new study shows that cats—especially feral ones—kill far more birds and small mammals than scientists previously thought**

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A feral cat, just trying to get by. Photo: [Topsynette](#)

There are so many ways for a little bird or squirrel to die these days—they can be squished by cars, splattered into buildings, run over by bulldozers, poisoned or even shot. But if you have ever had to clean up a mangled “present” left on your doorstep by a kitty, you’ll know that [little creatures can also be killed by pets](#).

Cats in particular have earned a nasty reputation for themselves as blood thirsty killers of wildlife. They have been named among the [top 100 worst invasive species \(PDF\)](#) in the world. Cats have also earned credit for countless island extinctions. Arriving onto the virgin specks of land alongside sailors, the naive native fauna

didn't stand a chance against these clever, efficient killers. All said, [cats claim 14 percent](#) of modern bird, amphibian and mammal island extinctions. But what about the mainland?

A recent study aimed to find out just that. Now the stats are in, and it's much worse than we thought. But before bird lovers rush to declaw pets, the study's scientists also found that feral cats and strays—not house cats—are responsible for the majority of the killings.

To arrive at the new findings, researchers from the Smithsonian's Migratory Bird Center and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Center assembled a systematic review of every U.S.-based cat predation study known in the scientific literature (excluding Hawaii and Alaska). Based on figures the authors verified as scientifically rigorous, they statistically quantified the total bird and small mammal mortality estimate caused by cats, further breaking the categories down into domestic versus unowned cats, that latter of which the authors define as barnyard kitties, strays that receive food from kind humans and cats that are completely wild.

Their results paint a grim picture for wildlife. In [a paper published today](#) in *Nature Communications*, they write that between 1.4 to 3.7 billion birds lose their lives to cats each year in the United States. Around 33 percent of the birds killed are non-native species (read: unwelcome). Even more startlingly, between 6.9 to 20.7 billion small mammals succumb to the predators. In urban areas, most of the mammals were pesky rats and mice, though rabbit, squirrel, shrew and vole carcasses turned up in rural and suburban locations. Just under 70 percent of those deaths, the authors calculate, occur at the paws of unowned cats, a number about three times the amount domesticated kitties slay.

Cats may also be impacting reptile and amphibian populations, although calculating those figures remains difficult due to a lack of studies. Based upon data taken from Europe, Australia and New Zealand and extrapolated to fit the United States, the authors think that between 258 to 822 million reptiles and 95 to 299 million amphibians may die by cat each year nationwide, although additional research would be needed to verify those extrapolations.

These estimates, especially for birds, far exceed any previous figures for cat killings, they write, and also exceed all other direct sources of anthropogenic bird deaths, such as cars, buildings and [communication towers](#).

The authors conclude:

The magnitude of wildlife mortality caused by cats that we report here far exceeds all prior estimates. Available evidence suggests that mortality from cat predation is likely to be substantial in all parts of the world where free-ranging cats occur.

Our estimates should alert policy makers and the general public about the large magnitude of wildlife mortality caused by free-ranging cats.

Although our results suggest that owned cats have relatively less impact than un-owned cats, owned cats still cause substantial wildlife mortality; simple solutions to reduce mortality caused by pets, such as limiting or preventing outdoor access, should be pursued.

The authors write that trap-neuter/spay-return programs—or those in which feral cats are caught, “fixed,” and released back into the wild unharmed—are undertaken throughout North America and are carried out largely without consideration towards to native animals and without widespread public knowledge. While cat lovers claim that these methods reduce wildlife mortality by humanely limiting the growth of feral colonies, the authors point out that the scientific literature [does not support this assumption](#). Therefore, such colonies should be a “wildlife management priority,” they write. They don't come out and say it but the implication is that feral cat colonies should be exterminated.

But feral cats, some animal rights advocates argue, are simply trying to [eke out a living](#) in a tough, unloving world. As the [Humane Society explains](#), simply removing the cats may not be the most efficient means of solving the problem because cats that are inevitably left behind repopulate the colony, surrounding colonies may move in to replace the old and “the ongoing abandonment of unaltered pet cats...can also repopulate a vacated territory.” [Feral cats](#), after all, are the “offspring of lost or abandoned pet cats or other feral cats who are not spayed or neutered.” Targeting irresponsible humans may provide a different solution, although spay/neuter laws [are controversial](#).

In Washington D.C. alone, for example, there are more than 300 known feral cat colonies. Wildlife are victims of this problem, but feral cats are too as [conditions for survival are tough](#). And as with so many other environmental banes, the root of the problem neatly traces back to a single source: humans. As the authors write in their paper, feral cats are the single greatest source of anthropogenic (human-driven) mortality for U.S. birds and mammals.

Incidentally, the Humane Society will host [World Spay Day](#) on February 26. [Find an event](#) for your furry friend to attend, or even [host a spaying party yourself](#).

#### About Rachel Nuwer



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