

Cats and Birds: A Lethal Combination

A RECENT ARTICLE in *The New Mexican*, written by **Anne Schmauss**, co-owner of Wild Birds Unlimited, made note of the above title's fact. You may not be aware of how significantly cats affect the bird population. If you love our local birds and have a cat (or if your neighbors have wandering cats), this article may provide some useful information.

There are more than 90 million cats in the U.S., 65% of which spend at least some time outdoors and free. According to the American Bird Conservancy, scientists estimate that each year nationwide, cats kill hundreds of millions of birds, and more than a billion small mammals, such as rabbits, squirrels, and chipmunks.

Loss and fragmentation of wildlife habitat due to human development is the leading cause of declining bird populations. However, scientists now list invasive species, including cats, as the second most serious threat to bird populations worldwide.

Of the wildlife that cats kill, roughly 60%–70% are small mammals; 20%–30% are birds; and up to 10% are amphibians, reptiles, and insects. One well-fed cat that roamed a wildlife experiment station was recorded to have killed more than 1,600 animals (mostly small mammals) over 18 months. Surprisingly, cats with bells kill as many birds as non-bell wearers; well-fed cats kill many birds too, as do de-clawed cats.

So, if you own a cat, keep it indoors. If you want your cat to go outdoors, use a leash (not very useful for most cats!) or build an outdoor playground where the

cat is confined. This protects the cats too; a significant number of cats here disappear (especially if outside overnight) most likely due to coyote predation.

State law requires all cats to have rabies shots. In Santa Fe County (and thus Eldorado), cats must be restrained to their own yards. I understand that an invisible fence is now made for cats (but I am not a fan of these for dogs or cats).

A few things can be done to make the birds in your yard safer in case a cat comes prowling. Locate feeders high enough that a cat cannot jump to feeding birds—5 feet or higher. Keep the immediate area around your feeder clear of vegetation, wood piles, and other things that can hide a stalking cat. Provide cover for birds 10 or 15 feet away from feeding areas. Try to provide a high platform where normally ground-feeding birds (towhees, doves, quail, finches) are safe. Don't let seed, or water, accumulate on the ground below feeders. Your lovely pedestal bird bath may not be bird-friendly if cats are around. My dogs do an excellent job of keeping cats out of the fenced portion of my yard. You can try repellents, but this can get expensive and usually doesn't work.

Thanks to American Bird Conservancy, "Cats Indoors! The Campaign for Safer Birds and Cats," for much of this information.



Photo by Jennifer Bar

—Pam Henline