

FERAL CATS ON THE FIRING LINE

For all the talk of cat predation, science exonerates our feral friends.

By Nathan J. Winograd, former Director, Law & Advocacy, The San Francisco SPCA

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All animals, whether wild or domestic, deserve to be treated in a kind manner. That is why we support the actions of compassionate individuals who feed, spay, and care for feral cats. But feral cat caretakers and their allies are increasingly coming under attack by misinformed native-species advocates who blame cats for a perceived decline in local wildlife, that is no fault of the cats. In San Francisco, it is time to put the issue to rest once and for all.

Every major, reputable study has shown that claims of cat predation affecting bird or wildlife populations are wholly overstated. In fact, all the studies we have seen have shown that in Golden Gate Park, and throughout our city, the true factors that account for the disappearance of quail and other wildlife are habitat loss, pollution, and inclement weather changes.

The reasons for this are well-documented. As human development continues in our already crowded city, available habitat for wildlife is carved up into smaller and smaller pieces. Habitat fragmentation and marginalization cause wildlife populations to become genetically separated, and if a particular population is not large enough, remnant populations are subject to genetic inbreeding. As a result, as habitat declines, so does diversity and heterogeneity, resulting in high extinction rates.

Under such circumstances, harsh winters or long periods of drought can easily drive down remaining populations. As all living things are dependent on water, the six-year period of drought in California during the 1980s and early 1990s had a devastating effect on wildlife mortality and clutch success.

Pesticides are also recognized as a major culprit in bird decline—particularly the effect of toxic lawn care products in the decline of the songbird. Insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, and rodenticides are routinely used in city parks. Indeed, poisoning as a result of the everyday use of pesticides has become so widespread that biologists term the phenomenon “lawn care syndrome.” Other practices, such as removal of low-growing shrubbery, tree trimming, and the lack of adequate maintenance at many city parks will also impact on birds and other wildlife.

A 1994 WorldWatch Institute study showed, for example, that of the world’s 9,000 bird species, 5,000 are in

decline, while another 1,600 are threatened or nearly threatened with extinction. Some populations have fallen by 75% as a result of four primary factors: habitat loss, overtrapping, drought, and pesticides. Cats are noticeably absent as factors.

With regard to predation, cats are widely recognized to have low success with bird predation. The studies by biologist Robert Berg showed, in fact, that any feral cat predation at Golden Gate Park would actually occur on the rat population in the park, increasing quail strength, because it lowers nest predation by rats. Roger Tabor’s famous studies of cat predation in Great Britain and the United States show that the great bulk of an unfed feral cat’s diet is scavenger material such as garbage, insects, plants, and rats, finding no impact on continental bird and wildlife populations. Indeed, studies on four continents reach the same conclusion—“[t]he common belief that feral cats are serious predators of birds is apparently without basis.”

City officials have also recognized and acknowledged that cats are not responsible for bird decline in San Francisco. The Board of Supervisor’s Commission on Animal Control and Welfare put a stop to a proposed roundup-and-kill plan for feral cats in Golden Gate Park after extensive research and public testimony demonstrated a clear lack of evidence that cats were impacting birds. The Board of Supervisors also removed language from the city’s sustainability plan targeting feral cats as a threat to biodiversity—a decision reached after all sides were heard, a consideration not extended in the drafting of the original document.

Given the available evidence to the opposite, we believe it is both incorrect and inappropriate to speculate that cats are a significant cause for the species decline in San Francisco parks. In fact, unless we are going to conclude that the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the Commission on Animal Control and Welfare, the Golden Gate Park studies, and predation studies on four continents (Europe, North America, Australia, and Africa) are all wrong, feral cats should not be unfairly implicated in any perceived decimation of local wildlife. ■

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