



### BirdLife South Africa

#### Position Statement on the Management of *Felis catus* (Domestic and Feral Cats)

- BirdLife South Africa is cognisant that the management of feral and domestic cats is a highly sensitive issue, both to the public and to public-interest groups.
- Feral cats are domestic cats which have reverted to a more wild state, and may be considered invasive, a threat to native fauna, a health risk to other cats and also to public health.
- Feral and domestic cats have been found to:
  - Cause significant losses to populations of native birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians.
  - Transmit diseases such as rabies, toxoplasmosis and other diseases.
  - Be hosts to ecto-parasites such as ticks and fleas.
  - Hybridize with African Wildcats (*Felis lybica*). This inbreeding could ultimately threaten the survival of the African Wildcat species.
- The number of animals killed by feral cats has significantly increased, largely due to the rapid spread of feral cat colonies.
- Cats around the world have been shown to kill millions of birds annually and feature as one of the most important human-associated activities which causes bird mortalities.
- Estimates for feral cat populations in the US ranges between 60 to 100 million cats.
- Extensive studies of the feeding habits of free-roaming cats have been conducted over the past 55 years in Europe, North America, Australia, Africa and on many islands. These studies show that, although the type of animal killed by cats varies greatly, approximately 20-30% of prey items are birds. On some islands this may escalate to 100% of prey items.
- In Cape Town, domestic cats are responsible for killing between 25 and 33 million animals annually of which birds comprise about 2.4 million. A similar study has been done in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

- On Marion Island cats were estimated to have killed 450 000 seabirds annually prior to cat eradication efforts. Island bird populations often evolve in the absence of mammalian predators.
- Statistics on domestic cats in the UK (information provided by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) indicates that:
  - The known number of prey items that are caught annually by cats in the UK varies; recent figures by the UK Mammal Society indicate however, that 275 million items are caught per year, 55 million of which are birds. Most prey species recorded were typically associated with gardens.
  - It is likely that most of the birds killed by cats would have died from other natural causes before the next breeding season, so cats are unlikely to have a major impact on populations. If, however, their predation was additional to these other causes of mortality, this might have a serious impact on bird populations.
- Recent research has shown that domestic cats will maintain their predatory instincts even when well fed. A study conducted in Cape Town, suggests however, that the better fed cats have a 38% lower prey-return rate than those fed just once a day.
- Predation of birds by cats poses a problem largely when:
  - Housing is near a pristine or conservation area where many bird species are present.
  - Housing is in the vicinity of a habitat used by threatened or range-restricted bird species as levels of predation may be unsustainable
- Gardens serve as an important source of food and also provide shelter for many birds due to decrease in natural habitats and food sources.
- BirdLife South Africa therefore supports:
  - A legislative review, requiring the fitment of a bell and collar to all pet cats which would significantly reduce predation rates. <http://www.birdsbesafe.com/>
  - The phasing out of feeding at feral cat colonies due to the probable increase in the transmission of diseases where cats congregate.
  - The removal, where feasible, of feral cat colonies from protected areas.
  - All colonies should be subject to Trap-Neuter-Release policy, as practiced in Cape Town. Captured cats should be taken to a local animal control or humane society, neutered and given homes.
- BirdLife South Africa also encourages:
  - Pet owners to increase the feeding of their domestic cats to more than once a day, especially those on the urban-edge.

- Local authorities to implement legislation for all feral cats to be neutered, and for domestic cats to be collared with bells (a correctly fitted collar and bell can reduce cat predation of birds by more than 50%).
  - The assessment of cat bibs (as marketed in New Zealand and Australia) to reduce predation by cats where they have been shown to be major predators.
  - Further research on the impact of feral and pet cats on all forms of native wildlife throughout South Africa.
  - Pet owners to have no more than two cats per household (especially in the sensitive areas mentioned above).
- There are many ways of making a garden bird-friendly and minimising the predation risk posed by cats. See <http://www.rspb.org.uk/advice/gardening/unwantedvisitors/cats/> and <http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/live/ec1781/build/ec1781.pdf> and <http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/index.html>  
Dr Rob Simmons commented on this position statement (based on a UCT MSc thesis by Sharon George, 13 February 2011).