Military bases often struggle with how to manage domestic cat populations. Frequent transfers of personnel often means cats are left behind, abandoned to fend for themselves. Lucky cats find a new human, but most are not so fortunate. Abandoned cats face many dangers: being hit by cars, starving, freezing temperatures, disease, and more. If not spayed or neutered, cat populations can explode.

Free-roaming cats kill native wildlife, including many rare and endangered species, and can also threaten the health and safety of military personnel and their children. Base commanders must deal with how to humanely and cost-effectively resolve the issue of too many free-roaming cats. ***As a cat owner, you are an important part of the solution.***

Photo: Dr. Gil Ewing

Cat killing a Yellow-rumped Warbler at a bird bath.

The Skinny on Cats

Domesticated in Egypt over 4,000 years ago, house cats are descendants of the European and African wild cat. Now considered a separate species, *Felis catus* was introduced all over the rest of the world by European explorers and settlers. Recent estimates place the U.S. pet cat population at 90 million. No one knows how many stray or feral cats are out there—best estimates range from 60 to 100 million.

- ***Stray* cats are lost or abandoned by their owners.**
- **Truly *feral* cats live entirely on their own without any human assistance.**
- **A female cat can have two to three litters per year, with four to eight kittens per litter.**

Photo: Microsoft

Cats kill small animals such as chipmunks.

Keeping Cats Indoors Is Good For People

Stray cats often congregate around a food source such as garbage dumps and mess halls, or where people leave food out for them. They can be a nuisance around base housing, where people may feed birds, tend flower gardens, or have children's sand boxes.

Outdoor cats are exposed to many diseases and parasites, some of which can be transmitted to people:

Rabies, a deadly virus, can infect cats, wildlife, and humans. Outdoor cats are more likely to contract rabies than any other domestic animal.

Cat-scratch Disease: is transmitted from cat to cat by fleas, and from cat to human by a scratch or bite. While cats show no symptoms of the disease, it can cause severe illness in people.

Toxoplasmosis is caused by a tiny parasite found in the intestines of cats and in the tissues of many animals. People can contract this disease by not washing their hands after coming into contact with cat litter or soil contaminated with cat feces. If contracted by a pregnant woman, abortion of the fetus or blindness or retardation in the newborn can result.

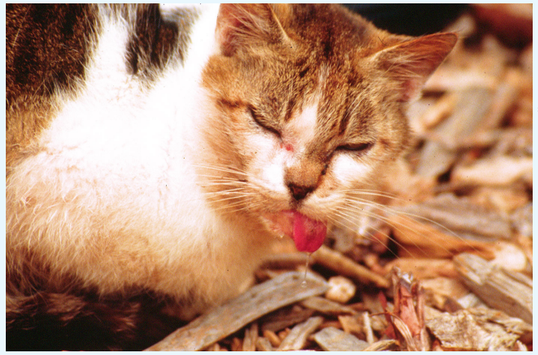

Photo: Alan Hopkins

Cats are not wildlife and struggle to survive outdoors.

Cats can also transmit fleas, roundworm, and hookworm to humans. In the southwest, cases of the most lethal form of plague in humans have been linked to outdoor cats.

Keeping Cats Indoors Is Good For Cats

Many people don't realize the daily hazards that outdoor cats face. The average life expectancy of a free-roaming cat is less than five years, while indoor cats commonly live to 12 - 20 years. Cats who roam are in constant danger from:

Cars: Millions of cats are run over by cars annually. In colder climates, cats may crawl into car engines to get warm and are killed or maimed when the car is started.

Disease: In addition to rabies, outdoor cats risk exposure to fatal diseases such as feline leukemia and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). While vaccines are available for some diseases, they are not 100 percent effective. A vaccine for FIV is not available.

Injuries: Abscesses, broken limbs, disease, torn ears, scratched eyes, internal injuries, parasites, and death can result from encounters with dogs, other cats, coyotes, raccoons, foxes, hawks, and owls.

Overpopulation: Cats who have not been spayed or neutered are the greatest cause of cat overpopulation. As a result, millions of cats must be euthanized each year because there are not enough homes for them.

Poisons and Traps: Pesticides, rodenticides, and antifreeze poison and kill thousands of outdoor cats yearly. Cats may be caught in traps set for furbearing animals.

Human Cruelty: Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for animal shelters and veterinarians to have to treat cats who have been shot, stabbed, or set on fire.

Parasites: Outdoor cats suffer from debilitating parasites such as ear mites, fleas, ticks, and worms.

Inclement Weather: Outside cats suffer from extreme weather conditions and natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, fires, and tornadoes.

Keeping Cats Indoors Is Good For Birds

Isn't it natural for cats to kill birds?
No! Cats are not native to North America or many other parts of the world. Our wildlife did not evolve with this abundant and efficient predator, and thus have few defenses against them. Millions of animals may be killed each year by outdoor, pet cats in the U.S. Stray and feral cats add to the toll.

The Truth About Cats and Wildlife

- **Even well-fed cats kill wildlife.** This is because cats are born predators and the urges to hunt and eat are controlled by different parts of their brain.
- Belled cats kill wildlife. Cats quickly learn to silently stalk their prey. Wild animals don't necessarily know a ringing bell means danger.

Photo: Michael Stubblefield

Cats kill rare species such as this Piping Plover chick.

- Once caught by a cat, few small animals survive the ordeal. Even if the animal escapes, infection from a cat's teeth or claws, or internal injury usually result in death.

Tips for Happy Indoor Cats

Kittens who are kept indoors from the start usually show no desire to go outside as adults. With patience and time, most outdoor cats can become happy indoor pets. The following tips will help:

Photo: Dr. Jeff Price

An indoor cat is a safe and happy cat.

- Play with your cat for at least 15 minutes each day.
- Paper bags and cardboard boxes provide places to play when they are alone.
- Provide window shelves and bird feeders to keep your indoor cat entertained.
- Give your cat a nutritious diet, including constant access to clean water.
- If your cat must go outside, train him to wear a harness and leash or provide a safe outside enclosure such as a screened porch or cat run.
- Plant kitty grass in indoor pots so your cat can safely graze.
- Keep the litter box clean.

Indoor Cats Can Slip Out, So Remember To:

- Spay or neuter your kitten as early as eight weeks old, *before* it can breed. Your cat will be healthier and won't contribute to the overpopulation problem.
- Attach an ID tag to your pet's collar or get a microchip implanted containing your contact information.
- Provide routine veterinary care, including an annual check up and vaccinations.

Cat ownership is a responsibility, so please do your part.

For the Sake of Cats, Wildlife and People:

- *Never* abandon cats. If you are transferred and can't take your cat with you, find a good home or contact a veterinarian or local humane society for help.
- Do not feed stray cats—this only increases the cat overpopulation problem. Take them to a local shelter or call your base animal control officer for help.

For more information: contact your base veterinarian, local humane society, or **www.denix.osd.mil/DoDPIF.**

Produced by DoD Legacy Program
Prepared by American Bird Conservancy

Don't Let Your Cat Go AWOL!

Indoor Cats Are Safe Cats