

## **Free ranging cats and dogs frustrate outdoorsmen and environmentalists**

Domestic cats and dogs kill and maim more than a billion birds and mammals in The United States every year. And despite several studies outlining the wanton destruction our pets inflict on indigenous species year round, frustrated outdoorsmen, farmers, educators and environmentalists have few choices in Indiana to remedy the problem legally.

A 1990 University of Wisconsin study revealed that a single free ranging domestic cat can kill over 1000 wild animals per year. Nationwide, there are over 60 million rural cats alone. Kills made by urban cats were not even counted.

The study made no distinction between the killing prowess of the more wild, feral cat, and the common household pet out for the afternoon either. They both proved to be equally efficient killers, even when declawed.

In addition, the study said that worldwide, cats are to blame for the extinction of more bird species than any other cause other than habitat destruction. Currently, they are contributing to the endangerment of birds like the Least Tern, and some varieties of marsh rabbits.

Domestic cats have infected the endangered Florida Panther with feline distemper, and even transmitted diseases like rabies and toxoplasmosis to humans.

Indiana Department of Natural Resources Small Game Research Biologist, Clark McCreedy calls domestic cats, “super predators.” “Unequivocally, domestic cats are the top of the line predators in the Midwest. We rarely see them in the field, but at night we catch scores of cats in our box traps at Atterbury FWA,” he said.

Mc Creedy also said that cats quickly learn to hunt near bird feeders, or on vulnerable nesting birds and mammals in the spring.

Late winter is a time of survival for wildlife, with food and fat reserves getting low. So even when wildlife outruns a cat or dog, it is using up valuable energy that was needed for survival or reproduction. Wild animals simply can not compete with a domestic animal that is well fed and spends it's days sleeping in a heated garage.

Quail Unlimited's National Habitat Coordinator, Roger Wells added to Mc Creedy's concerns about cats. “Ground nesting birds like quail are very vulnerable to being killed on the nest by domestic cats. Our studies have also shown that even well fed house cats destroy nests for no apparent reason,” he said.

Domestic dogs on the other hand, do not kill a billion wild animals in this country every year. Instead, according to a recent study done by The Colorado Division of Wildlife,

they kill part of the time, and maim wild animals the rest of the time.

“Single dogs are not always a threat to wildlife, but instinctually they team up with neighborhood dogs and form packs. That is when the hunter/killer urge surfaces in them,” according to Lonnie Brown of The CDOW.

Brown said that most dog owners do not realize that when a dog chases down a deer, they often do not know what to do with it. Unlike coyotes, which are efficient killers, dogs often chew off the animals ears and nose, and the wild animal really suffers.

And contrary to some dog owners belief that fluffy could never actually catch an animal as big as a deer, Brown said a few years ago, they documented two dogs killing 12 elk in one single day. There are also cases of dog kills on big horn sheep there as well.

IDNR Regional Biologist Supervisor, Dick Hudson admitted that even he needed to be convinced that his family dog was capable of hunting down and killing wild game.

“Several years ago, I had a collie that on occasion spent the overnight in my back yard in an enclosed area. That was, until on two separate occasions I caught my own dog in deer box traps set to catch deer for tagging, over a mile from my home. My dog was out hunting all night and returning before dawn without me knowing it,” Hudson revealed.

### **No Easy Answers**

Now, when Hudson is confronted with dogs hunting alone or in packs on the fish and wildlife areas he manages, he considers his options carefully.

“Wildlife areas are prime dumping spots for cats and dogs, and they are a major threat to the indigenous wildlife. If we can catch the animal, we turn it over to local animal control, but that is not always possible,” he said.

Hudson has been surrounded in the field by up to 10 wild dogs, all growling at him and not backing down. It is in these cases when Hudson said he has no problem “taking care of them.”

But unlike some other states, where it is legal to shoot a domestic dog or cat threatening a person on their own property, in Indiana, it is illegal.

And unlike other states where there are separate fines levied against pet owners for wildlife harassment by the pet, in Indiana there are none.

According to Sergeant Dean Shadley of The IDNR Law Enforcement Division, only a law enforcement officer can address dog problems. Regardless of the situation, a landowner who shoots a dog might be liable to the dog’s owner both criminally and civilly, according to recent case law adjudicated in Indiana.

“ That does not mean a whole lot of farmers, hunters and threatened landowners don’t take the law into their own hands and take care of the problem quietly,” he said.

He added that dog owners on the other hand, do not have a right to enter another person’s private property to retrieve a dog or cat. The most they can do he said, “was stand at the property line, call for the animal and hope it comes out.”

All of this is just a big source of frustration for Dave Delaney, President of The Indiana Deer Hunter’s Association.

“I think I speak for a lot of deer hunters when I say how frustrating it is to drive two hours on your only day off to deer hunt, only to then watch a pack of dogs run the deer out of your hunting area,” he said.

Delaney said he wished some pet owners would be more responsible and realize the damage their animal is doing to not only the sport of hunting, but even more so to the entire outdoor experience.

“In recognition of the law, The IDHA thinks hunters should always consult with the landowner before taking any steps to alleviate a dog or cat problem on their land,” he said.

Realistically however, Delaney acknowledged as did others before him, that if pet owners let their animals run loose, and one day they do not come home, it may be because someone “took care of it.”