

PLANT LIFE COLUMN

PETS AND WILDLIFE

Many of us have pets that are part of the family. We include them in vacation plans, special occasion celebrations and family photos. Well behaved pets can be a source of great pleasure and comfort. But sometimes, pets follow their natural instincts and cause us heartache as well as damage the environment.

The most popular pets, cats and dogs, are natural predators, meaning they are meat eaters. They have been bred for domestic traits that make them calmer house mates, but the natural tendency to hunt and kill prey is still present. As a result, outdoor pets can pose quite a threat to wildlife.

Free roaming cats and dogs reduce wild animal populations, including threatened or endangered species in local areas. In addition to harboring diseases that affect humans, such as ringworm, distemper, *toxoplasmosis*, *leptospirosis* and rabies, infected pets have the potential to transmit diseases into wild populations of animals. As we develop into natural areas and pet numbers increase, the natural system is becoming more at risk.

While dogs are known to catch and kill rabbits, turtles, frogs and lizards, "outside" cats are by far more damaging to local wildlife populations. As a teenager, I remember Spook, my white neutered stray, laying trophy mice, birds and lizards at the door step to show off his hunting skills. Besides the night yowling that can be annoying, I now realize the damage an entire neighborhood of roaming cats can cause.

Research in Wisconsin found that rural cats may be killing between 8 and 217 million birds in that state each year with 39 million the best estimate. (Kill rates and cat population estimates resulted in the broad range.) Another study showed that rural cats could eat up to 1000 animals a year. Many studies show that birds are only about 20 percent of the cat's diet so many other types of animals are being killed and eaten as well.

Free ranging cats can be especially damaging to ground feeding and nesting animals such as bobwhite quail, wrens, cardinals, loggerhead shrikes, towhees, rabbits and lizards. Coastal community animals such as least turns, piping plovers, marsh rabbits and beach mice are especially threatened by predation from outside cats. Consider the number of strays as well as outside house cats in Florida and the threat to our native animals, especially the threatened and endangers species is quite staggering.

If you love your pets and enjoy wildlife, there are a few simple steps to keep you pets safe and reduce wildlife damage. University of Florida wildlife specialists with the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) makes the following suggestions:

- Spay or neuter any cats or dogs that will roam outside.
- Vaccinate pets to protect their health and wildlife they may come in contact with.
- Do not place a bird feeder or bath immediately next to dense shrubbery or other hiding places.
- If you own an outside cat, place two bells on its collar--some cats can learn to adjust their moves to silence a single bell.
- Do not let your cat roam at night when they can be much more effective predators on sleeping prey.
- If you are having problems with a neighbor's cat, speak to the neighbor about the problem and see what can be worked out.
- Cats hate water, so you may be able to discourage a cat from entering your yard by spraying it several times with a garden hose. Sprinklers can be set to activate with a motion sensor.
- If the cat is an untagged stray or feral (wild cat), trap it with a live trap (the raccoon-type trap) then turn it over to the Osceola County Animal Control Office on Kissimmee Park Road in St. Cloud (407-343-7101) or a local Humane Society.

If you or someone you know is considering adding a pet to your family, consider adopting or fostering a stray from Animal Control. Budget and space is limited at the shelter so adoptions save lives. Contact them to make donations and ask about volunteer opportunities.

Hank Bruce, Horticulture Therapist and author of gardening books, will be the featured speaker at the September meeting of the Osceola County Master Gardeners. The public is invited. Hank will be addressing solutions to world hunger issues. While hunger is a global problem, the solutions are local.

His latest book, Global Gardening, co-authored with his wife, Tomi Folk, describes our global garden of over 15,000 edible plants, and how they can help sustain our world village. Books and plant examples will be available for sale. The program is at 1:45PM, Wednesday, September 11, at the Kissimmee Valley Agriculture Center, 1901 E. Irlo Bronson Hwy, Kissimmee. For further information, please call (321) 697-3000.

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