

Cats and Wildlife Don't Mix

By Mary Lou Zimmerman
PAWS of Bainbridge
Cat Adoption Coordinator

I am going to talk about the multifaceted problem of outdoor cats. It's a problem everywhere, not just on Bainbridge. It's actually less a problem on Bainbridge than many other places in the country. But it is a problem on a number of different levels.

Cats and predators. Cats are efficient predators. Cats are instinctive predators. You can put bells on their collars; you can teach them to be nice kitties; but they still don't care - if they are outside, they will kill things. They kill birds; they kill nesting waterfowl. They will prey on eggs in nests. They catch small mammals which impacts on the small animal population, but it also has a great impact on the predators on which those small mammals and rodents are a food source. The owl population will be impacted if there are cats killing mice. Typically animals that are hunted by cats do not recover. Cat wounds are not easy to treat as they get infected very easily. The Wildlife Shelter statistics show that more than 50% of their injured animals come from cat inflicted wounds. If a cat attacks something, 90% of the time it is going to die, especially birds who are very susceptible to *Pasturella*, a bacteria that lives in the mouths of all cats.

The second part of the outdoor cat predator problem is that cats are themselves prey. They will be killed by coyotes, eagles, owls, raccoons, dogs and otters. Two cats were killed by an otter when the cats got too close to their nest. Cars and humans also kill cats. PAWS regularly sees cats which have gunshot wounds or vehicular injuries. This spring we worked with a cat named Lindsay, who came to us with her femur shattered by a 22-caliber bullet. It's not safe outside for cats.

Cats carry diseases. They carry diseases that impact on other wildlife and other cats such as Panleukopenia, Corona Virus, and Feline Infectious Peritonitis. Feline Leukemia is not such a big issue on Bainbridge Island because there are not a lot of native cats species here, but in other areas of the country where they have bobcat populations, frequently cats can impact on native cats by spreading disease.

Another side of the story is that cats are also vectors for a lot of diseases affecting humans. Toxoplasmosis; rabies, round worm, hook worm, and ring worm. Bainbridge Island is the only municipality in Kitsap County that does not have an ordinance that addresses free roaming cats. Bainbridge specifically exempts free roaming cats from the free roaming animal ordinance and the poop-scooping ordinance. Just looking into my crystal ball, and knowing our litigious society, it's going to take one child getting toxoplasmosis from the sandbox at the daycare center that someone's cat is using as a litter box before there will be an ordinance on Bainbridge dealing with free roaming cats, and I don't think it will be a bad thing.

Outdoor Cat Populations: There are two types of populations of free roaming cats. There are the cats which owners let roam outside. Fluffy who gets to play outside, and loves to watch the birds. Then there are the unknown cats, the feral colonies that may or may not be managed, including “dumped” cats. These are cats that people say “are just going take them out and leave them in the country side, because cats are hunters and they will be able to survive. I’m not going to take them to the Humane Society because they will just put them to sleep.”

One of the goals of PAWS is to create a climate of cultural change much like has happened over the last 20 or 30 years with dogs. Thirty years ago it was completely socially acceptable if you had a dog you could let it free roam the neighborhood. Today responsible pet owners know that if you have a dog, it is on a leash, or in the house, or contained in a fenced yard or in an off-leash dog park. Off-leash dog parks are a recent innovation and created by responsible pet owners. We want to create the same responsible ownership among cat owners, namely it’s not okay to just let your cat go. It’s not okay if you have 3 or 4 cats that hang out, and if you move, it’s not okay to leave the cats there. They need to go somewhere.

Some of the things that PAWS has done during the 10 years I’ve been with the organization is to eradicate four major feral cat colonies on Bainbridge Island. One was near the back edge of Bloedel where we trapped and removed over 60 feral cats. There was another group near Day Road and Lovegren where we removed upwards of 40 cats, and we have been working with veterinarians in the area as we tracked an outbreak of Feline Infection Peritonitis (FIP). Typically we have been seeing one to two cases of this a year, and we noticed a spike both within the paws program and with local veterinarians. We tracked the disease back to this one source near Day Road, and proceeded to remove over 40 cats. Another colony in Rolling Bay had over 30 cats. Removing these colonies greatly impacts wildlife. It also eliminates highlighting those places as a dumping ground, indicating it’s okay to dump your cat there.

Another thing that PAWS has done is instituted a policy where all our kitten adoptions - and we do over 250 adoptions a year - go only to indoor-only homes. We have coordinated our work with other organizations, including the Kitsap Humane Society, Rescue Every Dog, and Animal Rescue family to promote the indoor cat policy. We have been getting a lot of good responses from this policy, and providing a lot of education to those interested in adding a kitten to the family that has never considered the indoor vs. outdoor dilemma.

PAWS realizes that, as instinctive predators, cats need outlets for their hunting behavior to avoid channeling those instincts down destructive paths. We have plans available for building enclosures at our Adoption Center at 8820 Miller Road. You can build a safe cat enclosure if your cat has to absolutely go outside. Put up a fence. There are commercial cat fences available that cats cannot climb over or under. Leash walking is an option if you start when your cats are young. Cats will walk on a leash just like a dog, and they will get their enjoyment of being outside. We are encouraging owners to make the indoor environment more stimulating for their cats. Get a cat tree. Use interactive cat

toys. Don't feed your cat with a bowl of food. Make your cat hunt for its food. Put it in toys and around the house so that the cat is using its brain and using its hunting instincts inside the house, so the natural drive to get out and go kill something outside is satisfied.

PAWS would like to request of the many different environmental organizations here on Bainbridge to make indoor cats this part of your message. When you are talking about creating a backyard habitat, put out feeders, put out birdbaths, and keep your cat inside. When talking about creating sustainable wildlife corridors, make sure they will be cat-free zones. When working to save at-risk bird species, remember the impact of cat predation on the population.

Learn More:

PAWS of Bainbridge Island – www.pawsbainbridge.org

American Bird Conservancy- Cats Indoors Campaign - www.abcbirds.org/cats/

HSUS Safe Cats Campaign -

www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/cat_care/keep_your_cat_safe_at_home_hsus_safe_cats_campaign/index.html

Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine - Indoor Cat Initiative

<http://vet.osu.edu/indoorcat.htm>