Prowling the Divide

After years of debate about the place of feral cats in our society, bird lovers and feline advocates are making peace for the sake of the animals

BY JULIE FALCONER

It wasn't the shot heard around the world—but it didn't go unnoticed.

The victim, a feral tabby named Mama Cat, lived under the San Luis Pass Bridge in Galveston, Texas, where she was fed by an elderly toll worker. In November 2006, Mama Cat took a .22-caliber hollow point bullet to the spine and, according to police testimony, suffered for more than 30 minutes before dying. The triggerman, local birding guide James Stevenson, was unrepentant. He claimed the cat was a threat to endangered piping plovers nesting on the nearby dunes, and killing her was a public service.

Debates on the Galveston killing started simmering on the Internet, with cat and bird enthusiasts quick to weigh in. And when Stevenson was indicted on animal cruelty charges five months later, the national press picked up the story, depicting cats and birds and the people who defend them at deadly odds with no middle ground in sight.

Judging from the more colorful commentary from both sides, it wasn't hard to believe. As the trial date neared, birding blogs flew "Free Jim Stevenson" banners on their home pages and posted comments describing cats as "mini-Hitlers," "a scourge on our landscape," and "manmade killing machines." Pet lovers fired back with reactions to the "evil Galveston bird lover" and—in response to reports that Stevenson had killed many felines wandering through his yard—"serial cat killer."

None of this happened in a vacuum. The Galveston incident reflected just one highly publicized skirmish in a decades-long fight between conservationists and cat advocates. When the case ended in a mistrial in November 2007, the focus shifted to other battlegrounds, including a popular seaside resort in New Jersey, a tiny town in Iowa, and an island off California's southern coast.

And again, the situation was presented as an either/or question: Do we save the cats or the birds?

To people like Stevenson, the tradeoff is clear. "I had to choose who dies," he told *The Wall Street Journal*. But there are compassionate people who aren't comfortable making such choices. And they're working to prove that we don't need to.

How We Got Here

In the 1970s, the nation's shelters were euthanizing 15 to 20 million dogs and cats a year—most of them healthy, adoptable animals. Spay/neuter clinics were scarce, animal control received minimal funding, and since local governments often wouldn't pay for cat management, many municipal shelters accepted only dogs. In this environment, free-roaming cats—particularly ferals, who aren't socialized to people and are rarely adoptable—were a low priority. Local and state agencies sometimes killed or trapped and removed groups of ferals in response to complaints, but for the most part, these wild counterparts to one of the nation's most popular pets were simply ignored.

Feral cats emerged from the shadows in the mid-1980s with a grassroots movement to control their numbers nonlethally. The trap-neuter-return (TNR) method gradually diminishes cat colonies, as kittens and tame adults are typically removed for adoption, and the remaining animals age and die off.

It's an innovative solution to a dilemma that continues to this day. Though euthanasia rates have steadily declined since the 1970s, even socialized lap cats often face slim chances for adoption. Meanwhile, tens of millions of street cats occupy the fringes of urban, suburban, and rural areas, subsisting on handouts or scavenging around dumpsters. They and their offspring often end up at shelters, adding more lives to an already crowded lottery for too few homes.

TNR's pioneers recognized that cat overpopulation wouldn't be solved without addressing the needs of ferals. They argued that removing the cats based on nuisance complaints created a vacuum for more cats to move into the territory and begin the breeding cycle anew. And they questioned the ethics of expecting shelters—originally established as havens for homeless pets—to euthanize an endless stream of healthy but untame animals.

But these early advocates received little praise for their efforts. The most heated criticism initially came from animal welfarists who worried that the presence of managed cat colonies would encourage people to abandon pets at colony sites. And TNR seemed to sanction life on the streets at a time when shelters were trying to change the cultural mindset, encouraging people to view dogs and cats as cherished family members—not objects to be chained in backyards or allowed to roam at will.

"We considered it condoned abandonment," says John Snyder, vice president of The Humane Society of the United States's Companion Animals section, referring to the organization's early opposition to TNR. "It was hard to reconcile our ideal of the safe indoor home with the TNR model, which lets the cats live outside and take their chances."

But just five years after the Feral Cat Coalition of San Diego launched an aggressive TNR program in 1992, a local animal control agency reported a nearly 50 percent decrease in the number of cats impounded and euthanized. Other projects across the country began to show similarly impressive results, while veterinarians Margaret Slater and Julie Levy wrote convincingly about the benefits of nonlethal feral cat management. It became obvious that TNR was helping to combat cat overpopulation, says Snyder.

At the time, The HSUS was a microcosm of the larger debate. The organization's wildlife staff were concerned about protecting all wild species, not just the rare and endangered ones, while the pet experts were thinking of the cats. "People were literally in tears over this issue," says Stephanie Shain, the former director of outreach for The HSUS's Companion Animals section who now heads the organization's Stop Puppy Mills campaign. "What kept us pushing forward together was the fact that we all wanted to find a way to protect cats and wild animals, understanding that there are generally no simple answers to complex issues like this."

Shain, a longtime supporter of TNR, helped craft the organization's new policy. "I was thrilled to see the change," she says. "It was great to come to a place where we were very clearly pro-TNR and could put resources toward helping feral cats."

ALEXEI ZAYCEV/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

Left to their own devices, feral cats are trapped in an unending cycle of breeding and scavenging for food. Managed colonies can make a huge difference.

But as TNR gained traction in the animal welfare movement, some conservation groups stepped up their offensive.

A Conservation Dilemma

Last year, scientists announced that human-related changes to the global climate and ecosystems have ushered in a new geological era, the Anthropocene. The effects on wildlife are grim. Worldwide bird populations are in free fall, and the National Audubon Society has concluded that nearly one-quarter of the 448 species of land birds who breed in North America may be slipping toward extinction.

Reports by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and other wildlife protection organizations agree that habitat loss and degradation are the primary causes of this decline. But the National Audubon Society, along with the American Bird Conservancy and the National Wildlife Federation, also identify free-roaming cats—including tame pets allowed to wander from home and feral cats who live outdoors—as a contributing factor. The American Bird Conservancy denounces managed cat colonies as a threat to the nation's wildlife—"the wrong solution to a tragic problem"—and actively lobbies against TNR programs.

Most conservationists believe that ferals should be trapped and removed to protect wild animals from cats who may hunt them or compete with them for food. But TNR advocates argue that cats have been made scapegoats for a much larger problem caused by our own species.

"Arguing over cats versus birds trivializes the bigger issues," says Becky Robinson, president of Alley Cat Allies, a national feral cat advocacy organization. "It deflects attention from the critical issues that are truly affecting wild animals."

Years of debate have whipped up so much animosity that some birding listservs have banned or limited posts on the "dreaded cat thread." But more recently, new voices have paved the way to a fresh perspective: that conservationists and feral cat advocates aren't natural enemies but obvious allies.

"Is there such a thing as a cat-person or a bird-person?" asked a 2008 press release from the Audubon Society of Portland (ASP) in Oregon. "It's not about birds versus cats; it's about protecting birds and cats."

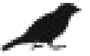
It was an unusual statement from a wildlife organization, but ASP conservation director Bob Sallinger defies some of the stereotypes animal advocates have about conservationists. For one, he's skeptical of lethal control solutions aimed at protecting one species from another—something many environmentalists support when they believe a species is threatened. "Where does it end?" asks Sallinger. "I struggle with that."

And despite the years he spent overseeing a wildlife rehabilitation hospital that receives a steady flow of the victims of house cat attacks, he doesn't hold a grudge against cats, either. Almost a third of bird species in Oregon are in serious trouble, Sallinger says, but "even if we solve the cat problem tomorrow, it's not going to stop bird populations from declining. It would just be removing one pressure—and none of [the pressures] are going to be solved overnight."

Finding the Middle Ground

Sallinger's long-term approach inspired a partnership with the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon, which responded positively to his request in 2007 to sign a letter encouraging people to keep their pet cats indoors. Last February, the two organizations launched the "It's Good for Cats and It's Good for Wildlife" public education campaign to further promote the benefits of the indoor life. "The point isn't targeting ferals as something negative in the environment, but helping to prevent future ferals," says the cat coalition's executive director, Karen Kraus.

Key to such collaborations is a willingness to set aside grudges, refrain from superficial squabbling, and acknowledge the validity of others' concerns, believes TNR advocate Bryan Kortis. The cofounder of Neighborhood Cats in New York City, Kortis recognizes missteps on both sides. Conservationists have been guilty of throwing around "fake science" that exaggerates feline predation on wildlife, he says, while TNR advocates have often refused to acknowledge that cats may significantly impact some bird populations. "Even if it's 10th on the list, there is still some impact from cat predation," says Kortis, who is also the author of a trap-neuter-return manual published



by The HSUS in 2007. "Let's not avoid the issue, but let's not rely on studies that don't apply, either."

Many opponents assert that TNR creates and enables feral cat colonies. But, as Kortis points out, the cats are already there, often fed by people who don't even realize that trapping and spaying is an option. "We're trying to fix the problem," he says.

At the same time, cat advocates should recognize that TNR may not be appropriate in certain circumstances, such as in the middle of a sensitive bird sanctuary where attrition over time is too slow. Though relocating feral cats is difficult, it should be considered in these rare situations. Those who insist that cats stay in an area where they could have a genuine impact on a threatened species are simply exacerbating "the 'no TNR anywhere' sentiment that cripples the larger effort," Kortis says.

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To help build bridges with birders, cat advocates should acknowledge that TNR may not be appropriate in certain circumstances, such as in the middle of a sensitive bird sanctuary where attrition over time is too slow.

No Species is an Island

Caught in a no-man's land between wild animal and family pet, feral cats are clearly in a class of their own. But they're just one of the many victims of humans' belief that we can order nature to our liking, killing one species to save another. In recent years, tax dollars have funded the slaughter of wolves for the sake of game species such as elk and moose, sea lions to protect salmon, raccoons on behalf of marsh rabbits, double-crested cormorants to preserve the walleye, and mute swans for native waterfowl.

People often feel a special responsibility to protect native species that, because of past actions by humans, may otherwise disappear. But that doesn't absolve us from a moral responsibility for finding humane methods to resolve conflict. We can't accept our cell phone towers, seaside homes, superhighways, skyscrapers, and suburban sprawl, and still feel justified killing animals who don't jibe with our opinion of what the natural world should look like. Like many wild species, feral cats challenge us to combine our best methods for protecting all animals—while acknowledging the limits of our control over ecological systems.

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Bryan Kortis helps cat advocates and conservationists learn how to get along.

Ironically, the polarizing Galveston cat killing carries a constructive message for cat and bird advocates. Two days after the trial began, Stevenson's attorney, Ted Nelson, described the difficulty of selecting a jury. "Six or seven people got struck because they thought it was the biggest waste of their time," Nelson told *ABCNews.com*. "They couldn't believe they got called down to court to talk about a bird and a cat."

It's a reality that both sides should keep in mind. The enemies of cat defenders and bird protectors aren't each other, but the portion of the public that considers these issues too trivial for serious consideration. People who care about animals—domestic, wild, or in-between—can't afford to be divided. AS

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