

localnews

www.peterboroughexaminer.com

Editor **JIM HENDRY** life@peterboroughexaminer.com 745-4641 ext. 242

LIVING

Save a bird, keep the cat inside

Your pet is a skillful hunter. As many as a billion birds a year pay the price

In about six weeks time, countless numbers of songbirds – warblers, vireos, flycatchers, tanagers, and orioles, to name a few – will begin winging their way northward from their wintering grounds in Latin America to nesting territories throughout North America and, of course, right here in the Kawarthas.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

With the help of southern winds, many will fly non-stop across the Gulf of Mexico, while others will make their way north along the coasts of Mexico and Texas, or island hop across the Caribbean. All will face formidable obstacles such as city skyscrapers, cell-phone towers, power lines, windows, road traffic, pesticides, storms, scarce resting and feeding places; and then, upon arrival at destination, more and more of their former homes will have been logged over, paved over, or fragmented by new roads, houses, shopping centres, and golf courses. If all of this is not enough, another ubiquitous danger is lurking: free-roaming cats.

In North America, anywhere from 117 million to 150 million domestic and feral cats (cats that have escaped from domestication and returned, partly or wholly, to a more or less wild state) wander freely some or all of the time. They are believed to kill an estimated one billion birds a year, many of them migratory songbirds such as those listed above. Other victims include resident species like cardinals and chickadees and short-distance migrants like robins and bluebirds. As a result of cat predation, in combination with climate change, window collisions, pesticides, and habitat destruction, we are already looking at an overall drop in our songbird populations of as much as 40%.

Some cats take as many as 50 birds a year, not to mention huge numbers of monarch butterflies, frogs, toads, and small mammals. Even if every outdoor cat only killed one bird, it could still mean 150 million fewer birds less. If cats were limiting their hunting to abundant species like robins and starlings, this wouldn't be as much of a concern. However, as with most predators, they take whatever they can get. In many cases cats end up killing species that are already threatened with extinction such as some of our warblers, flycatchers, and grassland species. Many of these species turn up in suburban backyards during migration or nest around cottages and rural homes, hence the danger from cats. Cats also leave countless other baby birds orphaned and almost sure to die. Just a scratch from a cat's claws can be enough to kill many small creatures. A cat's mouth and claws contain a huge variety of dangerous bacteria that can be fatal to many animals.

Anyone who values biodiversity and how much it adds to our lives has to be concerned. Cat owners, on the other hand, have nothing to worry about



Special to The Examiner

The cat that caught this woodpecker on the fly (above) is an example of how dangerous even a well-fed, declawed pet can be. The cerulean warbler (below) is one of the songbirds most in danger of extinction.



Special to The Examiner

when it comes to the future of domestic felines. Cats are in no danger of extinction. Future generations are absolutely guaranteed to be able to enjoy the companionship of a cat. This is not the case for the future of bird diversity. We are setting our children and grandchildren up to live in a much lonelier planet where a multitude of avian voices will have been forever silenced.

Cats, of course, are not the only reason why bird biodiversity is threatened. They are, however, one of the causes that we have some control over. Factors such as habitat destruction, probably the biggest threat, will almost certainly continue unabated as long as our economic system is based on the continual growth and expansion of industry, agriculture population, and of our towns and cities. Even when natural areas are protected – almost

always a protracted, exhausting, and hugely expensive battle for conservationists – these areas are often simply isolated, green islands in a sea of condos, roads, malls, industrial parks, and agricultural land. Even stopping birds from colliding with windows is not easy to accomplish. The problem of free-roaming cats, however, is different. We can take action and are morally obliged to do so.

It's important to dispel some myths. One such falsehood is that a declawed, well-fed cat with a bell on its collar won't kill wild animals. Research has proven otherwise. Even if a cat has a full stomach, it will still hunt. Unlike dogs, cats have never lost their hunting



© Karl Egressy

KARL EGRESSY photo

instinct and skill and are extremely efficient predators. It's also important to remember that cats have never been part of North American ecosystems. They are a non-native species that is closely related to the Chinese Mountain Cat and the African Wildcat. Our North American birds, therefore, have never had time to evolve adaptations to avoid cat predation. It therefore makes no

sense for North Americans to say that allowing a cat to go outside to hunt is part of the natural order of things. If we lived in Africa or Asia, maybe.

I certainly don't want to demonize cats. They should not be blamed for doing what comes naturally. The cat's owner is the only irresponsible party. Our family has had a cat for many years, but we keep it inside. Some cat owners that I know even have a backyard cat enclosure or attach the animal to a leash on a clothesline. Most, however, simply keep the animal indoors. Allowing your cat to roam around outdoors is not good for the animal, either. Outdoor cats live an average of only five to seven years while indoor cats can easily live 15 to 17 years. Outdoor cats also run the risk of being hit by cars, being exposed to disease or poison, or succumbing to the elements. With a little patience, cats that are used to being let out can be trained to stay inside. Yes, there might be a lot of meowing at first, but the task is not impossible. A host of different strategies can easily be found on-line.

I think it's also time that Peterborough follow the lead of cities like Calgary where cats are essentially treated in the same manner as dogs. They are licensed, provided with an identification tag, but not allowed to run free. According to the City of Calgary website, at three-months of age, all cats must be licensed and must remain on the owner's property. The fine for a cat running at large is \$100, while the fine for not licensing your cat is \$250. According to Bill Bruce of Calgary's animal and by-law services, these measures have been very successful. There has been a dramatic drop in cat euthanasia and a huge increase in the return of lost animals to their owner. Apparently, as a direct result of this bylaw, there are very few cats in Calgary's animal shelters. In Peterborough, on the other hand, which has no cat bylaw and allows cats to run free, the humane society shelter is presently at capacity.

Oakville, too, has taken steps to control free-roaming cats. Allowing a cat to wander freely is now a ticketable offense punishable by a fine of \$105 plus a \$30 surcharge. The new small animal bylaws still allow the public to humanely trap and remove a cat from their property (or even a cat at large on public property) and bring it to the humane society. Cats are also required to have identification, which can be a tag or microchip. Johanne Golder, executive director of the Oakville & Milton Humane Society, supports the new bylaws and says they are needed to address the cat overpopulation crisis as well as the risks faced by outdoor cats and songbirds.

We need to find ways for cats and songbirds to peacefully coexist. People rightfully feel a sense of injustice when a largely preventable cause of songbird decline such as free-roaming cats is allowed to continue unhampered – especially in a city like Peterborough that prides itself on environmental innovation, education, and leadership.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com.

Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him, go to www.kegressy.com.