

Feral cats are our own creation

Unlike dogs, cats not controlled so owners put less value on their lives

Having grown up in Peterborough in the 1950s and '60s, I clearly remember the stray dogs that used to roam our neighbourhood streets, either on their own or in small packs. I, for one, was terrified of them. I have an especially vivid memory of going tobogganing one day and having a stray dog run after the toboggan, nipping me in the arm as we sped down the hill.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

As a society, we eventually came to the realization that free-roaming dogs was not an acceptable situation – not for the dogs nor for the public in general. A similar change of attitude has occurred with regards to smoking. We are infinitesimally more respectful of the rights and health of other people than we ever were before. A respect for other people's property, interests and sources of joy and happiness in the world seems to stop, however, when it becomes a question of free-roaming cats. This week I'd like to turn my attention to the problem of feral cats.

According to the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the term "feral cat" refers to "the offspring of strays or abandoned domestic cats that have reverted to a wild state; the offspring of feral cats who have lived in a wild state for some generations; or domestic cats that have been abandoned or run off and gone wild. Feral cats live in family groups called colonies." These cats can also be distinguished from strays by the fact that they either lack owners, or lack any reasonable prospect of being reunited with their owners - for whatever reason.

One of the unintended side effects of not having a cat bylaw in Peterborough is the attitude on the part of some people that kittens and adult cats are somehow "disposable." This, in turn, exacerbates the feral cat problem. Irresponsible owners routinely release cats in wooded areas adjacent to subdivisions or even at the bottom of farmers' lanes. I heard of one woman who, over the course of one year, had five litters of kittens dropped off at the bottom of her farm lane. She almost wondered if someone had put up a neon sign inviting people to leave their unwanted cats there! Even in the city, boxes of kittens turn up in bus shelters, along local rail-trails, in parking lots, or in just about any other public venue. Strangely enough, the disposable animal syndrome does not really exist when it comes to dogs. By and large, most dog owners are responsible. The much stricter controls on dog ownership are certainly one of the main reasons why.

Many of these abandoned cats end up at already full-to-capacity animal shelters such as those in Peterborough and Lakefield. This puts a huge financial burden on the shelters in staff time, veterinary services, food, and transporting the cats to other shelters where they may have space. Just last week, a man brought in 56 cats that had been living in his home. He had started with two pregnant cats, which, within a couple of years, had increased in number by a factor of almost 30!

Other abandoned cats eventually

become feral. If they are lucky, they may manage to survive for several miserable, hungry years as they wreak havoc on local songbird and chipmunk populations. Some may receive occasional handouts from well-meaning people.

But for most feral cats, life is grueling. In cold weather they can easily lose ear tips to frostbite. Many end up getting into fights with other cats with devastating results. Cats hold onto their rival with their front paws and then rake the sharp, powerful claws of their back legs over their opponent's body. In cold weather, cats will sometimes slink under cars and then climb up onto the engine for warmth. The unknowing motorist who turns on the ignition ends up mangling the poor cat. Cats may also

lap up sweet tasting but deadly anti-freeze from spills on the pavement. Like domestic cats, feral cats are often run over by cars or fall victim to coyotes or birds of prey. They are also at a much greater risk of contracting all manner of diseases.

Although the exact number of feral cat colonies in and around Peterborough is not known, they certainly do exist. And, as long as people continue to abandon cats, the situation will only get worse. Add to this the speed at which cats reproduce. On average, an unsprayed female cat can have two or three litters a year but even more is possible.

In some cases, feral cats are taken care of through an informal network of caregivers that feed and sometimes

even provide them with shelter (e.g., inside a garage, shed, etc.). Others simply fend for themselves without any assistance or compassion. Some feral cats are trapped and delivered to animal shelters. However, these animals are rarely adopted and, in many jurisdictions, are euthanized after a short period. According to Wendy Ryan, executive director of the Peterborough Humane Society, not only are feral cats unadoptable but the animals become completely terrified when caged and are therefore very difficult to care for. The Peterborough Humane Society does not accept feral cats.

An example of a local feral cat colony can be found on Jackson Road in Hastings. Here, large numbers of feral cats – possibly 40 or more - are fed by

some of the neighbours. One resident spoke to me of the continual spraying that people have to put up with. For a male cat, urine serves to mark territorial boundaries. This seems to be especially prevalent in a feral cat colony where territory is "shared." When cats feel threatened or frightened, they will often mark their territory again and again. The musky odor of cat urine marking is unmistakable and not terribly pleasant. This activity often prompts innocent cats inside a house to spray back at them.

In another rural feral colony in our area, one homeowner has taken it upon himself to have the feral cats spayed or neutered – and all at his own expense. The cats are then returned to the outdoors where other neighbours feed them. This trap-neuter-return (TNR) is

the only method proven to be effective at controlling feral cat population growth. By neutering close to 100 percent of the cats, the size of the colony will gradually decline. Even TNR, however, is not great news for songbirds, chipmunks, monarch butterflies, and toads and frogs. The neutered cats still live in the wild and even well-fed cats – feral or domestic – are formidable hunters.

Feral cat colonies are often located near natural areas, which makes them even more of a threat. In a landmark study in Rithet's Bog in Victoria, B.C., both feral and owned cats have been caught on video decimating songbirds and their nests. Professor Liana Zanette of the University of Western Ontario found that cats

were responsible for 22% of the nest predation events recorded to date. The feral cats are being fed by people living in condos on the edge of the bog. This has understandably caused tension with people who enjoy visiting the bog for its natural values.

By having a cat bylaw in Peterborough, the number of feral cats would eventually decrease. Compulsory licensing and micro-chipping (inserting a rice grain-size computer chip under your cat's skin) would mean that lost cats could easily be identified and reunited with their owners. Right now, only 2% of cats that arrive at the Peterborough Humane Society end up returning to their original home. Over the long term, a cat bylaw would also help to change the attitude on the part of some people that cats are throwaway pets that don't need to be taken seriously.

In the final analysis, a significant number of people will not become conscientious pet owners unless they are forced to behave responsibly as a result of municipal legislation. In the meantime, we all need to spread the word that cats should be kept indoors. They will live longer, healthier lives, as will our increasingly threatened songbird populations.

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A feral kitten devours the remains of a rabbit (centre photo) and a house cat (top) roaming outside carries off its prey, an unlucky pigeon. Bottom photos show feral cat colonies.