



Cats

Why are they a threat to native wildlife?

For many New Zealanders, cats are a treasured companion animal, but cats can also have significant impacts on our native wildlife.

All cats, whether feral, stray or domestic, are active hunters during the day and night. They can kill a wide range of native wildlife, including insects, eels, kōura (native crayfish), fish, lizards, frogs, birds (including kiwi and NZ dotterel chicks) as well as rabbits and rodents. They can also carry toxoplasmosis and other diseases and parasites harmful to humans, livestock and native wildlife.

Cats are widespread throughout all landscapes in the Auckland region, especially coastal and lake margins. Cats are often present in far greater numbers than is obvious as they are extremely alert and are quick to hide. Home range on mainland New Zealand is around 200 hectares, depending on the density of cats and prey availability.



A feral cat with typical tabby markings

Are all cats the same?

No. Cats are commonly classified into companion (pet or domestic) cats, and two classes of unowned cats - stray and feral. These classes of cats are further described below.

Companion (pet, domestic) cat:

A common domestic cat (including a kitten unless otherwise stated) that lives with humans as a companion and is dependent on humans for its welfare. Cats are New Zealand's most popular companion animal and can be a much-loved member of the family. Companion cats are not pests and it is not acceptable to intentionally kill companion cats in community conservation projects.

However, even companion cats can be prolific hunters. If you own a cat, make sure it's desexed and microchipped (or easily identifiable in some other way e.g. with a named, addressed collar, so it can be safely returned to you if caught in a live capture trap), and consider making it an indoor cat – it keeps your cat safe and our native wildlife too!

Unowned cats:

Unowned cats are often classed as either stray or feral, depending on the extent of their contact with humans. These two classes of unowned cat are described further here:

Stray Cat:

A companion cat which is lost or abandoned and which is living as an individual or in a group (colony). Stray cats have many of their needs indirectly supplied by humans, and live around centres of human habitation. Stray cats are likely to interbreed with the unneutered companion cat population.

Feral Cat:

A cat which is not a stray cat, and which has none of its needs provided by humans. Feral cats generally do not live around centres of human habitation. Feral cat population size fluctuates largely independently of humans, is self-sustaining, and is not dependant on input from the companion cat population.

Control Methods

Step one – avoid harm to companion cats

Community groups need to be aware that it is important to take all reasonable steps to avoid killing anyone's pet cat. If you are undertaking cat control for your property, we suggest using live capture traps if it is possible that you might catch a companion cat. Any other forms of cat control must not be used in urban areas.

First, you should notify neighbours you are undertaking cat control on your property³. Ask your neighbours whether they have pet cats and, if so, how they can be identified, to help you return them safely if caught.

As above, in the majority of situations the most appropriate method will be live capture trapping to avoid accidentally killing companion cats.

³ Note that express permission from the Ministry for Primary Industries is legally required before leghold traps may be used. These are not a recommended type of trap for community use.

Occasionally, in remote rural areas where you can be confident that companion cats are not at risk, kill traps or shooting may be an option.

Only two toxins are registered for the control of cats in New Zealand. Both require Medical Officer of Health approval, must be administered by a Controlled Substance License holder, and neighbour notifications are a legal requirement. For these reasons, cat control using toxins should be restricted to large scale projects of high biodiversity value, and in rural or remote areas. Toxins are usually not an appropriate method for community groups to use for cat control. If you require more information, please contact Auckland Council Conservation Advisors.

Auckland Council (and/or its contractors) will undertake cat control in accordance with the Regional Pest Management Plan on public land (or private land with consent of the private land occupier) at defined remote rural sites that contain a resident or breeding or roosting population of any regionally or nationally threatened bird, reptile or amphibian.

As it is not appropriate for community groups to undertake this control, the remainder of the advice in this section of the Pest Animal Guide relates to control on private land.

Live capture cage traps

Treadle activated live capture traps are the best option for ensuring that owned cats can be identified and safely returned to their owners.

Cage traps must be checked and cleared within 12 hours of sunrise each day, as this is an important legal requirement to manage the welfare of cats while they are in the cage. Alternatively, remote sensing networks can be used to remotely check traps. The type of remote sensing tool that is applicable will depend on access to cell phone or satellite coverage. It is imperative that there is confidence that the remote sensor is accurate. If there is any doubt about the effectiveness of the remote sensor, then manual inspections of the trap will be required to satisfy Animal Welfare Act requirements.

If a cat is caught, check to see whether it is owned – check for the presence of a collar, or a microchip (your local vet will be able to help if you don't have a microchip scanner). Whether the cat appears to be socialised or not will also be a relevant indicator of whether it is owned.

If an owner can be located, return the cat to its owner as soon as possible.

If the cat appears unowned (no microchip or other form of identification and not socialised) but may not be feral (i.e., it appears stray), contact a local cat rescue group or the SPCA.

If the cat caught is feral and needs to be killed, this must be done in a humane way in which the cat is rendered insensible, and that death immediately follows.

Catching feral cats

Feral cats are easiest to catch in mid-winter when food sources are low. Traps should be at densities of about 1 trap to 150ha. For sites under 150ha, more than one trap may be required – seek advice from a conservation advisor about what is suitable for the habitat the traps are in and the values you're trying to protect. When setting the cage trap attach it to the ground or tree.

Feral cats can be difficult to trap as they are naturally cautious, and any previous bad experience will make a cat become trap shy. To reduce this risk, wire the door of the baited trap open for 5 nights to give the cat time to become familiar with the trap before setting it. After this, run the trap set for a minimum of 10 consecutive nights. Fresh bait is essential as it is easy to create trap-wise cats if unpalatable bait is tasted and then the cat escapes. Cat biscuits in peanut butter are commonly used, or fresh meat (fish or rabbit). Traps should be rebaited fortnightly at a minimum. In warmer months it may be necessary to rebait traps more often.

There is the potential risk of attracting non-target animals, including birds. To reduce this risk, cover the trap top to prevent birds seeing the bait from above. This cover will also protect any trapped animal from sun and rain.

Kill Traps

Kill traps should not be used if it is possible that companion cats could be killed, therefore they should not be used in urban areas. Kill traps can be a useful tool on private property in remote areas when the landowner knows any cats are likely to be feral and the trap cannot be checked every day.

The Timms trap is recommended as a humane kill trap for feral cat control, along with the Steve Allen Mk2 (SA2) Kat trap. Care must be taken to ensure non-target animals are not caught. As above, kill traps are not appropriate in urban areas where there is a risk of catching companion cats. The numbers of kill traps required for any given area, trap position and baiting of kill traps will be as described above for live capture trapping.

Shooting

Shooting for cat control should only be undertaken on private property in remote areas where you are confident that companion cats are not present, as shooting does not allow for cats to be checked for the presence of microchip or other signs of ownership. Also note that it is only lawful to shoot feral cats on private property where it does not amount to wilful or reckless ill-treatment of the animal, and does not endanger any property, or endanger, annoy or frighten any person.

Night shooting with spotlights can sometimes be effective in more open terrain, around the margins of small forest blocks and in isolated trees. When using firearms, all users must have a firearms licence. The seven rules of firearm use must be observed at all times. These rules can be viewed at:

<http://www.police.govt.nz/advice/firearms-and-safety/arms-code/seven-firearms-safety-rules>