



Cat (*Felis catus*)

The feral cat has had a devastating impact on Australian wildlife. It may never be removed from Australia, but will hopefully someday be controlled.

History

Cats were thought to have landed in Australia when Dutch explorers in the 1600s were shipwrecked on the mainland. The numbers weren't great at that time until the English came to Australia to settle.

By the 1850s, although not in high numbers, cats were found throughout the Australian mainland and Tasmania with only a few small off shore islands and dense tropical rainforests being cat free. In the late 1800s cats were released into the wild to try and control the rabbit, rat and mice numbers.

Physical Characteristics

Feral cats belong to the same species as domestic cats. They are generally short haired with colour varying depending on the area in which they live.

Arid and semi-arid feral cats are more likely to be lighter in colour while cats that live in forest or bush areas are more likely to be grey or black. This helps them to blend in with their surroundings. Feral cats weigh about the same as a domestic cat, between 4-5kg, with females being slightly smaller.

Feral cats are generally solitary animals and are generally more active at night time than during the day. They shelter in burrows or logs and hunt predominately during the night. If they are living on live prey, feral cats are able to obtain all of their water from their food and so can live anywhere within Australia.



Breeding

Feral cats will breed about twice a year with a peak in late winter and spring producing on average 4 offspring. That amounts to 40-50 million births every year, with most of the kittens not surviving to maturity.

Shelter

In the arid areas of Australia, cats shelter during the day to escape the heat. They mainly use rabbit warrens but are also found under large shady bushes.

Impacts

In the Roxby Downs region, 60% of mammal species have become locally or globally extinct. Although feral cats have not caused all of these extinctions they have contributed to most of the small to medium mammal extinctions and to the reduction in bird numbers, especially ground dwelling birds, as well as a possible reduction in small reptile numbers.

Eradication

There are several methods used to manage feral cats. An effective method is fencing an area so that they are unable to get in.

Shooting and trapping feral cats as well as using 1080 poison baits are effective if used together. Overseas there is a feline disease which helps

OUTBACK CATASTROPHE

The cat pictured on the left was shot in the area of the Arid Recovery Reserve before the fence was built.

Photo: John Read

Its stomach contents revealed:

24 painted dragons (*Ctenophorus pictus*)
3 bearded dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*)
3 striped skinks (*Ctenotus schomburgkii*)
2 earless dragons (*Tympanocryptis* sp.)
1 mouse (*Mus domesticus*)
1 zebra finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*)

The majority of these animals were undigested, indicating it represented a hunting period of less than one day.

There are an estimated 12 million feral cats in Australia, eating 1-3 animals per day.

This gives us a loss of 8,760,000,000 (8.76 billion) animals per year.



to control feral cat numbers but at present it is not allowed into Australia.



The horseshoe shaped corral of the Arid Recovery cat traps

Photo: Arid Recovery

Arid Recovery

Around the Arid Recovery Reserve there are 20 cat traps. They use a sound lure, which makes a 'cheep cheep' or 'meow' sound, to attract the cat. The cat steps over a stick at the front of a horseshoe shaped corral and a soft jaw leg hold trap closes around the cats leg. They are then euthanised by an Arid Recovery staff member or a licensed, trained volunteer. Later the cat is dissected to see what it has been eating.



Laying out 1080 baits to dry

Photo: Arid Recovery

These traps help to keep cat pressure off the fence and helps Arid Recovery staff keep track of how many cats are in the area.

Feral cats are also baited using 1080 baits. Spotlighting and shooting at night, around the reserve, is another way that Arid Recovery helps to control the feral cat population.

Arid Recovery Research

Arid Recovery has conducted research on cats and foxes to find out where they live, how far they travel around Roxby Downs and how effective the aerial baiting program is.

Before baiting in 2006, cats and foxes were caught in traps and then collared with a VHF and GPS collar. The animals were then released and checked periodically to monitor their activity. After 5 months the cats and foxes were caught again and their collar information downloaded into a computer. The results found that aerial baiting was effective at controlling foxes but not cats, with cats quickly reinvading after baiting. We are currently testing an integrated approach in a smaller area to see if hand baiting, shooting and trapping will have more success at managing cat and fox populations and enabling threatened animals such as the Greater Bilby to survive in the wild.



Bertha a feral cat caught during the cat and fox collaring project.

Photo: Jenny Stott

What you can do to be a responsible cat owner, and reduce the population of feral cats.

Domestic cats live longer and are happier and healthier if they are kept indoors or contained in a cat run and have less chance of getting run over by a car or of getting into a fight with another cat.

Desex your cat, it will make them live longer and they will make a happier pet.

Domestic cats should be **micro chipped** and **collared**. This will mean if your cat gets out it will be easier to find them or have them returned to you.

Put **bells** on your cats collar as this may help reduce your cats ability to hunt

Give your cat **fresh water** and **food** every day so that they are less likely to go hunting for native animals.

If you are leaving town or your cat has had kittens **don't dump** them in the bush. Take the unwanted animals to a shelter or arrange for some one to adopt or look after your animals.

DON'T FEED OR LOOK AFTER STRAYS AS THEY CAN BECOME FERAL.

Find Out More

Population dynamics, diet and aspects of the biology of feral and cats and foxes in arid South Australia 2001 Read J; Bowen Z; Wildlife Research, CSIRO Aus.

<http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/Feral+cats>

<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive/publications/cat/index.html>

http://www.epa.qld.gov.au/nature_conservation/wildlife/threats_to_wildlife/invasive_plants_and_animals/cat/