

There is no denying that pet cats kill garden birds. Many people are distressed and angered by someone else's cat killing birds in their garden. Many cat owners want to stop cats killing birds.

The RSPB is not an animal welfare organisation, but a wildlife conservation organisation concerned with populations of all wild birds and other wildlife. The RSPB is, however, aware of people's feelings about this issue, and takes their concerns seriously. The RSPCA and Scottish SPCA, which are primarily concerned with animal welfare and not conservation, support the advice in this leaflet.

Cats may take millions of birds every year, but from a conservation viewpoint, we need to consider whether this is causing bird populations to decline. This leaflet provides some information on the impact cats might have on birds in gardens, and some ideas on what can be done to reduce it. There is still much that is not clear but we will continue to review our knowledge.

Some facts and figures

The best estimate of the number of pet cats in the UK is 7.2 million, according to the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association, plus an unknown number of feral cats (those living wild).

There is a species of wild cat, found in Scotland, which is native to the UK, but domestic cats are not part of our native fauna. They are maintained by people and do not need to hunt to survive.

Cats are individuals: their behaviour varies widely. Some will be prolific hunters; some may catch nothing at all.

Most cats are opportunistic hunters – they will catch whatever they come across rather than actively hunting a particular species. This means whatever is most abundant or vulnerable is most likely to be caught. Cats will catch prey even if they are not hungry.

According to a major survey by the Mammal Society, between a quarter and a third of all animals killed by cats are birds. Most of the rest of their catches will be

mice or voles.

Birds are most vulnerable around dawn and dusk, during the breeding season and mid-winter.

Are cats causing bird declines?

Estimates of how many creatures are killed by cats each year vary significantly. The most recent figures are from the Mammal Society, which estimated that the UK's cats caught 100 million prey items in five months, of which 27 million were birds. This is the number of prey items that were known to have been caught – we don't know how many more the cats caught, but didn't bring home, or how many escaped but subsequently died.

The most frequently caught birds, according to the Mammal Society, are (in order) house sparrows, blue tits, blackbirds and starlings.



Blackbird

Despite the large numbers of birds killed, there is no scientific proof that predation by cats in gardens is having any impact on bird populations UK wide. This may be surprising, but many millions of birds die naturally each year, mainly through starvation, disease, or other forms of predation. There is some evidence that cats tend to take weak or sickly birds. We also know that of the millions of baby birds hatched each

year, most will die before they reach breeding age. This is also quite natural, and each pair needs only to rear two young that survive to breeding age to replace themselves and maintain the population. It is possible that most of the birds killed by the cats would have died anyway from other causes before the next breeding season. So it is unclear whether cats have a major impact on populations. If their predation was additional to these other causes of mortality, this might have a serious impact on bird populations.

Those bird species that have undergone the most serious population declines in the UK (such as skylarks, tree sparrows and corn buntings) rarely encounter cats, so cats cannot be causing their declines. Research shows that these declines are usually caused by habitat change or loss, particularly on farmland. Populations of species that are most abundant in gardens tend to be increasing, despite the presence of cats. Blue tits, for example, the second most frequently caught birds, have increased by over a third across the UK since 1970. Of the birds most frequently caught by cats in gardens, only two (house sparrow and starling) have shown declines in breeding population across a range of habitats in the last decade. Gardens may provide a breeding habitat for at least 20% of the UK populations of house sparrows, starlings, greenfinches, blackbirds and song thrushes. For this reason it would be prudent to try to reduce cat predation, as, although it may not be causing the declines, some of these species are already under pressure.

Cat predation can be a problem where housing is next to scarce habitats such as heathland, and could potentially be most damaging to species with a restricted range (such as curlew buntings) or species dependent on a fragmented habitat (such as Dartford warblers on heathland).

What can I do?

A range of relatively simple measures can be recommended to cat owners and non-cat owners which could help to reduce the risk of cats catching garden birds, especially where food is being put out for birds.

Cat owners:

- Put a bell on the cat's collar – a recent RSPB study shows that this can reduce predation of birds by 41%, and predation of mammals such as mice and voles by 34%. The collar should have a quick release buckle that 'pops' open easily, and which will allow the cat to free itself should it become snagged. It must be correctly fitted, so that you can just fit one or two fingers under the collar. If in doubt about collar fitting, ask your vet for advice. There are commercially available 'sonic' collars that are designed to alert the potential prey to the cat's presence, and these will also reduce predation of birds and mammals. They are, however, more expensive.
- Cats should always be well-fed and cared-for. This may also encourage them to stay near home and be less likely to wander where they are not welcome (although it will not prevent them catching birds).



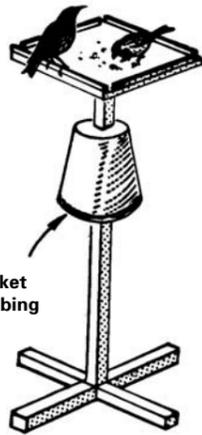
Juvenile starling

- Keep your cat indoors when birds are most vulnerable: at least an hour before sunset and an hour after sunrise, especially during March-July and December-January. Also after bad weather, such as rain or a cold spell, to allow birds to come out and feed.

- Take your cat indoors if a fledgling is in the garden, until its parents lead it away.
- Take unwanted cats to a shelter for rehoming to prevent the feral cat population from increasing.
- Consider having cats neutered to prevent them 'wandering' and producing unwanted kittens.

Bird-friendly gardens:

- Where cats are a problem, avoid putting food on the ground, but use a bird table where cats cannot reach it.
- Place feeders high off the ground but away from surfaces from which a cat could jump.
- Place spiny plants (such as holly) or an uncomfortable surface around the base of the feeding station to prevent cats sitting underneath it.
- Place an upturned tin or cone underneath the table to prevent cats from climbing the post (squirrel 'baffles' are already commercially available).



Upturned tin, cone or bucket helps to prevent cats climbing

- Make the table-stand slippery using a metal post, or plastic bottles around non-metal posts.

- Plant wildlife-friendly vegetation, such as prickly bushes and thick climbers in the garden to provide secure cover for birds. This should be close enough to where birds feed to provide cover, but not so close that cats can use it to stalk birds. See RSPB leaflets *Feeding garden birds*, *Gardening with wildlife* and *Planting gardens for birds* for more information. This kind of planting may also provide food and nesting sites.
- Position nest boxes where cats cannot reach them or sit close to them (preventing the parent birds from getting to the box).
- CATWatch, an ultrasonic cat deterrent, reduces cat visits into gardens by a third, as research for the RSPB has shown. The deterrent effect also appeared to increase with time, suggesting cats were learning to avoid gardens with active devices. Other deterrents, such as strong-smelling repellents, are available. The effectiveness of these is probably variable and there is little scientific evidence of their effectiveness. However, many people tell us that they have achieved good results with some of these techniques, so it must remain a matter of individual choice whether to use them or not.

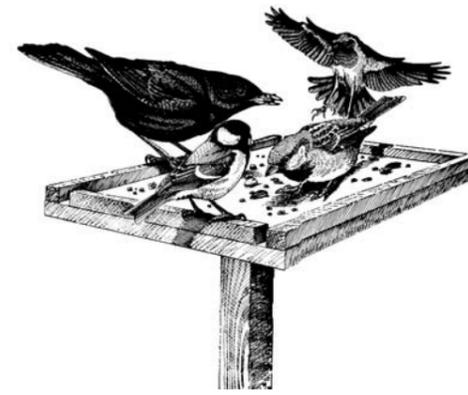
Cats and the law

- Domestic cats are protected by law and it is an offence to trap, injure or kill them.
- The welfare of cats must not be ignored. Remember that cats, even if they are unwelcome in your garden, may be someone's much-loved pets, perhaps of a child or elderly person living alone.
- Some people have called for legislation to be introduced to curb the freedom with which cats are allowed to roam. While we understand why people feel this way, we are not able to urge the government to introduce such legislation, as we have no scientific proof of the impact of cat predation on bird populations that is strong enough to support such a call.

Further reading

Woods, MJ, McDonald, RA and Harris, S (2003) *Predation of wildlife by domestic cats Felis catus in Great Britain*. Mammal Review vol 33. Report of the Mammal Society's *Look what the cat's brought in!* survey.

Turner, DC and Bateson, P (1986) *The domestic cat – the biology of its behaviour*. Cambridge University Press.



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The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way. We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654

Illustrations by Dan Powell

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INFORMATION Cats and garden birds



a million voices for nature