BEHAVIOR SERIES

Discouraging Free-Roaming Cats

MANY PEOPLE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH free-roaming cats who hunt wild birds as they feed or nest in their yards, who use their garden as a litter box, or who upset their pets by invading their territory. You certainly have the right to enjoy your yard and the birds who visit it. However, it's your responsibility to solve your free-roaming cat problem humanely.

Why Are They Picking on Me?

Although a destructive neighborhood cat can be frustrating, don't take it personally. The cat isn't acting out of spite or picking on you for some unknown reason. He's behaving naturally. The problem, of course, is that he's doing so in places you find inappropriate. The solution lies in making those places undesirable so the cat will behave naturally somewhere else.

Most cats won't eat birds, but they do enjoy the "thrill of the hunt." Cats have preyed upon birds for thousands of years, and there's no foolproof way to discourage this natural instinct.

Another natural feline instinct is to defecate in areas where the cat can cover his scent by burying the waste. Therefore, a cat who spends most of his time outdoors appreciates the soft, pre-dug dirt of your garden—or your child's sandbox—as a handy toilet.

When a cat naps on the hood of your car or in the center of your flowerbed, he's simply sunning himself in a nice, warm spot and doesn't realize the damage he's doing. He won't connect your negative reaction with the place where he naps, and although he may learn to avoid you, he won't avoid the place or stop the activity.

A free-roaming cat may approach your window or patio door and challenge your cat or dog through the glass with body language or vocal insults. The best way to protect your pet from this situation is to keep the outside cat away from the areas that your pet can see by using the techniques described below.

Of course, the ideal solution is for all cat owners to keep their cats safely confined. Unfortunately, not all cat owners are willing to do this, so you'll need to take steps to solve the problem without harming the cat, the birds, other animals, or your yard and garden. Because each situation is different, you may need patience and ingenuity to find the appropriate deterrent through trial and error.

Repellents

Repellents and devices designed to startle the cat "in the act" will work best to condition him to avoid the area. Never use poisons. Not only is poisoning animals inhumane and illegal, it's not an effective solution to the problem. Poisons will only rid you of one "pest" and won't deter any others. You'd have no way of knowing or controlling who might find and ingest the poisonous substance.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has registered more than 30 compounds for safe use in repelling domestic cats. Check with any pet supply store or garden supplier for commercial cat repellents. Most commercial repellents are based on the simple mothball compound. Mothballs or moth crystals, encased in cheesecloth bags to help protect the soil, work well to keep cats from digging in garden areas or potted plants.

Keep in mind that the effectiveness of any repellent will deteriorate with moisture and time. Whether you use mothballs or a commercial mixture, you'll need to reapply the solution after each rain, heavy dew, or watering. Check with your garden supplier to be certain that the solution you choose won't harm plants growing in that area, especially if you use fertilizers or other soil additives.

For areas where cats want to dig, ornamental pebbles may be an effective deterrent. Avoid pebbles that are very round or smooth, as they make a great cat bed. Rocks or pebbles should be placed in a way that makes it difficult for them

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to be dispersed. Small-gauge chicken wire can also be buried under a light layer of dirt or mulch, and may even restrain some weeds. The sharp pebbles or rough wire will be uncomfortable to soft paws.

"Surprise" Devices

To teach a cat to avoid a specific area, you must make that area unattractive to him. The best method is to surprise the cat "in the act" but without the cat knowing that you are the one administering the surprise. Simple devices can effectively booby-trap the area that a cat has found attractive.

- **Sound and Movement:** Scatter dry beans, macaroni, or birdseed on a metal tray; disposable pie pans or cookie sheets work well and are inexpensive. Balance several trays along the fence, porch or deck railing, the windowsill, or around the edge of any vehicle where the cat jumps onto the surface. Birds can still land safely if the trays are balanced properly, but the weight of a cat leaping onto the surface will upset the tray. The cat will be startled by the noise and by the unsteady, collapsing perch. As a variation on this "falling tray" method, set shallow plastic lids filled with water on each end of the tray to add a shower to the noise and movement of the falling tray.
- **Texture:** To keep a cat from jumping onto flat surfaces (railings, vehicles, or decks), criss-cross double-sided tape onto a piece of sturdy plastic—either a heavy, plastic drop cloth or a vinyl tablecloth would work well. Drape the plastic over the surface and secure it with cord, or at least one weighted object, to keep it in position. The sticky tape is annoying to the cat (without causing pain or panic), and the slick plastic not only rattles but also offers no foothold. An alternative to sticky tape would be to use a plastic carpet protector with the knobby side up.
- **Water:** This method works especially well for those areas where birds feed on the ground or where cats are using a garden area as a litter box. When the temperature permits, turn on a water sprinkler during the usual time of disturbance (which may be dawn or dusk if the cat is on your property to hunt). A timing device for the sprinkler, set to a staggered schedule, will help discourage those intelligent cats who would otherwise simply avoid the area at "regularly wet" times of day. A motion-detector sprinkler, designed specifically for deterring cats and other animals from gardens and other areas, is another option.
- **Obstacle:** If your bird feeder or birdhouse is mounted on a post, nail a galvanized metal guard in the shape of an inverted cone to the post to protect the platform.

Responsibility

If these suggested remedies fail to provide relief, your next step is to establish who cares for the cat. In many cases, the "problem cat" may be an owned cat who is allowed to roam, or the cat may have no real owner. If the cat belongs to a neighbor, your problem is a shared one. It's not always easy to discuss neighborhood issues diplomatically. Remember that the cat is your neighbor's pet, even though he's a nuisance when he's on your property. By emphasizing your concern for the cat's safety, instead of the problems he's causing, you have a greater chance of gaining your neighbor's cooperation.

If you're unable to determine who owns the cat, the problem is in your hands. In some cases it may be difficult to distinguish a feral (semi-wild) cat from a potentially friendly stray, so unless the cat comes to you fairly readily when you squat down nearby and gently call to him, play it safe and don't touch the cat (if you are able to get close enough in the first place). Even some well-socialized cats despise being picked up by strangers. Assuming you've already tried the reconditioning tactics mentioned above without success, you may need to resort to a humane trap.

Humane Traps

Don't use anything other than a humane cage trap designed to lure a cat into the cage with food and to safely contain him until he can be moved to another area. Most animal control agencies and humane societies loan or rent out these traps, and some will even deliver or pick them up. Be sure to find out how to set and bait the trap, how to cover the trap, and how often to check the trap.

If you have any reason to believe that the cat has an owner, please think twice before trapping the cat, unless you plan to return him to his owner.

If the cat is feral and unowned, check with your community's animal care and control agency or local humane society for information on trap, test, vaccinate, alter, release, and monitor (TTVARM) programs in your area.

To trap a stray cat, bait the trap with canned cat food. Place the trap in an area that's sheltered against the weather. You may hear some alarming noises when the cat realizes he's trapped. Immediately cover the trap with a sheet, blanket, or towel large enough to cover the entire trap; this will calm the cat considerably and prevent him from injuring himself in the trap. If the cat is confined with no access to water or shelter from inclement weather or predators, it's important that you remove the trap from the area immediately. Using gloves to prevent scratches or bites, put the trap in a protected area until you can take the cat to an animal shelter or veterinarian (which should be as soon as possible).

Many owned cats, unfortunately, don't wear collars with identification. An owned cat who is lost may behave fearfully. If the cat is unknown to you, take him to your local animal shelter. He will be cared for there, and his owners will have a better chance of reclaiming him. If he is not reclaimed, you may be able to take the cat yourself if you wish. That way, you can keep him safely confined in your home, where he belongs, with you.

This information provided for you by

Town of Truckee Animal Control
530-582-7830
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Humane Society of Truckee-Tahoe
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