

# Not just for the birds

## Keeping cats indoors to protect wildlife, and for their own safety

by Rosemary Guyette

The songbird didn't make it. The one whose picture was going to accompany this article, as an illustration of injuries inflicted by a domestic cat, ended up dying before the photographer arrived.

Death by kitty is an all-too-common fate for wild birds, according to Dr. Helene Van Doninck, a wildlife veterinarian and co-founder of the Cobequid Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre near Truro, N.S. She is one of the developers of Allied Cats, a local initiative of the Ecology Action Centre (EAC), a Halifax-based environmental protection organization, aimed at encouraging people to keep their cats indoors.

It's part of a growing international movement. Van Doninck cites scientific studies and annual counts by lay people which show bird numbers rapidly declining worldwide. Habitat loss, electrical wires, and natural predation are all factors, but domestic cats are thought to play a significant role. It is estimated that cats take out 100-350 million birds per year in Canada alone. Spring and summer kills of adult birds have the greatest impact on populations, says Van Doninck, because their offspring often starve, or fall victim when their peeping attracts predators.

While saving wildlife is the program's primary objective, it also highlights the advantages for cat owners. The motto is:



Many cat lovers cling to the view that their pets should have the freedom to indulge in "natural" behavior outdoors, but conservationists say these non-native predators are having a significant impact on bird populations. (RD photo)



**Dr. Helene Van Doninck, a wildlife veterinarian and co-founder of the Cobequid Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre near Truro, N.S., where this aviary is used for rehabilitation of eagles.**

"Building a network of indoor cats to protect cats and birds!" It's intended to put a positive slant on this contentious issue.

"I've lived in rural and urban areas, and have seen the impact of cats on birds," says Mark Butler, policy manager with the EAC. He has also seen plenty of "lost cat" posters put up by families distressed over the disappearance of their pet. "A program like Allied Cats seemed to be an answer to both of these situations," he says.

Biologist Bob Bancroft, known to many Maritimers as a wildlife expert on CBC Radio, has frequently spoken out on this issue. "Outdoor cats are killing a substantial amount of wildlife," he says. "It is a serious problem with cats in rural areas. There is much more diversity for cats to tackle." He cites cat predation on bats and chipmunks as well as birds.

Feral cats, often living in colonies, are responsible for the majority of kills. "You wouldn't believe the number of people who drop off cats at the end of roads," says Bancroft. But people tend to deny that their beloved pet felines, if allowed free range outdoors, are also part of the problem. That's why Bancroft supports the Allied Cats program.

### NON-NATIVE PREDATORS

Many homeowners aren't aware of their cats' impact on local bird populations, because many cats don't bring home their kills. Studies of cats' scat will indicate when they have ingested birds, but some cats don't eat their prey. Well-fed felines will still hunt, says Van Doninck.

“It’s just the cat being a cat,” she observes, but this does not mean it’s a natural part of the ecosystem. “Cats are not native,” she stresses. “They are introduced predators.”

While she is passionate about protecting wildlife, Van Doninck’s stance on this issue figures cats, and even cows, into the equation. (More on the cow connection later.) “It’s seeing all the horrible things that happen to cats,” she says. As a veterinarian, she treats many pet cats that have contracted diseases and injuries due to being allowed outdoors.

Her own cat is quite content living indoors these days, even after two years of living on the edge of Van Doninck’s Brookfield property where the rehab centre is located – birthing a few litters of kittens, and trying unsuccessfully to out-race a groundhog to a proffered food dish, thus earning the name G-Hog. One day she ventured indoors, and decided to stay. After a few swipes at Van Doninck’s three caged pet birds, G-Hog quickly discovered kitty treats and regular lunch hours were preferable to the hunt. The rotund kitty usually lounges indifferently near the cage, occasionally even sleeping on it, ignoring the noisy birds as well as an elderly, deaf dog named Jessie.

The cat and dog have the run of most of the house, but Van Doninck tries to discourage them from visiting the two rooms in her basement where she provides care for smaller animals. (Larger animals are housed in other buildings on the property.) On this particular day 40 animals are convalescing. The 10 eagles and two owls are majestic; the squirrels and baby birds, adorable. These animals are here for many reasons, sometimes known, sometimes unknown. Van Doninck keeps computer statistics, comparing and conferring with other wildlife rehab centres across the country.

She says part of her role is to educate people. She applauds people who spay or neuter their animals, and those who choose to keep their cats indoors. When someone brings in a bird that their cat has injured, she tactfully tells them it’s their fault for letting the cat out.



**Another injured bird being nursed back to health at the Cobequid Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre. (Rosemary Guyette photos)**

“Especially the repeat offenders,” she says. “You have control over the door. I can’t force anyone. Hopefully with information it is an informed choice.”

Not everyone appreciates the advice. “Some people are totally offended.”

### **LONGER LIFESPAN**

But Van Doninck says keeping cats indoors offers significant advantages, such as decreased health care needs (translating to lower costs) and longer lifespan. Injuries and illness are a

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major source of sadness for her. No one likes to learn their cat has been attacked, poisoned, or hit by a car. Or that it has frostbite. Or that the cat has contracted a virus like Feline leukemia or Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). While these aren't contagious for humans, there is another disease threat linked to cats; toxoplasmosis, which is known to be a risk for pregnant women, is also a problem on farms, because pregnant cows contracting this disease can abort, explains Van Doninck.

Although farmers often keep cats around for vermin control, and many of these cats are well taken care of, she notes often times other people will abandon cats at farms. "It's not the farmers' fault," she says. But these surplus cats may spread the above-mentioned diseases and other parasites to the farm animals.

Instead of relying on cats for rodent control, Van Doninck recommends building a T-bar perch in the barnyard for birds of prey, like hawks. Unlike cats, the natural predator population tends to stay low, due to their territorial nature.

Bancroft, for his part, is willing to make a concession here. "I can under-

stand why a farmer would want a cat in the barn," he says. "A good mouser in the barn, neutered." VanDoninck says ideally cats should be kept indoors from the beginning, because the transition can be difficult. For cats that do not take well to indoor life, she has a few suggestions. One option is to build a "catio," which is essentially an outdoor kennel, allowing fresh air and sunshine without access to all outdoors. Another idea is to try your cat on a leash, although she says this works best for younger cats.

She doesn't advise using neoprene bibs or bells attached to collars, which are supposed to prevent cats from hunting; she says they aren't effective, for a variety of reasons. Studies are showing that birds don't identify bells with predators, and that cats can learn to move more stealthily.

Allied Cats supporters are hoping that, over time, keeping cats indoors will become accepted as a social norm. "Even 15 years ago, you'd see dogs roaming," points out Van Doninck. "Now you don't. Everything takes time. We're hoping to start the conversation."

For more information, follow the Allied Cats link at [RuralLife.ca](http://RuralLife.ca). ●



Many cats do not bring their kills home, and some do not eat their prey, so we may be unaware of our pets' murderous habits. (RD photo)