

Cats are bird killers. These animal experts let theirs outside anyway.

Story from [The Washington Post](#)



Cats, our most popular pet, are becoming our most embattled.

A national debate has simmered since a [2013 study](#) by the Smithsonian's Migratory Bird Center and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that cats kill up to 3.7 billion birds and 20.7 billion small mammals annually in the United States. The study blamed feral "unowned" cats but noted that their domestic peers "still cause substantial wildlife mortality."

Since then, cities and towns across the country have considered alley-cat crackdowns. An entire country, New Zealand, has decided to [scrub](#) from its lush landscape every last feral cat, along with other small invasive species. A new book called ["Cat Wars,"](#) by Chris Santella and Peter P. Marra, an author of the Smithsonian study, calls for a future free of all "free-ranging cats." Meanwhile, nearly every animal welfare agency, along with the major veterinary association, urges pet owners to keep cats indoors not only to curb their murderous behavior but also for their own safety.

And yet a number of animal experts — people who understand all the arguments — still continue to let their cats outside. Many do it with a heavy heart. "I am more morally conflicted about this than any other animal issue," said Hal Herzog, an academic and writer. David Grimm, a Science magazine editor

and author of "[Citizen Canine: Our Evolving Relationship with Cats and Dogs](#)," likens leaving your cat indoors to keeping "your race car in a garage."

We asked these and other animal experts how, despite the available research, they rationalize letting their cats outside. Their answers, some of which have been condensed, follow.

John Bradshaw, anthrozoologist and author of "[Cat Sense](#)" and "[Dog Sense](#)"

As far as I am aware, there has still been no convincing demonstration that confining pet cats indoors has any beneficial effect on wildlife populations. Pet cats are usually surplus killers (= "lazy"), only removing individual animals already weakened by disease, starvation or old age.

On the other hand, feral cats, because they obtain a large proportion of their nutrition from what they can scavenge or kill, probably represent a significant threat to wildlife in places where they are numerous. In Australia and New Zealand, where they seem to be able to compete effectively with other predators, feral cats have been able to spread into wilderness areas. In the United States and Europe, with their much more robust sets of native predators, feral cats rarely flourish unless they are being fed by people. Thus, the real issue is how best to manage feral cats, not whether to restrict pet cats indoors.

All my cats have been given 24-hour access outdoors. The suburban area where I live has a large rat population (I see a rat most times I walk through the park nearby), and I have often seen my cats hunting and killing rats. Our compost bins are rat-free (my wife is a keen organic gardener), and I would rather have their numbers kept down by the cats than put out poison. Rats abound in towns and cities worldwide and are far-worse vectors of human disease than cats ever were or will be. Moreover, rats are predators themselves, and given their numbers are probably as much if not more of a threat to wildlife than are cats. Cats were domesticated primarily to keep mice and rats — man-made pests — at bay, and I have few qualms about allowing them to continue to do this where they can be useful.

I accept that there is collateral damage and that this is regrettable. Even though there is no evidence that outdoor pet cats affect the numbers of songbirds, I would still encourage cat owners to provide (cat-proof!) bird feeders and nesting boxes — but as much to compensate for the destruction of habitat caused by the creation of the plot on which their home stands than for the occasional kill that their cat makes.

Under some circumstances, I accept that there are strong arguments for keeping cats indoors permanently. Ideally, such cats should never have been allowed outdoors, so that they have never had the opportunity to develop their motivation for hunting and roaming behavior. Also, the indoor environment should be made as rewarding and interesting as possible for them.

By being kept indoors, cats are protected not only from some diseases and from predation by motor vehicles but also from what are often hostile relationships between neighborhood outdoor-access cats (both pets and ferals).

Thus, in my opinion, the decision whether to restrict a cat indoors should be the owner's, based on the environment around the home and the background of the cat they own.

Jessica Pierce, bioethicist and author of "[Run, Spot, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets](#)": For me, it boils down to what each individual cat needs (how strongly do they need or want to be outside) and where you live.

At my previous house, I did not let my cat Thor outside — except in the back yard on supervised “walks” (with me being helicopter parent). We lived on a busy street, and it seemed too dangerous. Once we moved out to a more rural location, we decided to let Thor outside. He really, really, really wanted to go out and would sit by the sliding glass door or window all day, just crying. We felt so sorry for him that we finally just decided to open the door for him. He was much happier. My daughter’s cat, Lovie, is living with us now, and Lovie really could take it or leave it. She has access to the outside and knows how to use the dog door, but she rarely goes out, and when she does, it is usually only to eat some grass which she then promptly throws up once she is back inside on the carpet! I’m actually really happy to be caring for a cat who isn’t very interested in the outside, because I don’t have to feel guilty about giving her freedom — or not.

Each cat owner needs to make a considered decision, and blanket recommendations such as “no cat should ever, ever be allowed outside” are, in my view, unkind to cats and lead to welfare problems such as obesity, stress and boredom. That said, it is important to acknowledge that there are also welfare considerations in allowing cats outside, and we should do what we can to mitigate them (e.g., making sure a cat has identification tags and keeping the cat indoors overnight, when predators such as coyotes may be more active). I’m not sure that things like bells and brightly colored “scrunchi” neck wear are proven to reduce mortality for small rodents and birds that cats hunt, but it would be wonderful if new technologies could be developed that would offer these small animals a bit more protection from cats.

Hal Herzog, professor of psychology at Western Carolina University and author of [“Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat”](#):

Indoor cats are more inclined to feline urinary infections, and I found a 2009 paper by Spanish researchers indicating that indoor cats had more behavior problems. Indoor cats are also more likely to suffer from obesity.

Further, there is a substantial body of literature says that indoor cats are more inclined to get bored and thus have special needs in terms of additional playtime and scratching posts.

Outdoor cats, however, have their own issues — fights over territory with neighboring cats, risks of being hit by cars or eaten by coyotes. Thus they are probably more likely to die early than their comfy indoor cousins.

However, if I had a choice, I would much rather be allowed to go outside and chase chipmunks than sit in the window watching the birds flit about.

FYI: I do let my cat outside. Personally, I am more morally conflicted about this than any other animal issue.

James McWilliams, a history professor at Texas State University and author of [“The Modern Savage: Our Unthinking Decision to Eat Animals”](#):

I have a cat we rescued, and she is a wild child. She’s visibly restless, often unhappily so, indoors. She goes up to the sliding door and wails — I’m talking a longing, chandelier-shaking wail —because she wants with every ounce of her being to be outside. In a way, she ensures her own independence with this visceral tactic. Once out, she sticks to a tight periphery around the house, spending the vast majority of her time perched on a neighbor’s porch, high up, imperious and visibly comfortable.

There are more choices for her to make outside. Many of these choices, of course, involve killing snakes, birds and lizards, carnage I consider to be beyond my ability to manage and thus carnage that I do not find morally troublesome. Not that I like it — but we are, after all, talking about a poorly domesticated critter doing her best to make it in an urban neighborhood.

Jeffrey Masson is the author most recently of [“Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About the Origins Of Good And Evil”](#):

Basically, I believe cats should be able to go outdoors when it is perfectly safe. Problem is, it rarely is, and statistics show that indoor cats live 11 — and outdoor, 2 — years on average. Still, I feel a cat who never goes out is almost not a cat. How would we like it?

Questions:

1. List at least three reasons why these experts believe cats should be allowed to go outside:

1.

2.

3.

2. Do you think the claims the experts make in this article are based on personal belief or scientific evidence? Explain.

3. Many of these experts agree that letting a cat outdoors is a threat to the cat’s health, and yet they still do it. Why do you think this is?

4. After reading this article, please explain whether or not you would feel comfortable letting your cat outdoors and why, or why not.