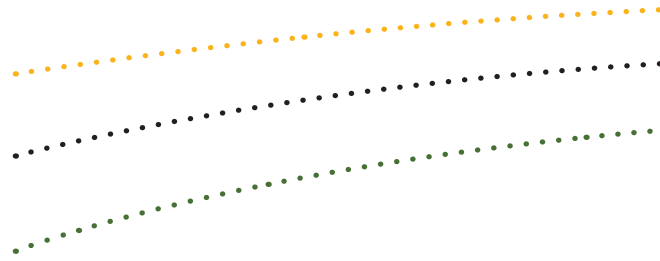




Australian Government

Department of Sustainability, Environment,  
Water, Population and Communities



# THE FERAL CAT (*FELIS CATUS*)

The feral cat is found in nearly all habitats across Australia. It has caused the extinction of some species on islands and has contributed to the disappearance of many ground-dwelling birds and mammals on the mainland. Feral cat control is feasible on islands, but elsewhere, management is difficult due to the lack of effective and humane broad-scale control techniques, and the presence of domestic cats.

## History

Cats have been in Australia since European settlement, and may have arrived as early as the 17th century with Dutch shipwrecks. By the 1850s, feral cat colonies had become established in the wild. Intentional releases were made in the late 1800s, particularly around farms and homesteads, in the hope that cats would control rabbits, rats and mice.

Feral cats are now found in all habitats except the wettest rainforests on the mainland and some offshore islands.

For management purposes, cats are divided into three categories — domestic, stray and feral — although they are all the same species and individual cats may move between categories. Domestic cats are owned and cared for, and stray cats are those found roaming cities, towns and some rural holdings. Feral cats, which survive without any human contact or assistance, are the main target of Australian Government control programs.

## Ecology

Feral cats are predominantly solitary and nocturnal, spending most of the day in the safety of a shelter such as a burrow, log or rock pile. Rabbits have aided their spread by providing food and burrows for shelter. There is typically one feral cat for every one to two kilometre square but this may be larger if food supplies are scarce.

Feral cats are carnivores and can survive with limited access to water, as they use moisture from their prey. They generally eat small mammals, but also catch birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and insects - taking prey up to the size of a brush-tail possum. In pastoral regions, they feed largely on young rabbits, but in other areas feral cats prey mainly on native animals.

From the age of about one year, feral cats can breed in any season. They have up to two litters of about four kittens each year, but few of the young survive.

Dingos and foxes may restrict feral cat numbers by both direct predation and competition. Feral cats also fall prey to wedge-tailed eagles.



## Distribution of feral cats in Australia



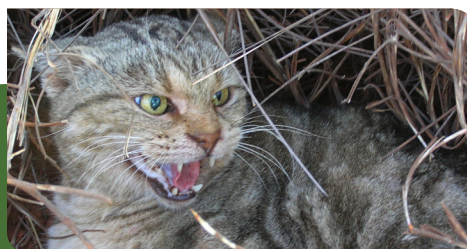
**Sources:** National Land & Water Resources Audit (2008) Assessing invasive animals in Australia 2008, NLWRA, Canberra./SEWPaC (2010) Feral animals on offshore islands database located at <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive/ferals/islands/>

## Impact

There is clear evidence that feral cats have had a heavy impact on island fauna. On Macquarie Island, for example, feral cats are implicated in the sharp decline of a subspecies of the red-fronted parakeet in the 1880s and its extinction by 1891. On the mainland, they are identified as a threat to 35 species of birds, 36 mammals, 7 reptiles and 3 amphibians. Cats have probably contributed to the extinction of many small to medium-sized mammals and ground-nesting birds in the arid

zone, and seriously affected bilby, mala and numbat populations. In some instances, feral cats have directly threatened the success of recovery programs for endangered species.

Feral cats can carry infectious diseases such as toxoplasmosis and sarcosporidiosis, which can be transmitted to native animals, domestic livestock and humans. If rabies were to be accidentally introduced into Australia, there is a high risk that feral cats would act as carriers of the disease.



## Control

Conventional control techniques of trapping and hunting have been successful in eradicating feral cats from some offshore islands around the world, including some Australian islands. On the mainland, management is more difficult because feral cats are shy of traps, do not take buried baits and generally avoid human contact, making them hard to shoot. Even if cats are removed from an area, it is quickly recolonised.

Barrier fencing, combined with eradication inside the fences, has proved to be effective for protecting endangered species that are being reintroduced. For example, fences are now used to exclude feral cats and other predators from wildlife sanctuaries in Queensland and South Australia.

Researchers are attempting to improve the effectiveness and humaneness of baits and traps in controlling feral cats. In various parts of Australia, researchers are also studying the impact of feral cats on native wildlife, so that they can target control measures more effectively and assess how well they have worked.

## How the Australian Government is dealing with a national problem

'Predation by feral cats' is listed as a key threatening process under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act). Under the EPBC Act, the Australian Government, in consultation with the states and territories, has developed the *Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats*.

The threat abatement plan aims to reduce the impact of feral cats on native wildlife by:

- Preventing feral cats occupying new areas in Australia and eradicating feral cats from high-conservation-value 'islands'.

- Promoting the maintenance and recovery of native species and ecological communities that are affected by feral cat predation.
- Improving the knowledge and understanding of feral cat impacts and interactions with other species and other ecological processes.
- Improving the effectiveness, target specificity, humaneness and integration of control options for feral cats.
- Increasing the awareness of all stakeholders of the objectives and actions of the threat abatement plan, and of the need to control and manage feral cats.

Feral cat control programs need to be coordinated with other activities that may be taking place, including the on-ground protection of threatened plants and animals and control of other invasive species such as rabbits and foxes. The threat abatement plan provides a framework that will enable the best use of the resources available for feral cat management. The Australian Government will continue to work with the states and territories in dealing with this national problem.

More information about the threat abatement plan can be found at:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/tap/cats08.html>

## For further information, contact:

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Photo credits in order: Cat eating remains of rosella (C.Potter, SEWPaC), Grey tabby (Neil Hamilton), Black cat (Michael Johnston), Cat eating bird (C. Potter, SEWPaC), Ginger cat (Michael Johnston).

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