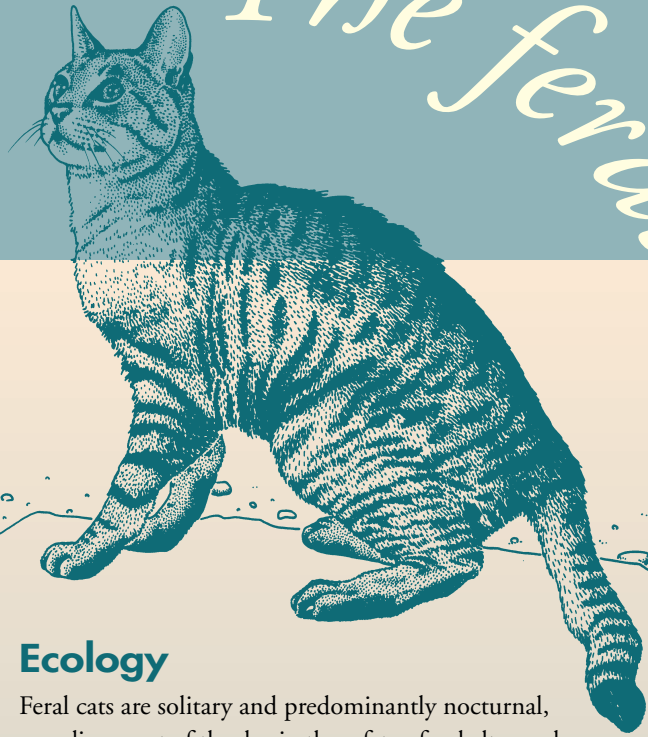


# The feral cat (*Felis catus*)



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

## History

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

Feral cats are now found in most habitats on the mainland, Tasmania and many offshore islands, although not in the wettest rainforests.

For management purposes, cats are divided into three categories — domestic, stray and feral — although 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 control programs.

## Ecology

Feral cats are solitary and predominantly 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. Males usually occupy a home range of ten square kilometres 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 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.

## Impact

There is clear evidence that feral cats have had a heavy impact on island fauna. On Macquarie Island, for example, feral cats caused the extinction of a subspecies of the red-fronted parakeet. On the mainland, they 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 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.



**Distribution of feral cats in Australia**  
— they are now found in all areas.

Adapted from: Clarke GM et al (2000). *Environmental Pest Species in Australia*. Internal report, Department of the Environment and Heritage, Canberra.



Although it is known that feral cats prey on native mammals, birds and reptiles, the details of their impact on native wildlife are still being researched. Photo: C Potter

## Control

Conventional control techniques have been successful in eradicating feral cats from some offshore islands. Due to a very successful program conducted between the Commonwealth and Tasmania with funds from the Natural Heritage Trust, feral cats have been successfully removed from Macquarie Island. This has protected the long-term survival of colonies of nesting seabirds, including albatrosses. One bird species, the grey petrel, has started breeding on the island again for the first time in over 100 years.

On the mainland, management is more difficult because feral cats are shy of traps, do not take baits readily and generally avoid human contact, making them hard to shoot. Control techniques must also not harm domestic cats. 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 bilby colonies in Queensland. 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.



Animals killed by feral cats include endangered mammals such as the bridled nail-tail wallaby, shown here with the remains of two brush-tailed possums. Photo: M Evans

## 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:

- implementing feral cat control programs in identified regions of high conservation priority
- encouraging the development and application of innovative, humane feral cat control methods
- collecting and disseminating information to improve our understanding of the ecology of feral cats in Australia, their impacts and humane methods to control them
- educating land managers and others about feral cat impacts to ensure their skilled and effective participation in control activities.

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.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/tap/cats>

Illustration of feral cat by Karina Hansen McInnes

Printed on recycled paper (2004)

### For further information, contact:



**Australian Government**  
**Department of the**  
**Environment and Heritage**

GPO Box 787 Canberra ACT 2601

Phone: 1800 803 772

Web site: <http://www.deh.gov.au>



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