

Responsible cat ownership in Australia

In brief

Cats are the second most popular pet in Australia. Pet cat ownership has physical and mental health benefits for their owners. If pet cats are not responsibly managed they can have significant impacts for society and the environment.

Collectively, pet cats kill around 300 million animals in Australia every year, the majority being native species.

These impacts can be reduced by responsible cat ownership:

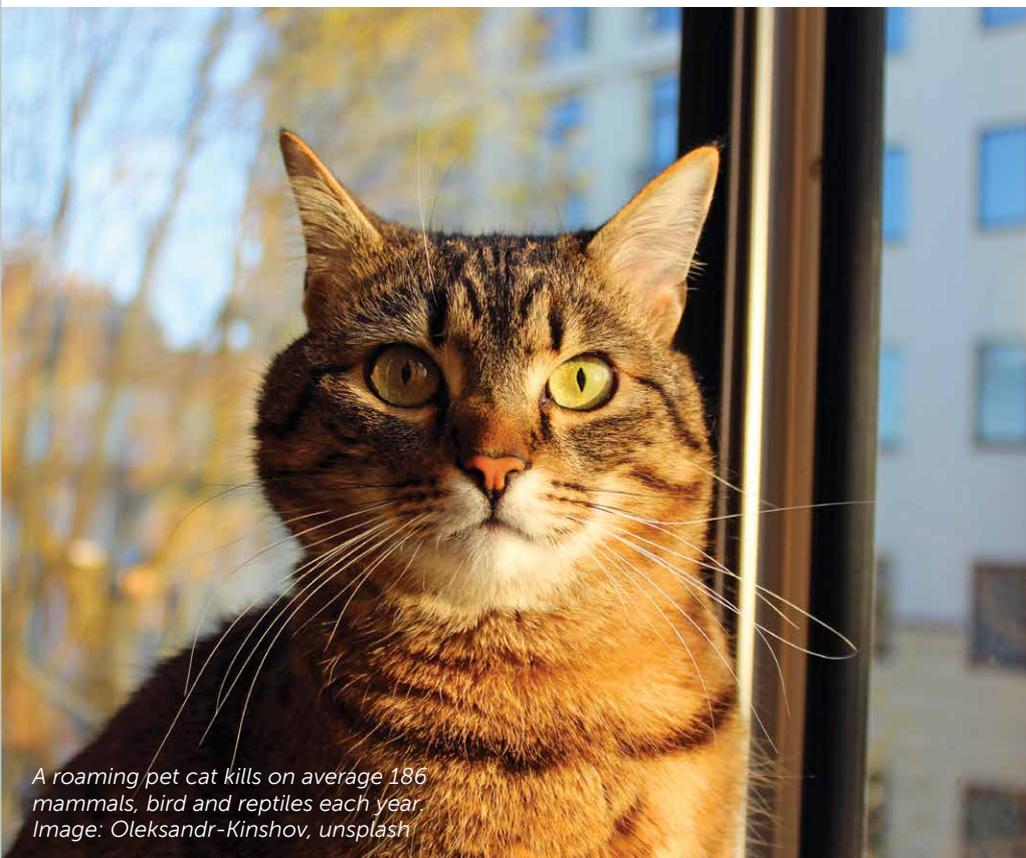
- Keep your cat indoors or fully contained at all times
- Get your cat desexed
- Have your cat microchipped
- Have regular vet check-ups
- Dispose of cat litter hygienically
- Register your cat and comply with local government regulations.

Background

Cats were introduced to Australia by European settlers from 1788 onwards. Feral cat populations grew rapidly, and spread beyond settlements as cats were released in failed attempts to control introduced species, such as the rabbit. Feral cats now occur over 99.9% of the Australian mainland, Tasmania and larger islands.

Cats are beloved pets to many people. About 27% of Australian households have pet cats. The most recent estimate for the pet cat population in Australia is 4.9 million cats¹. Pet cat numbers in Australia are broadly in line with population growth.

Unfortunately, there are many unwanted cats in Australia, mainly due to uncontrolled breeding. Most of these cats are surrendered to RSPCA-Australia, local government and other shelters for rehoming or euthanasia. In most years, over 50,000 cats are euthanased in RSPCA-Australia shelters alone². This number does not include council or independent shelters, so the real number is higher. With no centralised database on the numbers of cats processed by animal shelters, estimating the total numbers of cats euthanased each year is challenging.



*A roaming pet cat kills on average 186 mammals, bird and reptiles each year.
Image: Oleksandr-Kinshov, unsplash*



Background

A large proportion of the Australian population lives on the east coast, in urban and peri-urban areas. Native wildlife is still common in many of our urban environments, and faces a range of interacting threats: loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitat, disease and pathogens, invasive species, pollution, alteration of hydrological and fire regimes, reduced genetic diversity and climate change³.

Sadly, our pets have an impact on native wildlife. Off-leash dogs disturb and prey on native species. When allowed to roam, pet cats hunt and kill native wildlife (such as blue-tongued lizards, fairy-wrens and bandicoots). On average, each roaming pet cat in Australia is estimated to kill 115 native animals per year. Collectively, Australia's pet cats kill an estimated 80 million birds, 67 million mammals, 83 million reptiles, at least one million frogs and an unknown number of invertebrates⁴. This is a total of around 230 million native animals killed per year.

Pet cats living near bushland areas kill more wildlife, and a higher proportion of native wildlife, than pet cats in more built-up areas.

Pet cat owners, local governments, veterinarians and animal welfare organisations all have an important role in improving the way pet cats are managed to (i) enhance the safety and welfare of pet cats, (ii) reduce the number of unwanted cats that are euthanased every year, (iii) reduce the risks of cats transmitting pathogens to native wildlife, people and livestock, and (iv) reduce impacts to wildlife. Responsible cat ownership practices are an important component of achieving these aims.

What is responsible cat ownership?

Responsible pet ownership involves a duty of care both to the health and welfare of the animal, and also to the rest of the community⁵, and involves the following actions.

Careful decision making

Choosing to adopt or purchase a pet cat is a big decision. Kittens and cats can be acquired freely or cheaply, but there are other costs associated with caring for a pet cat, including costs of desexing and veterinary care. Prospective owners should carefully consider whether they can meet the cat's needs (food, shelter, veterinary care and play) over its lifetime.

If you decide to get a kitten or cat, make sure you do so from responsible registered breeders or an animal shelter. Be mindful of 'backyard breeding' or irresponsible breeding of animals, which contributes to large numbers of unwanted kittens becoming euthanased.

Keeping your cat contained at home, either indoors or in an enclosure at all times

Many cat owners bring their cats inside at night to prevent their cat from hunting native wildlife. This is a move in the right direction, but not enough - keeping your cat indoors at night might reduce hunting of native mammals and frogs that are active at night. But our native birds and reptiles are active during the day, and cats allowed to roam during daylight hours will hunt them.

Some people think that pet cats keep numbers of introduced mice and rats down, or keep snakes away from houses. However, research has shown that while pet cats do hunt introduced species, this hunting doesn't make a dint in the populations of those rats and mice. Plus, the majority of what pet cats catch are native species.

Recent surveys of pet owners have reported that 29-53%^{6,7} of pet cats are contained, and unable to roam outside, showing that many pet owners are already taking steps to look after both wildlife and the health and safety of their pet.

BELOW: **Figure 1:** The movements of a pet cat named Mildred, over a two-week period, on Phillip Island, Victoria. (Source: Phillip Island Nature Parks). Orange lines show daytime activity and blue lines show nocturnal activity.



What is responsible cat ownership? (continued)

However, cats are rather good at sneaking outdoors undetected: a detailed study found that of 177 pet cats in Adelaide whose owners thought were safely indoors overnight, 39% were actually leaving their homes to roam at will⁸. Another study on Phillip Island, Victoria, found that pet cats are more active and travelled further when migratory shorebirds arrived on the island (Figure 1).

The most responsible option is to keep cats contained 24/7, either indoors, in a backyard or in an enclosure. There is a range of cat containment solutions available for pet cat owners, that allow cats to access the outdoors in a safe way (Figure 2 and 3).

Some owners believe that pet cats need to wander to be happy, and that containing a cat is cruel. In fact, pet cats can live safe and happy lives indoors, provided that appropriate enrichment is provided. Enrichment involves creating a stimulating living space for cats where they can express natural behaviours, and meet

their environmental and social needs (Figure 4).

Evidence also clearly shows that contained cats are at lower risk of:

- injury (e.g. from road accidents, fights with other cats and dogs, or misadventure);
- contracting harmful and expensive diseases such as feline AIDS or toxoplasmosis; and
- getting lost.

For example, one study showed that about 66% of cat owners (from a sample size of over 5,300 participants) reported having lost at least one cat, due to a car accident, or the cat going missing⁷.

Outdoor cats are more likely to encounter other threats, such as toxic plants, garden pesticides, exposure to poisoned rodents, or snakes. Consequently, the Australian Veterinary Association advises that keeping your cat contained at home is safer for your cat⁵.

Some jurisdictions (ACT, Victoria and South Australia) have cat curfews, or cat containment

requirements, and use of these measures is increasing. A recent study in Victoria found that 53% of pet cat owners (from a sample size of 220) keep their cat fully contained, out of concern for their cat's safety⁷.

The fact is, the more time a pet cat spends safe at home, the less risk of injury or death from road accidents, fighting, and disease. A pet cat kept safe at home can live up to four times longer than a cat left to roam. (Australian Veterinary Association, 2016)

Desexing your cat, to prevent unwanted litters

Desexing (sterilisation) is the most important action pet cat owners can take to prevent unwanted litters and unnecessary euthanasia. Desexing involves surgical removal of the ovaries and uterus of female cats, and testicles of male cats, and is the only widely available, effective and permanent way of preventing unwanted breeding¹⁰.



Figures 2 and 3: Cat proof fencing. Images: Jason Shortt. **Figure 4:** Cats can live safe and content lives indoors, provided appropriate enrichment is provided. Image: William Justen de Vasconcellos, Unsplash.



What is responsible cat ownership? (continued)

Other benefits of desexing your pet cat include:

- Long-term health benefits for your pet;
- Stops nuisance calling behaviour of female cats;
- Reduces unpleasant spraying by male cats;
- Reduces the risk of disease transmission;
- Reduces the risk of fighting, which can lead to painful (and expensive!) abscesses.

There is no health benefit associated with allowing a female cat to have a litter of kittens.

Ideally, desexing should be scheduled before a cat reaches puberty, or first heat, which can happen as early as four months of age. This is called Early Age Desexing. If cats are already mature, it is still important to have your cat

desexed, unless you are a registered breeder.

Identifying your cat as a pet

Permanent identification of cats (by microchipping), together with a collar and a tag, means that if your pet cat escapes or gets lost, it can easily be identified as a pet and returned to you quickly.

Disposing of used cat litter hygienically

Pet cats can carry disease-causing pathogens that can be transmitted to people, wildlife, and livestock, including through their waste. If you have a cat that has access to the outdoors, the safest way of disposing of used cat litter is in the general waste, or in a compost system that reaches high enough temperatures (e.g. 50°C for 10 min¹¹) to kill the pathogens. If you have an indoor cat (and your cat is healthy and disease-

free), you may be able to safely compost the used cat litter.

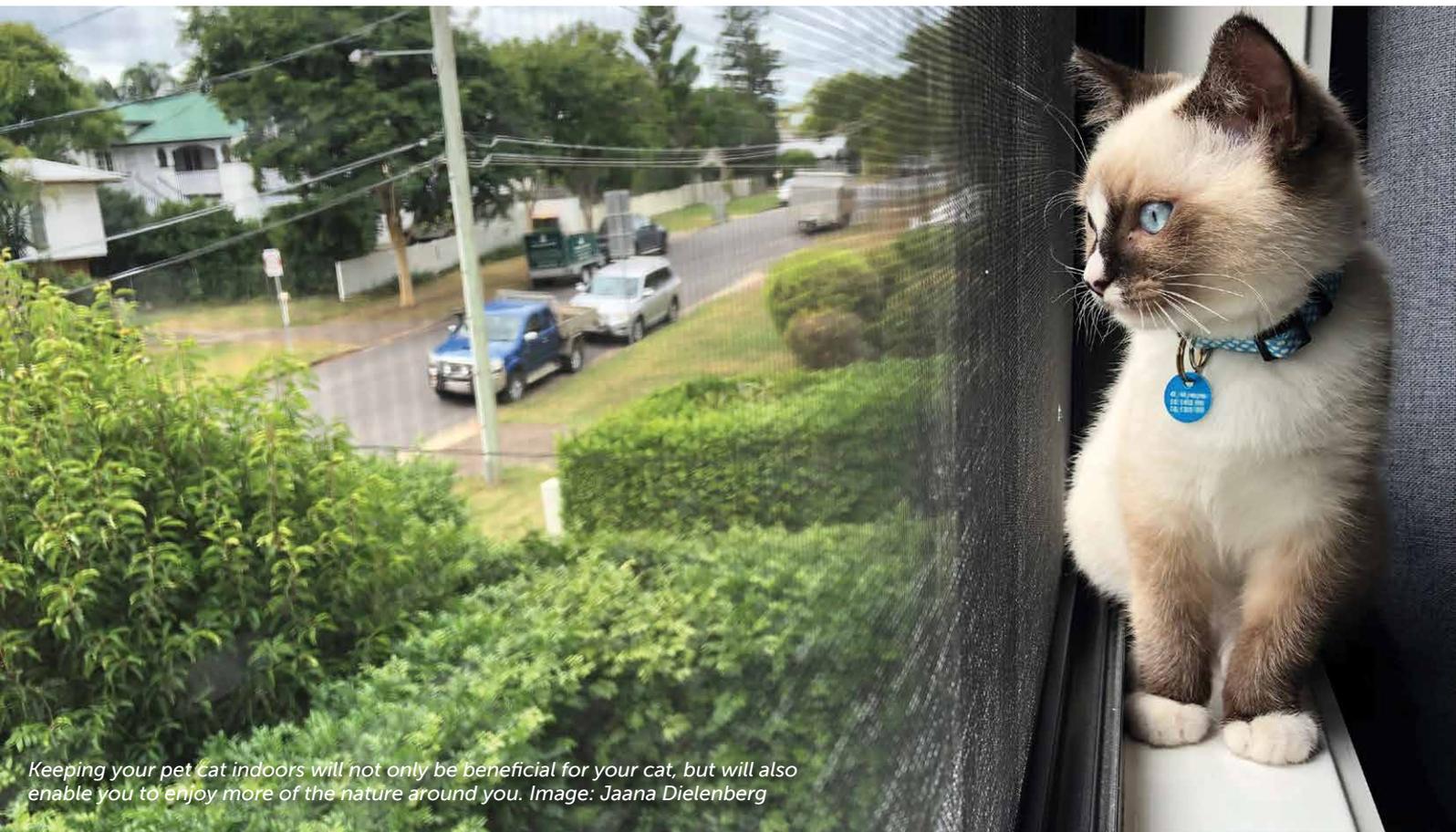
Veterinary care

Your cat needs annual veterinary checks, dental care, vaccinations, flea/worming prevention, a balanced diet and access to clean, fresh water at all times.

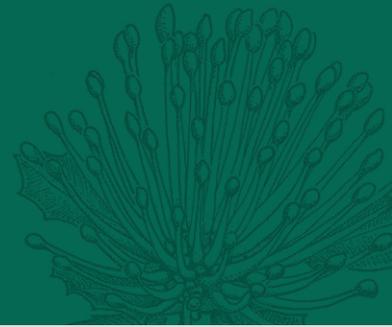
These actions are all essential for ensuring the health and wellbeing of pet cats.

Managing changes in circumstances

Changes in circumstances and emergencies may pose challenges for caring for pets. If these situations arise, choose an option that maintains the health and welfare of your pet. Never dump kittens or cats in the bush. Instead, take them to an animal shelter or the local council pound, for re-homing. Successful rehoming of your cat is more likely if your cat has been responsibly cared for.



Keeping your pet cat indoors will not only be beneficial for your cat, but will also enable you to enjoy more of the nature around you. Image: Jaana Dielenberg



Why should I adopt responsible cat ownership practices?

Adopting these practices may involve time, cost and effort. They are worthwhile because stray and irresponsibly owned animals are more likely to suffer and can create serious problems for society and the environment.

The key action that pet cat owners can take is to keep them contained 24/7, either indoors, or in a backyard enclosure, to:

- enhance their safety and welfare;
- reduce the risk of picking up pathogens that can affect their health, and transmitting cat-dependent diseases to people, livestock and wildlife;
- reduce their impacts on urban and peri-urban wildlife.

What happens if I find a stray cat?

Stray cats are present in most Australian cities and towns. It is upsetting to see animals in these circumstances, particularly if they are in poor health. Please do not feed stray cats, as this can make the cat colony bigger. Sadly, some people will also dump unwanted kittens or cats in these colonies, especially if they think the colony is being fed.

If you encounter a stray cat, the best course of action is to take it to a rehoming centre, or advise animal health workers at your local council.

Where can I find more information?

A wide range of resources are available at: <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/projects/cat-impacts-and-management-knowledge-exchange-for-stakeholders>

Factsheets

The impact of cats in Australia
<https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/the-impact-of-cats-in-australia>

The impact of pet cats on Australian wildlife
<https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/the-impact-of-pet-cats-on-australian-wildlife>

The hidden costs of cats in Australia: cat dependent diseases and human health
<https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/the-hidden-costs-of-cats-in-australia-cat-dependent-diseases-and-human-health>

The toll of cat-dependent diseases on Australian agriculture
<https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/the-toll-of-cat-dependent-diseases-on-australian-agriculture>

Videos

The impact of pet cats on Australian wildlife
<https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/video-gallery/the-impact-of-roaming-pet-cats-on-australian-wildlife>

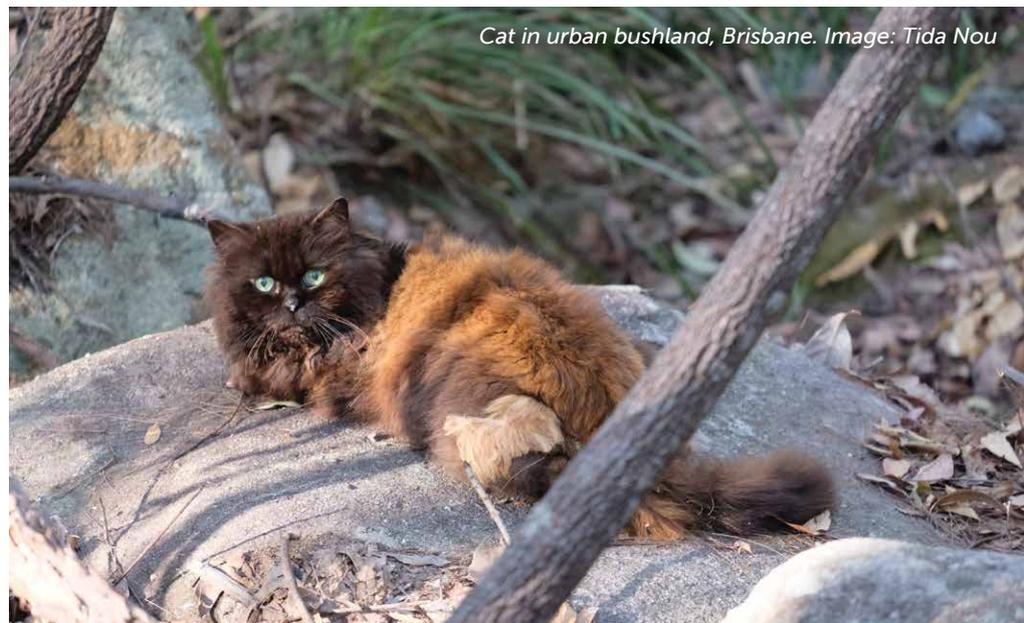
Caring for Country: managing cats animation
<https://ictv.com.au/video/item/9257>

Cat-borne diseases and their impacts on human health
<https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/video-gallery/cat-borne-diseases-and-their-impacts-on-human-health>

Cat-borne diseases and their impacts on agriculture and livestock in Australia
<https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/video-gallery/cat-borne-diseases-and-their-impacts-on-agriculture-and-livestock-in-australia>

Books

Woinarski, J. C. Z., Legge, S., & Dickman, C. (2019). *Cats in Australia: Companion and Killer*: CSIRO Publishing.



Cat in urban bushland, Brisbane. Image: Tida Nou



Other resources

Cat containment information/ resources

Safe Cat, Safe Wildlife
<https://www.safecat.org.au/>

Tassie Cat
<https://www.tassiecat.com/>

Cat owner education program
<http://www.southwestgroup.com.au/natural-resource-management/happyathome/>

RSPCA-Australia-How can I be a responsible cat owner?
<https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/how-can-i-be-a-responsible-cat-owner/>

Videos

Keeping pet cats safe and well-behaved
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-5kL7MVSd4>

Inside with cats: the story of Rasputin
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzqrMzQuZvs>

Example of excellent pet cat management by local governments

Tweed Shire Council, NSW
Cats on Camera: interactive mapping
<https://www.tweed.nsw.gov.au>

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Further Information

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