

ANIMAL PEST CONTROL

ANIMAL PEST

Feral Cats (*Felis catus*)

Introduction

It is estimated that wild and pet cats kill up to 100 million birds in New Zealand each year. Many of the victims are natives such as tuis and pigeons. Cats also eat lizards and frogs. Feral cats especially can carry tuberculosis with the potential to infect cattle. They also carry parasites and Toxoplasmosis, which can infect humans.

Wild cats are widespread throughout New Zealand, including most offshore islands. In many cases, populations have been established by dumping unwanted pets.

Feral cats are classed as site-specific animal pests. For details, please refer to the Regional Pest Management Strategy or contact Biosecurity Animal Pest Officers at Hawke's Bay Regional Council.



An average adult male cat weighs between 2 and 9 kilograms, while females weigh between 1.6 and 4.6kg. Coat colours vary from pure black to orange tabby.

Habitat

Feral cats live in a wide range of habitats from farmland to forest. They tend to be solitary and territorial, with home ranges between 30-80ha.

Territory is marked by scent secreted from anal glands and by spraying urine. Droppings may be buried or left on the ground.

Feral cats are mainly active at night, preying on small mammals such as rodents, small birds and eggs, fish, lizards and insects. Their vision and hearing are acute, but smell is less sensitive. Cats usually hunt by stalking or lying in wait and leaping on prey.

Breeding Cycle

Females usually come on heat in July or August when the males are noisy and wander extensively. Gestation normally takes 58 days, and two to four kittens are born in September or October. A second litter may be born later in the year.

At four to eight weeks, kittens emerge and play, at 10-12 weeks they accompany their mother on hunting trips and they are fully grown at 10 months. Juveniles may move up to 10km from where they were born. Females are sexually mature at about one year old and males slightly older.

Trapping

Care must be taken to avoid trapping domestic cats. Pets can be released unharmed if live capture boxes or cage possum traps are used. These traps are available from stock and station agents. Fish is usually the best bait.

Feral cats can be difficult to trap as they are naturally cautious and a previous bad experience will make them shy. Sometimes it is best to fix the door open for two or three nights until the cat is comfortable entering the trap, before actually setting it.

Note: The Animal Welfare Act 1999 requires that all set traps be checked at least once every 24 hours.

Do not attempt to touch or pick up a wild cat, or even a kitten. They bite and scratch and can spread disease. See a doctor if you get bitten by a wild cat.

Acknowledgements Information and photo supplied by Northland Regional Council.

For further information

For further information on animal pests or the Regional Pest Management Strategy, please contact the Biosecurity Animal Pest Officers at the Hawke's Bay Regional Council for advice.

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