

*Hunting behaviour in domestic cats: An exploratory study of risk and responsibility among cat owners*

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Domestic cats are one of the world's most popular pets, kept by millions of people for companionship and pest-control. Cats are excellent hunters and kill many wild animals every year. Increasingly, conservation and wildlife organisations are concerned that large cat populations are contributing to declines in the numbers of birds, small mammals and reptiles. Most research on the impact and control of cats has focused on free-living colonies and feral populations. However, in many countries the majority of cats are owned by, and the responsibility of, individual people and families, who have varying degrees of control over their cats' food supplies, reproduction and movement.

We carried out detailed interviews with 48 cat owners in the United Kingdom to investigate how they feel about their pets' hunting behaviour, to find out whether or not they feel they have a responsibility to manage it, and to learn about the techniques they use to reduce the amount of wildlife their pets hunt and catch.

We identified a variety of views on hunting behaviour, ranging from owners who keep cats for precisely this reason (e.g. to keep down rodents on farms and rural properties), to those who were deeply concerned that their cats caused other animals to suffer or might affect wild bird populations. However, we also found that many cat owners think of hunting as normal and natural for cats and didn't believe they had a responsibility to manage this.

Owners who did want to manage their cats' hunting often had concerns about the possible cat welfare impacts of some common techniques, such as keeping cats indoors or attaching a collar with a bell. We recommend that researchers, vets and welfare and wildlife organisations work collaboratively with cat owners to find effective, acceptable management techniques that recognise and address concerns about cat welfare. We also suggest that, in situations where hunting cats threaten vulnerable wildlife

populations, the management of hunting behaviour should be promoted as part of wider 'responsible pet ownership' schemes.

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