BIRDS CONNECT SEATTLE

Birds Connect Seattle Conservation Committee Policy Recommendations: Free-ranging Domestic Cats

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Background

Domestic cats (*Felis catus*) have been carried by people to every continent except Antarctica and are native nowhere in the wild. They are cherished companions, and they are also effective generalist predators that survive outdoors with or without human care ((BCS, 2026, sec. 1). The International Union for Conservation of Nature lists them among the world's 100 worst invasive species (Lowe et al., 2004).

Free-ranging cats, owned and unowned, are a significant and preventable source of harm to birds, and outdoor access also carries serious risks to the cats themselves. Because many of our members, neighbors, and partners are devoted cat owners and cat advocates, we approach this issue with respect for cats and for the people who care for them.

Issue Statement

Impacts on wildlife: Free-ranging cats kill an estimated 2.4 billion birds a year in the United States, the single greatest source of direct human-caused bird mortality (BCS, 2026, sec. 2.1; Loss et al., 2013). Globally, cats have contributed to at least 14% of modern bird, mammal, and reptile extinctions (Medina et al., 2011). Population-level effects are best documented on islands and harder to establish on the mainland, but researchers believe cats are likely to contribute to declines in some species and regions (BCS, 2026, sec. 2.1).

Pet cats cause harm: Pet cats account for roughly one-third of cat-caused bird mortality, nearly 800 million birds a year, and kill two to ten times more wildlife than native predators in the same space (BCS, 2026, sec. 2.3; Kays et al., 2020). Owners see only a fraction of this: cats with outdoor access bring home about a quarter of what they catch (Loyd et al., 2013). Ground-foraging and ground-nesting birds, including many of Washington's native sparrows and thrushes, may be especially vulnerable (BCS, 2026, sec. 2.2).

Indirect effects: The presence of cats can reduce nesting success and alter wildlife behavior, and cats can transmit parasites and diseases to wildlife, other animals, and people (BCS, 2026, sec. 2.4).

Risks to cats: Cats with outdoor access face road traffic, predation, poisoning, and infectious disease, and tend to live shorter lives (BCS, 2026, sec. 3.2). In the Seattle area, high urban coyote densities and widespread anticoagulant rodenticide use make these risks especially relevant (BCS, 2026, sec. 6.3). Unsupervised outdoor access also contributes to lost, stray, and feral cat populations (BCS, 2026, sec. 3.2). Outdoor access offers real benefits in stimulation and exercise, but most of these needs can be met through enrichment, play, and safe outdoor spaces (BCS, 2026, sec. 3.1).

A contested issue: Outdoor cat management is a long-standing conservation impasse, rooted in different values: conservationists often see outdoor cats as an invasive species, while cat welfare advocates often see them as homeless pets (BCS, 2026, sec. 4.2; Leong et al., 2020). No single management tool has proven sufficient on its own (BCS, 2026, sec. 5).

Policy Recommendations

The Birds Connect Seattle Conservation Committee makes the following policy recommendations:

1. **Acknowledge the conservation need for cat management:** Bird populations are declining across North America (Rosenberg et al., 2019) and locally (Morris, 2026). Free-ranging domestic cats contribute to the decline of bird populations, making management of free-ranging cats an important priority for bird conservation.
2. **Acknowledge cats' history, value, and social context:** Consider the long history of cats as valued companions to humans as well as the misogynistic history of persecution and abuse of cats in Western society. Avoid rhetoric that vilifies cats or their owners, that frames cat management as a "war" or uses other violent language, or that reinforces negative gendered stereotypes associated with cats (BCS, 2026, sec. 4.3).
3. **Lead with cat welfare:** Frame messaging around cat health and longevity, which is less divisive and often more effective with owners (BCS, 2026, sec. 4.2).
4. **Promote cat containment:** Educate cat owners about the risks that free-roaming cats pose to wildlife, as well as the risks to cats themselves, and encourage owners to keep their cats indoors or, when cats are allowed outside, to keep them contained in catios or under leash supervision.
5. **Promote use of antipredation measures when full containment is not possible:** Where owners will not or cannot keep cats fully indoors, promote the use of brightly colored antipredation collars—such as Birdsbesafe cat collars—that reduce predation success, while also clearly communicating that these harm reduction measures do not substitute for containment (BCS, 2026, sec. 5.6).
6. **Support partners and rehoming:** Support partner organizations that educate the public about the risks free-ranging cats pose to birds and other wildlife and support programs that capture, rehabilitate, and rehome feral and free-ranging cats.
7. **Support source reduction:** Support spay/neuter before adoption, low-cost sterilization, microchipping and licensing, and surrender and rehoming support, to prevent loss, abandonment, and unplanned litters (BCS, 2026, secs. 5.3, 6.4.5).
8. **Encourage study:** Encourage research and analysis of free-ranging cat populations, impacts to local bird populations, and owner attitudes and behaviors.

References

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