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Discouraging Roaming Cats

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Many people have a problem with roaming cats that attack wild birds as they feed or nest in their yards, that use their garden as a litter box, or that upset their pets by invading their territory. You certainly have the right to enjoy your yard and the birds that visit it, and to protect your own pets. However, it's your responsibility to use only humane methods to solve the problem.

Why Are They Picking On Me?

Although a destructive neighborhood cat can be very frustrating, don't take it personally. The cat isn't acting out of spite or picking on you for some unknown reason. He's behaving naturally, just in places that are inappropriate. The solution lies in making those places undesirable so the cat will behave naturally somewhere else.

Unless they're literally starving, most cats won't eat birds, but they do enjoy the "thrill of the hunt." Cats have preyed upon birds for thousands of years and there's no foolproof way to discourage this natural instinct. Fortunately, birds have developed survival techniques over the years, and it's unusual for a cat to actually catch a healthy, mature bird.

Another natural instinct for a cat is to relieve himself in an area where he can cover his scent by burying the waste. Therefore, a cat that spends most of his time outdoors, appreciates the soft, pre-dug dirt of your garden, or your child's sandbox, as a handy toilet.

When a cat naps on the hood of your car or in the center of your flowerbed, he's simply sunning himself in a nice, warm spot and doesn't realize the damage he's doing. He won't connect your negative reaction with the place where he naps, and although he may learn to avoid you, he won't avoid the place or the activity.

A roaming cat may approach your window or patio door and challenge your cat or dog through the glass with blatant body language and/or vocal insults. The best way to relieve your pet from this type of situation is to keep the outside cat away from the areas that your pet can see.

Of course, the ideal solution is for all cat owners to keep their cats safely indoors.

Unfortunately, not all cat-owners are willing to do this, so you'll need to take steps to solve the problem without harming the cat, the birds, the yard or other innocent animals. Since each situation is different, you may need patience and ingenuity to find the appropriate deterrent through trial and error.

Repellents:

Repellents and devices designed to startle the cat "in the act" will work best to condition him to avoid the area. Never use poisons. Not only is poisoning animals inhumane and illegal, it's not an effective solution to the problem. Poisons will only rid you of one pest, but won't deter any others. You'd have no way of knowing or controlling what, or who, might find and ingest the poisonous substance.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has registered over thirty compounds for safe use in repelling domestic cats. Check with any pet supply store or garden suppliers for commercial cat repellents. Most commercial repellents are based on the simple mothball compound. Mothballs or moth crystals, encased in cheesecloth bags to help protect the soil, work quite well to keep cats from digging in garden areas or potted plants.

Keep in mind that the effectiveness of any repellent will deteriorate with moisture and/or time. Whether you use mothballs or a sophisticated, commercial mixture, you'll need to re-apply the solution after each rain, heavy dew or watering. Check with your garden supplier to be certain that the solution you choose won't harm plants growing in that area, especially if you use fertilizers or other additives.

For areas where cats want to dig, ornamental pebbles may be an effective deterrent. Avoid those that are very round or smooth, as they make a great cat bed. Rocks or pebbles should be firmly secured into the dirt or mulched area so they can't easily be moved or overturned. Small-gauge chicken wire can also be buried under a light layer of dirt or mulch, and may even restrain some weeds. The sharp pebbles and/or rough wire will be uncomfortable to soft paws.

"Surprise" Devices:

To teach a cat to avoid a specific area, you must make that area unattractive to him. The best method is to surprise the cat "in the act," but the villain should be the area itself, not you. Simple devices can be used to effectively "booby-trap" the area that a cat has found attractive.

- ❖ **Sound & Movement:** Scatter dry beans, macaroni or birdseed on a metal tray (disposable pie pans or cookie sheets work great and are inexpensive). Balance several trays along the fence, porch or deck railing, the windowsill, or around the edge of any vehicle where the cat jumps onto the surface. Birds can still land safely if the trays are balanced properly, but the weight of a cat leaping onto the surface will upset the tray. The cat will be startled by the noise and by the unsteady, collapsing perch.
- ❖ **Texture:** To keep a cat from jumping onto flat surfaces (railings, vehicles or decks), criss-cross double-sided tape onto a piece of sturdy plastic - either a heavy, plastic drop cloth or a vinyl tablecloth would work well. Drape the plastic over the surface, and secure it with cord, or at least one weighted object, to keep it in position. The sticky tape on the cat's paws is annoying (without causing pain or panic), and the slick plastic rattles and offers no foothold.
- ❖ **Water:** This method works especially well for those areas where birds feed on the ground or where cats are using a garden area as a litter box. When the temperature permits, turn on a water sprinkler during the usual time of disturbance (dawn or dusk if the cat is on your property to hunt). A timing device for the sprinkler, set to a staggered schedule, will help discourage those intelligent cats who would otherwise simply avoid the area at "regularly wet" times of day. As a variation on the "falling tray" method, set shallow plastic lids filled with water on each end of the tray to add a shower to the noise and movement of the falling tray.
- ❖ **Obstacle:** If your bird feeder or birdhouse is mounted on a post, nail a galvanized metal guard in the shape of an inverted cone to the post to protect the platform.

Responsibility:

If these suggested remedies fail to provide relief, we encourage you to call our Behavior Helpline. The "problem cat" may be an owned cat that's allowed to roam or the cat may have no real owner. If the cat belongs to a neighbor, your problem is a shared one. It's not always easy to discuss neighborhood issues diplomatically. Remember that the cat is your neighbor's pet, even though he's a pest when he's on your property. By emphasizing your concern for the cat's safety, instead of the problems he's causing, you have a greater chance of gaining your neighbor's cooperation.

If you're unable to establish the cat's ownership, the problem is in your hands. It's often impossible to distinguish a feral cat from a potentially friendly stray, so play it safe and don't touch the cat. Assuming you've already tried the above re-conditioning tactics without success, you may need to resort to a humane trap.

Humane Traps:

Don't use anything other than a humane cage trap designed to lure a cat into the cage with food, and to safely contain him until he can be moved to another area. Most animal control agencies and humane societies loan or rent out these traps and some will even deliver and/or pick them up.

If you have any reason to believe that the cat has an owner, please think twice before trapping the cat, unless you plan to return him to his owner.

To trap a stray cat, bait the trap with canned cat food. Place the trap in an area that's sheltered, as much as possible, against the weather. Although you may hear some alarming noises when the cat realizes he's trapped, he's only angry, not hurt. If the cat is confined with no access to water or shelter from inclement weather or predators, it's important that you remove the trap from the area as soon as possible. Using gloves to prevent scratches or bites, put the trap in a protected area until you can take the cat to an animal shelter. Please don't release a stray cat. This will only cause further overpopulation problems and inevitably, a painful life and death for the cat.