



Felis catus—the feral cat

photo by Daryl Panther

by Scott Heiman

The phone call I received from my brother Les exclaiming that he had taken yet another feral cat brought me joy for two reasons—this one was record class and that’s always cause of celebration (? 10/16in unconfirmed). Also, as an environmental scientist, I thought the best kind of cat (*Felis catus*), in Australia, was a dead one.

I remember fondly the hunt in which I took my first feral cat as a 14 year old. This event was made even more memorable by the fact that it was trophy class. Topping it a year later with a record class cat generated pure adrenaline.

Back then, hunting for me was mostly about attaining a sense of achievement. Indeed, the skin from my first feral cat still adorns a prime location in my house, 25 years later! Today, however, when I consider hunting, I am more interested in the

conservation aspects of our sport, the integration of hunting into a landholder’s pest management strategy, the public benefit and the ability of individuals to help make a difference when applied in a co-ordinated fashion. Not to mention, hunting offers a

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Scott's first cat ... when it was taken ... and 25 years later.

great excuse to simply get back to basics and into the bush!

I realistically doubt that, along with rabbits and a number of other introduced species, we will ever be able to rid Australia of the feral cat. However, I'd like to offer the following insights about cats to help fellow bowhunters to understand a little more about the background and biology of one of ABA's target species.

The Federal Government's Threat Abatement Plan 2008 for the feral cat states that "[t]he first recorded instance of cats being brought to Australia was by English settlers

in the 18th century, although cats may have arrived much earlier with other human visitors." It is generally accepted the 'earlier arrivals' that the Plan refers to may have been associated with shipwrecks and fishermen, et cetera. Remember that Captain Cook was not the first person to arrive on our fair shores; with human occupation around 50,000 years ago, our local neighbours to the north, the Chinese in the 1400s and that the first European landing was in the 1606!

Notwithstanding the possibility of such pre-1700s cat incursions into Australia, it seems very likely that the cat did not take hold on mainland Australia prior to Europeans' arrival. Historical sources, such as the journals of inland explorers and settlers during the period 1788-1883, who set out to explore land beyond existing settled areas, never once mention the cat. Indeed, evidence suggests that cats did not solely move inland from the first settlement in Sydney, but instead spread from multiple coastal introductions during the period 1824-86.

The population was further fuelled by their deliberate release, during the 1800s, to control rabbits and mice. By 1890 nearly the entire continent had been colonised (CSIRO publication *Wildlife Research* 29(1) pp. 51-74). The National Museum of Australia has an

impressive visual depiction of introduced animals' spread and population growth across Australia, truly a must see.

Current estimates indicate that today there are approximately 18 million feral cats in Australia—that's almost one for every citizen! And the impact of this population has been devastating upon native species, especially small- to medium-sized mammals. Indeed, some sources attribute the extinction of around seven native species to the impact of cats and while the Game Council of NSW cites that the feral cat currently threatens 19 native species, other reputable sources claim that they are a 'key threat' to 62 more.

So let's look a little more closely at feral cats, their diet and hunting habits, to see why they are such a threat to our native species.

Feral cats, which typically weigh less than 4kg, require large amounts of fresh animal protein to successfully survive and reproduce. While rabbits are their principal prey, native vertebrates form a substantial percentage of their diet. Indeed, while cats can kill animals up to 2kg to 3kg in weight, studies indicate that smaller cats (approximately 2.5kg) prefer prey of approximately 200g including small native animals, birds, lizards and insects. In *Wildlife Research* (28(2) pp. 195-203), it is estimated that, annually, cat

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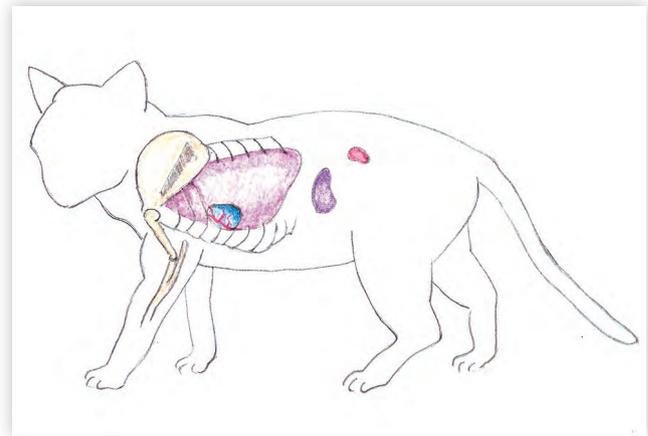
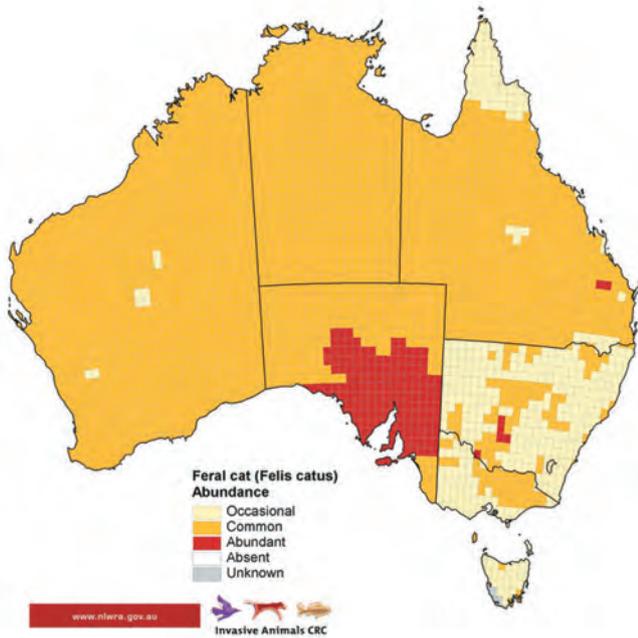
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ABOVE: Anatomy of a cat.
by Kath Heiman

RIGHT: Feral cat abundance in Australia.
(Source: National Land and Water Resources Audit)

predation accounts for the death of approximately 700 reptiles, 150 birds and 50 native mammals per square kilometre. Of course, these numbers are from one study and could vary considerably depending upon whether you are looking at an arid, forested, urban or a coastal region.

What makes a cat such a successful invasive species? Primarily, their success is based on their adaptability. In the event that the rabbit population declines, cats can effectively switch to hunting a wider range of native vertebrates. Further, studies show that reptiles are regularly eaten in summer while birds become an important food source in winter when reptiles are dormant. Invertebrates appear to be a consistent element of a feral cat's diet year round. And while cats prefer live prey, they will turn to carrion including refuse at tips when necessary.

Other factors that contribute to their success: Cats have a rapid reproduction cycle: They are weaned at eight weeks and become sexually mature at approximately 12 months. Cats can have two litters a year, with an average of four kittens a litter.

A feral cat's typical life span is five to eight years (note that your next door neighbour's tabby will live for 12 to 14 years). Compare this to its key prey species, rabbits, few of which survive past their first year, with only one to 10 per cent surviving to enjoy a two- to five-year lifespan. So for its size and place on the food chain, cats live to a ripe old age and learn from their mistakes.

Feral cat populations appear to be self sustaining: Stray and domestic cats probably play little or no role in maintaining the feral population. That's how bad the position has become.

Having outlined what makes cats such great survivors, the obvious question is what can we hunters do to deal with the biological/anatomical strengths and weaknesses of cats?

Here are some thoughts:

Cats have a better sense of smell than humans, so avoiding perfumed deodorants and soaps is a must.

While cats see better than we do in near darkness, they do not see as well as us in daylight and they do not distinguish colours well. So hunting in late morning or early afternoon will

increase your chance of success; just make sure you break up your outline.

Cats also have a lot of rods in the retina which, as well as being light receptors, serve as 'motion detectors.' Therefore, if you move across a cat's field of vision you are more likely to be detected.

Better still, while cats have a binocular vision that offers keen depth and distance perception, unlike goats and pigs, cats can only see straight ahead. So if you can come straight at them from the rear you'll stand the best chance of taking them by surprise. Hunt near permanent sources of rabbits, insects and reptiles. Look for a burrow, near water.

These have been just a few observations about one of Australia's pervasive feral introduced species. There is a lot of literature available online, so if you want to know more about the feral cat, or any of ABA's other target species, have a look through some journals or talk with your local Natural Resource Management Group.

And finally, keep Australia beautiful—be green and go hunting feral introduced species.