

# Feral cats

*Felis Catus Linnaeus*

Cats were brought to New Zealand by the early European explorers from 1769 onwards, as ships were heavily infested with rats and they were used to help control them. Later, farmers took them from the cities to release them on rabbit-infested farmland which assisted their dispersal into the wild.

Adult feral cats range between 2-5 kg and have a head and body length between 440-514 mm.

## Diet

On the mainland, the regular diet of feral cats consists of small mammals (young rabbits) rodents, hares and possums. Common bird species included in the feral cat's diet consist of California quail, starling, yellowhammer, silvereye, fantail and New Zealand pigeon. Along coastal areas cats prey on chicks and eggs of Pied Stilts and Black Stilts. Lizards and invertebrates make up a smaller portion of their diet.

On island situations, birds form a larger part of their diet. Seabirds are a large proportion of birds eaten. Parakeets disappeared from Here Kopare Island soon after cats became established and Kakapo were eaten on Stewart Island. In all areas studied, birds and insects were both present in feral cats diet, depending on available food sources.

## Where are they found?

Feral cats are widely distributed throughout all three main islands of New Zealand. Some are fully

feral, while others visit human settlements for food and shelter.

They are also present, or have been present, on at least 25 islands ranging from small (50 ha) to large biologically important reserves such as Raoul, Campbell and Auckland Islands.

Feral cats live in most terrestrial habitats in New Zealand, including sand dune, pasture, tussock, scrub, exotic plantations and native forests from sea level to 3000 metres. In the North and South Islands feral cats generally inhabit areas that harbour rabbits or are close to human habitation.

## Status as a pest animal in the Bay of Plenty

Feral cats are a Restricted Pest Animal (refer to the Bay of Plenty Regional Council Regional Pest Management Plan).

Landowners are not required to control feral cats on their property but are encouraged to do so.

## Field sign

The most characteristic and obvious signs are scats (droppings). Domestic cats usually bury their scats, but feral cats often deposit them in conspicuous places on tracks or clumps of grass.

The scat usually consists of about 3-6 cm round to elongated segments, which contain matted fur, feathers and bones and is dark in colour. Food remains are not specifically diagnostic as field sign of cats. Small birds are eaten



entirely, except for some body, wing or tail feathers being left. Rodents and young rabbits are usually completely eaten, except sometimes the tail and pieces of skin. Remains of older rabbits often include the stomach and the skin turned inside out over the rabbits head.

## Behaviour

Cats are often considered to be solitary animals, but their social organisation is complex. Domestic cats maintain a small core area of their home range as exclusive property, but tolerate other cats in the rest of their areas. Groups of cats usually comprise of several related adult females, their young of both sexes and an adult male whose range includes other groups of females. Young females usually remain in the group and breed there, or leave to establish a new colony elsewhere, they rarely, if ever, join another group. Young males are either driven out or leave from the group at 1-3 years old, as they reach sexual maturity.

## Reproduction

Gestation period of a domestic cat averages 65 days with most kittens being born between spring and autumn. Cats may produce two, sometimes three litters per year with litter sizes between 1-10 kittens (the average size is approximately 4). In farmland in the Hawkes Bay region for example, litters consist of 2-5 kittens, of which only 1-2 usually survive. New born kittens remain in dens where born until they weigh about 500 grams (5-6 weeks old), and are usually moved by the mother to a series of temporary sites, staying a few days in each. Growth rate is similar to domestic cats until they reach 500 grams, thereafter the feral kitten growth rate slows.

## Significance to the New Zealand environment

Cats have both harmful and beneficial effects on native fauna. On the mainland these are difficult to separate from the effects of other predators (rats, mustelids, man), diseases, destruction and degradation of natural habitat. On islands the effects of cats are more evident. For instance there are historical records of species disappearing from islands after cats were introduced.

When cats have been eradicated from islands, the subsequent changes in the population of surviving species and the successful reintroduction of species that disappeared are indirect evidence of the effects of cats. The beneficial role that cats play is the effect they have on vermin such as rabbits and rodents. A 10-year study of an enclosed population of rabbits proved that cats (and ferrets) reduced rabbits to very low numbers; and take all young rabbits before, or as soon as, they appeared above ground. Rodent populations have also shown significant changes due to the significance of cat numbers

in mainland forests, for example as cat numbers fall, rat numbers increase.

## Control in rural areas

### Trapping

The use of a Timms possum kill trap is an effective method of controlling feral cats. The entrance to the Timms trap must be modified to accommodate the length of the cat's whiskers. A cat won't put its head through an entrance that its whiskers won't fit through, as this is the width of a cat's body. Modification is a simple matter and requires approximately 25 mm to be removed around the entire opening. By baiting with fish, rabbit or other suitable food that attracts cats, trapping of this nature should be successful. Kill traps are capable of killing domestic as well as feral cats, if using in a rural setting with other houses in close proximity talk to neighbours about your intentions. One option is to set the traps only during night while domestic cats are safely locked inside.

Cage traps can be used in rural areas, especially close to houses. This trap can also be used for possums and when cats are the target, the bait needs to be changed to suit, for example meat or fish. If a domestic cat is caught, it can be released unharmed.

### Shooting

The use of a .22 rimfire with telescopic sights is an effective measure against feral cats. Centre-fire calibres (for example .22 Hornet, .223 Rem) could be used in areas where long shots are required. Shotguns can be utilised around areas of heavy cover where shots are generally close and moving. Cats can be hunted in day light as well as night. Cat's eyes shine a brilliant green at night in a spotlight beam. Hunting feral cats during day or night should be

concentrated in areas of available food sources, such as rabbit populations. See rabbit control options handbook for guidance on effective night shooting techniques.

## Control in urban areas

### Cage or live capture traps

This is the only safe method to catch unwanted cats in an urban environment. The traps must be set in areas frequented by the cats and baited with suitable food. Once a cat is caught it should be disposed of in a suitable manner. Veterinary practitioners, RSPCA officers are all able to humanely put down captured cats and may be able to offer this service.

*For more information contact a Bay of Plenty Regional Council Land Management Officer.*



## Bay of Plenty Regional Council

5 Quay Street, Whakatāne  
1125 Arawa Street, Rotorua  
Rata Street, Mount Maunganui

**Post:** PO Box 364, Whakatāne 3158

**Phone:** 0800 884 880

**Fax:** 0800 884 882

**Pollution Hotline:** 0800 884 883

**Email:** [info@boprc.govt.nz](mailto:info@boprc.govt.nz)

**Website:** [www.boprc.govt.nz](http://www.boprc.govt.nz)