

THE FERAL CAT PROBLEM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Time to stop pussyfooting?

Steps should be taken to control the large population of feral domestic cats in southern Africa. They not only pose a threat to the continued survival of the African wild cat but feed on a wide range of small indigenous vertebrates

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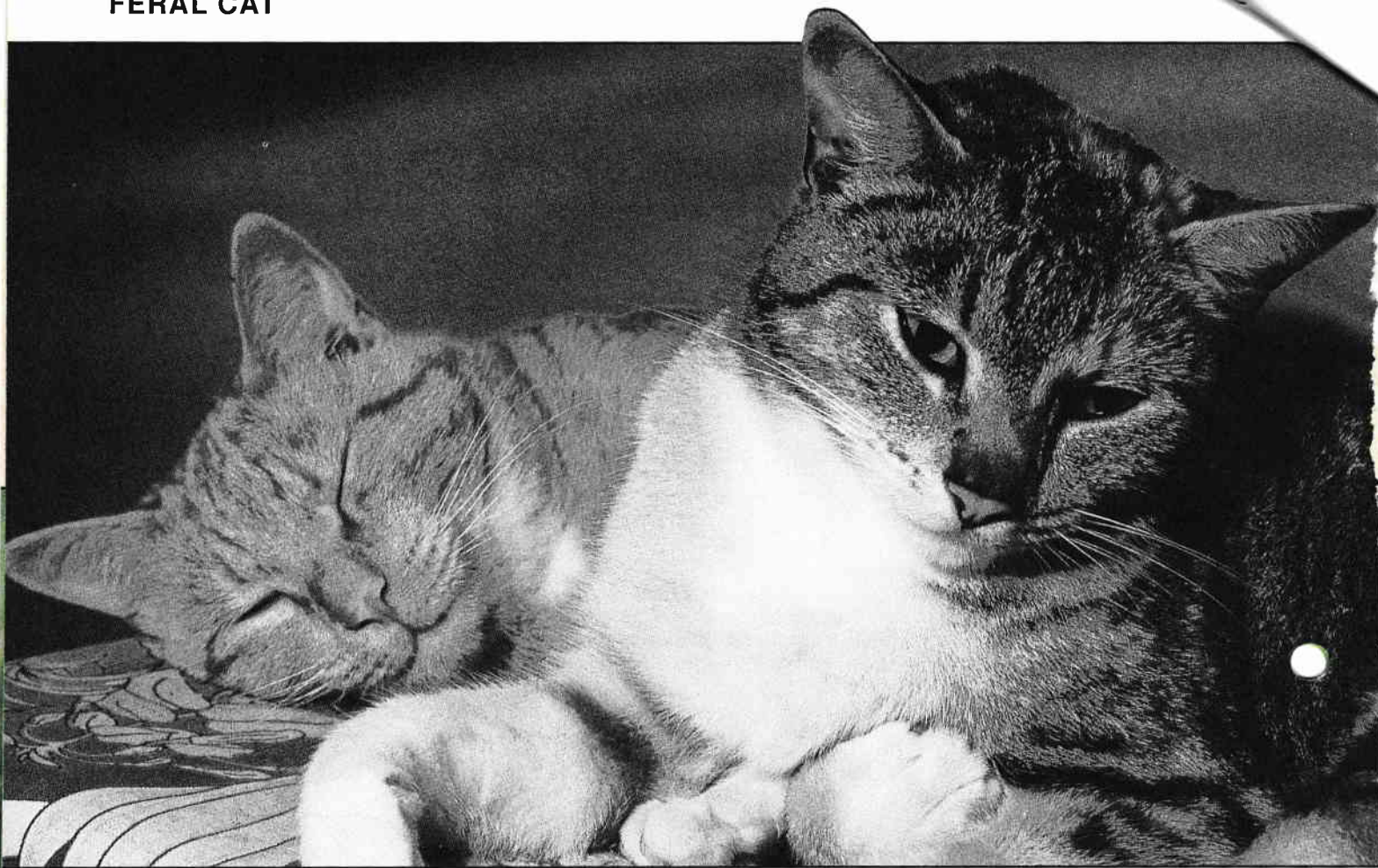
The cat's association with man is a long one indeed and the origin of this love/alooof relationship can be traced back some 4 000 years to the era of Ancient Egypt.

All domestic cats are descended from races of the wild cat, *Felis libyca* or *Felis silvestris*, depending on which authority one wishes to follow. Although these felines have been kept as pets by man for so long

and have lost much of the savagery of their ancestors, they remain aloof and solitary beasts. This is in sharp contrast to the domestic dog, a descendant of the highly social wolf. Because of its social nature the dog



The African wild cat always has rich, reddish-brown hair on the back of its ears.



The domestic cat poses two problems: it readily interbreeds with the African wild cat, and it feeds on a wide range of indigenous vertebrates.

has become dependent on man and for this reason many different breeds have been selectively bred for specific functions, such as guard dogs, pointers or retrievers. The cat, however, merely is.

Now back to the origins of the modern feline. The Egyptians were such passionate worshippers of the wild "domestic" cat that they took great pains to embalm and mummify many hundreds of thousands of cats. These cats were considered sacred to the goddess of pleasure, Bast. The Roman, Dirodus, saw one of his countrymen hanged by a mob for killing a domestic cat. Even the reverse situation has been recorded, perhaps tongue in cheek, by Richard Braithwaite in "Barnabee's Journal": "*I saw a Puritan-one, Hanging of his cat on Monday, For killing of a mouse on Sunday.*"

Now to the purpose of this article! In southern Africa and, no doubt, in other regions of the continent, the domestic cat poses a serious threat to the continued survival of the pure African wild cat (*Felis libyca*). It is in fact a case of "loving itself to death"!

Domestic cats accompanied man on his sailing ships to virtually all parts of the world. No-one really knows

when these felines first made their appearance at the southern tip of the African continent but it can be fairly safely assumed that they arrived with the first European settlers. Their principal purpose, no doubt, was to control the rats and mice that have always been a problem in port settlements.

Unfortunately, being the aloof and independent beast that it is, it has been able to break away from domestication and has settled successfully into the feral or wild state. As with their wild cousin, the African wild cat, feral domestic cats have an amazingly wide habitat tolerance. Although most of these feral populations are located in the vicinity of towns, rural settlements, farmsteads and temporary prospecting sites, I have encountered both feral and hybrid (*Felis catus* X *Felis libyca*) cats in parts of the Kalahari, the rugged hill country of the lower Orange River basin and the mopane country north of the Soutpansberg in the northern Transvaal. Even in the Namib Desert they have penetrated as far as Sandwich Harbour and at least 30 kilometres upstream in the Kuiseb River valley.

But why should the domestic/feral cat pose a threat to the continued

survival of the African wild cat? As we have already noted, all domestic cats are descended from races of the wild cat and they readily interbreed and produce fertile, hybrid young. To find a pure African wild cat near any form of human settlement is becoming an increasingly rare occurrence. The balance is definitely tilting in favour of the hybrid.

These hybrids in their turn breed with the few remaining pure African wild cats and in the not too distant future it is inevitable that we shall see the virtual extinction of the wild cat as it is today.

How then does one distinguish the "true-blood" wild cat from its domestic and half-caste brethren? The wild cat is generally larger and longer in the leg than its domestic cousin and the belly fur is usually reddish. The most important factor is, however, the rich, reddish-brown-coloured hair on the back of the ears.

The cat also poses a second threat, both in the form of the household tabby and its wild-ranging feral brother and sister. Being what they are, highly efficient hunters and killers, they are responsible for the

demise of vast numbers of small mammals up to the size of young hares, birds, reptiles and invertebrates. Even the well-fed cat that stays fairly close to home, is a frequent hunter. How often does the cat-owner come home to the sight of a dead shrew or golden mole lying uneaten on the front step, or numerous bird feathers scattered at the site of a kill on the lawn? Unfortunately no detailed study of domestic/feral cat diet has been undertaken in southern Africa. From casual observations (from scats and stomach contents) I have recorded them killing and eating 11 species of rodent, one hare species, at least three different shrews, elephant shrews, golden moles, a wide range of birds up to the size of a Cape francolin, and reptiles. Grasshoppers, beetles and termites also suffer their attentions.

Studies undertaken in other parts of the world have shown the devastating impact that domestic/feral cat populations can have on different prey species. Probably the best known example to South Africans is the impact that the cat has had on certain seabird populations on Marion Island in the South Atlantic. Five cats were taken there in

1947/48 to try to control the accidentally-introduced house mouse (*Mus musculus*). The cats, however, found that the local birds were much easier prey and by 1976 it was estimated that more than 2 000 of these felines were prowling the island. Each cat was killing approximately 213 petrels every year — that is, over 400 000 birds per year. Of course, this is a small island and an extreme example of the effect of cat predation.

Studies in Australia, New Zealand and several countries in Europe have, however, shown that feral and domestic cats are important predators of small vertebrates. In a Swedish study it was found that cat predation accounted for four per cent of the annual production of rabbits and about 20 per cent of the annual field vole production.

Here in the subcontinent we therefore face two problems connected with the domestic/feral cat, firstly hybridisation with the African wild cat, and secondly, predation by a non-indigenous carnivore on a broad spectrum of small indigenous vertebrates. What can be done to alleviate (as we shall never be able to rid ourselves of the problem) the

cat dilemma?

I feel that the time has come to take some action to prevent the total swamping of our African wild cat stocks. Around most settlements, both large and small, it is probably too late, but we should initiate a programme of sterilisation and neutering of domestic cats and of limiting the number of cats allowed per household. Even a system of licensing should be considered. The feral cat problem presents other difficulties. They have no owner and, particularly in outlying areas, these animals should be trapped or shot. In Germany any cat found more than 300 metres from a settlement, may be shot as a potential predator of game birds and young hares.

I, for one, do not relish the thought of watching hybrid cats strolling across the Nossob river bed in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, or stalking elephant shrews in a Zululand reserve. A cat may have nine lives but feral and hybrid cats should have none at all! ■

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it will die away.

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