

THE NON-PESTICIDE *SILENT SPRING*

John Cairns, Jr.

Department of Biological Sciences, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University,
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061, USA

The impetus for this commentary was witnessing, in May 2007, the blocking of the US Senate Resolution honoring Rachel Carson on what would have been her 100th birthday. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (Dem., Maryland) was the author of the intended resolution that was blocked by Senator Tom Coburn (Rep., Oklahoma) (Fahrenthold 2007). I wondered how birds, especially songbirds, had fared since *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. A quick search provided evidence that a *Silent Spring* could still happen, although the reasons differ from those in Carson's book.

When Carson's paradigm shifting book *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, the general public was outraged that excessive use of pesticides was endangering birds to the extent that they might disappear and future spring times would be silent. Industry took some measures to reduce the risks, and some threatened or endangered species have had a remarkable recovery. However, then and now, small birds are still threatened by a source that the general public, especially those cat-loving environmentalists who consider themselves green, is not acknowledging – CATS. The domestic cat, *Felis catus*, is not even an indigenous species in the United States because it was domesticated in Egypt more than 4,000 years ago. At present, more than 90 million pet cats thrive in the United States. A 1997 nationwide poll showed that only 35% of this number are kept exclusively indoors, leaving the majority of owned cats free to kill wildlife at least some of the time (American Bird Conservancy, no date). In addition, 60 to 100 million feral (homeless) cats exist in the United States. Pet cats have a major advantage over both feral cats and native predators since they receive protection from disease, predation, competition, and starvation, which control indigenous predators such as owls, bobcats, and foxes (American Bird Conservancy, no date). Unvaccinated cats can transmit diseases such as rabies and are the domestic animal most frequently reported to be rabid to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In a study of cat predation in an urban area, 83% of the 41 study cats killed birds (American Bird Conservancy, no date).

In the United States, cats kill more than a billion birds and small mammals each year, many of which are threatened or endangered (UF News 2003). Cat lovers maintain that domestic felines out for predacious prowls are just doing what comes naturally (Wildlife Report 1998). The genus *Felis* evolved from the domestic cat ancestor about 3.4 million years ago (O'Brien and Johnson 2007). Of the five species of the genus *Felis*, only the domestic cat *Felis catus* is protected and cared for by humans, thereby acquiring an advantage over indigenous predators seeking the same prey. However, the main point is that erasing 3.4 million years of predatory history is difficult – cats are less responsible for killing birds and other native wildlife since their owners fail to keep them indoors and restrain their activities outdoors with a leash. People who feed feral or semiferal cats are also responsible for the deaths of birds and other wildlife since they provide cats a competitive advantage over native predators.

However, persons who fail to act responsibly in their relationship with cats are not the only threat to birds. The loss of millions of acres of grasslands and shrubs nationwide to suburban sprawl and agriculture, together with global heating and other types of climate change, has dramatically reduced the numbers of common birds seen across the United States over the past 50 years (Donnelly 2007). Restoration of derelict lands and damaged ecosystems should remediate this problem to some degree if cats can be excluded, especially when fledgling birds are leaving the nest.

Another significant problem is the combination of pets and poverty (Eckholm 2007). Excess animals, dropped on dark roads that wind through oak and pine forests and cornfields, tend to end up in the care of people with bigger hearts than bank accounts. The combination of pets and poverty, veterinary experts say, brings similar results to many rural areas: unhealthy conditions for oversized animal populations, desperate efforts by often overwhelmed individuals to help, and a lurking threat to human health. Lacking money for normal accoutrements of pet care, some people improvise. Free roaming animals (e.g., cats and dogs) are obviously a threat to birds and small, wild mammals.

Regrettably, many persons who believe they are nature lovers and friends of wildlife are often neither because they practice targeted compassion. Cairns (1998) discusses this common failing of warmhearted people. They see the suffering of specific animals, such as cats, but lack multidimensional compassion, which includes the birds and other wildlife that cats kill and often do not even eat. Cat owners rarely witness cats killing birds and are, thus, able to project an attitude for the cats toward songbirds that evolution did not produce.

In Cape May, New Jersey, only 115 pairs of piping plovers exist to build nests in sandy, open beaches, which make them easy prey for cats and natural predators. Cape May is one of the prime bird-watching spots in all of North America. However, bird enthusiasts are concerned about the predatory nature of even household cats, especially since they are an introduced species and not part of the natural environment. Jessica Frohman with Alley Cat Allies in Bethesda, Maryland, sums up her organization's position: "We're intent on protecting all species. But birds are not somehow more important than cats" (Associated Press 2007).

Although a resolution honoring Rachel Carson was blocked by a single US Senator, she can still be honored by protecting songbirds and restoring at least some of their habitat. May it be so!

LITERATURE CITED

- American Bird Conservancy. No date. Domestic cat predation on birds and other wildlife. Washington, DC.
- Associated Press. 2007. Feathers and fur fly in New Jersey town's standoff between cats and endangered birds. International Herald Tribune 4Aug <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/08/05/america/NA-GEN-US-Cats-Vs.-Birds.php>
- Cairns, J., Jr. 1998. Replacing targeted compassion with multidimensional compassion: an essential paradigm shift to achieve sustainability. *Speculations in Science and Technology* 21:45-51.
- Donnelly, J. 2007. With development, common birds are losing ground. *Boston Globe* 15June http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/06/15/with_development_common_birds_are_losing_ground/.
- Eckholm, E. 2007. For poor families, an added burden of too many pets. *New York Times* 30June <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/30/us/30dogs.html?ex=1186200000&en=38613471e5b9e09e&ei=5070>.
- Fahrenthold, D. A. 2007. Bill to honor Rachel Carson on hold. *Washington Post* 23May <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/22/AR2007052201574.html>.
- O'Brien, S. J. and W. E. Johnson. 2007. The evolution of cats. *Scientific American* 287(1):68-75.
- UF News. 2003. UF study finds feral cat colonies threaten endangered species nationwide. University of Florida 1May <http://news.ufl.edu/2003/05/01/feralcat.htm>.
- Wildlife Report. 1998. Domestic felines cat-astrophic for Colorado's songbirds. 5June. http://www.dnr.state.co.us/cdnr_news/wildlife/1998615123232.html.