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### Is this cat a pet? Lost? Abandoned? Feral? Can't tell?

Of course you can't. All of these adjectives describe one species: *Felis catus*. A "feral" cat is usually the offspring of a lost or abandoned pet cat.

A feral cat is unsocialized to humans, and fears and avoids contact with them. Other commonly used terms for "feral cat" include alley cat, barn cat, and street cat. All are members of the domestic species *Felis catus*. Recent scientific research places the emergence of this domestic species at 8,000-10,000 years ago.

[Home](#) / [What We Do](#) / [Advocate to End the Killing](#) / [Wildlife & Environment](#) / [Articles](#) / [Humans: The Number One Threat to Birds](#)

## Humans: The Number One Threat to Birds

Wendy M. Anderson, Legal Director



Concern over the declining populations of certain bird species has generated heated debate about what are the most effective steps toward preserving and restoring those populations. Too often this discussion becomes mired in a simplistic cat-versus-bird

argument. Focusing on the perceived struggle between cats and birds diverts attention from the real cause of declining bird populations: the enormous impact of the human species on birds and their habitats.

The major cause of bird species loss—indeed, all species loss—is habitat destruction. Habitat modification, fragmentation, and loss is caused by a myriad of human activities, including logging, crop farming, livestock grazing, mining, industrial and residential development, urban sprawl, road building, dam building, and pesticide use.

In a 2000 report by the World Conservation Union surveying 1,173 threatened bird species, habitat loss was the most important threat, affecting 83% of the bird species sampled. Across the United States, little land is left untouched by human development, modification, fragmentation, and pollution. Already human activities have led to the extinction of 10% of the world's bird species—in some locales, that number rises to as much as 90%. Today more than a thousand bird species are listed as threatened, and scientists predict between 500 and 600 of those will go extinct in the next 50 years.

In the United States, much of the impact on birds is a result of America's growing population and its even faster-growing development of land. Between 1990 and 2000, the U.S. population grew by 33 million people, the greatest numerical increase the country has ever seen. Future growth is predicted to add 27 million people each decade for the next 30 years.

More significant is that America's demand for resources is growing disproportionately to its population. A Brookings Institution analysis reveals that urbanized land increased by 47% in the 15 years between 1982 and 1997, even though population only increased by 17%; population in suburbs, meanwhile, increased twice as fast as population in cities. Researchers at Brookings predict that by the year 2030, half of the buildings in which Americans live, work, and shop will have been built after the year 2000. With this level of development and population growth, the serious loss of bird species—due to habitat destruction, pollution, and fragmentation—will continue for decades to come.

Considering the vast scale of human destruction of bird habitat, arguing about "cats-versus-birds" trivializes the critical issues facing bird populations today. Cat lovers and bird lovers can agree: the real danger to birds is humans.

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## Wildlife & Environment

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