

## Pets as predators

Human Health Risk

Ecological Risk

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Socioeconomic Risk

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Free ranging cats and other household pets that are allowed to roam outdoors can pose a threat to birds and other wildlife. Housecats are abundant predators, responsible for killing over a billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds in the United States each year. To a lesser extent, unleashed dogs can also harm wildlife, particularly beach nesting birds. Suburbanization has the compound effect of increasing the incidence of pets, while decreasing preferred habitat for prey species.

### What's at risk?

Birds, mammals, and small reptiles including at least 18 endangered or protected species are at risk. Small perching birds and beach nesting species such as piping plover and tern are particularly vulnerable to pet predation in New Jersey. Cats also outnumber and outcompete some native predators such as hawks and weasels.

### What are the ecological impacts in New Jersey?

There have been no studies done in New Jersey to quantify the problem. As a reference, data from other states have found that cats kill nearly 40 million birds per year (Wisconsin), averaging up to 91 birds per year apiece (Virginia). Predators are cited as the major cause of piping plover decline in New Jersey, but management for cats and dogs has been recommended at only 8 of 34 monitored breeding sites.

### What are the socioeconomic impacts in New Jersey?

Predation of birds by pets could potentially have negative impacts for birdwatchers. Interest in birdwatching has grown in recent years, and more than 100,000 birdwatchers now visit the Cape May region each year. The economic impact associated with birdwatching has risen from \$10 million in 1991 to \$31 million in 1997. Since expenditures in New Jersey are rising, it appears that pets have not yet taken a measurable economic toll. If cats were to threaten the survival of enough species of birds, there could be a negative effect on birdwatching, but this is unlikely to occur within five years.

### What's being done?

There are currently no regulations protecting wildlife from household pet predation. Non-profit groups such as the American Bird Conservancy work to raise awareness among pet owners about the risks to birds and other wildlife when their pets roam freely.