

# The feral cat problem

## Challenges and solutions



**Widely distributed throughout Australia, feral cats are a significant threat to native wildlife and household pets.**

Since being introduced to Australia around the time of European settlement, feral cat populations have spread nationwide.

A key threat to many endangered animals, feral cats have caused significant loss of native wildlife through predation and disease.

### What are the feral cat impacts in the Blue Mountains?

Feral cats have probably existed in the Blue Mountains since the early-mid 1800s. Feral cats feed on a wide range of native wildlife including small mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects and even fish. The full extent of their historical as well as ongoing impacts on the biodiversity of the Blue Mountains are poorly understood.

Feral cats also spread disease and parasites including toxoplasmosis. This is particularly harmful to marsupials; it causes blindness, paralysis, respiratory and reproductive disorders.

Household pets—especially household cats that live near bushland areas—are both at risk of injury as well as contracting diseases from feral cats.

The difficulty of controlling feral cats, the extent of natural areas and the urban bushland interface, and the presence of domestic cats near bushland, makes feral cats control problematic in the Blue Mountains.

### What can you do to deter feral cats?

While feral cat control is a complex issue, there are practical things that responsible cat owners can do to protect wildlife & keep their pets safe:

- Ensure your cat is de-sexed to avoid unwanted pregnancies that may contribute to feral cat populations.
- Feed your cat indoors and remove left over food outside to reduce available food sources for feral cats.
- Keep your cat inside, particularly at night to avoid cat-fights, injury and disease.
- Educate your family, friends and neighbours about feral cats and responsible cat ownership.

The feral cat may have been introduced to Australia as early as the 17th century, as housecats aboard the Dutch shipwrecks of West Australia. Unlike the domestic cat, the feral cat does not rely on humans to survive. It obtains its food and shelter from its environment.



Small ground dwelling mammals such as the Brown Antechinus (pictured above), are at risk of predation.



Feral cats also predate on frogs and reptiles like the Blue Mountains Water Skink (below) and Tree Frog (above).



Ground-dwelling birds such as Lewin's Rail (above) are also at risk of predation.

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## A national issue - seeking local solutions

### Feral cats and other introduced pests

- Feral cats have a complex relationship with other introduced species. For example, foxes prey on feral cats and compete with them for food. Consequently, foxes may help to control feral cat populations.
- Feral cats can help to control rabbit populations, but only when rabbit densities are low. Rabbits otherwise support feral cats as a primary food source. When seasonal shortages of rabbits occur there is typically an increase in native animals eaten by feral cats.

### Feral cat control is not a simple matter

- Control methods currently available for feral cats include trapping and shooting. Both methods are resource intensive, costly and problematic in urban bushland interface areas. There are currently no poisons registered for use on feral cats.
- Effective feral cat management is expensive and resource intensive. The cost to resource successful feral cat management programs is significant.
- Feral cat control is a complex issue. In order to succeed, it needs to be strategic with an ongoing commitment of financial and other resources. When feral cats are removed from an area, other feral cats (in the absence of continuous control) quickly repopulate the area.
- Feral cat control may require concurrent rabbit control as rabbit populations may increase after of feral cat removal.
- Feral cats are widespread and broad-scale management is currently considered cost- prohibitive. Targeted feral cat management is more affordable, but is typically only implemented when a specific 'high value' biodiversity conservation outcome can be achieved (ie. protection of a threatened species such as the Blue Mountains Water Skink in swamps after fire or the protection of juvenile Brush Tailed Rock Wallabies).

### What are the options for feral cat control?

- Trapping is resource-intensive and not particularly efficient; it is difficult to trap sufficient numbers to be effective.
- Shooting is problematic in urban bushland interface areas, is resource intensive but can be used in more remote areas.
- There are no broad scale feral cat control programs implemented in the Blue Mountains region. Limited targeted feral cat management is implemented when a specific biodiversity conservation outcome can be achieved .



The feral cat is an opportunistic predator that uses moisture from its prey. Its ability to survive with limited access to water makes the feral cat highly adaptable to a range of environments.



Feral cats (see above) frequently occupy home territories of more than ten square kilometres. Their capacity to roam exacerbates the challenge of feral cat control.



When feral cats are caught, they must be treated humanely, such as through euthanasia by a qualified vet (see above).

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