

# Your Pet's Palace



## A comparison of the merits of hunting in the city as a pet cat with free outdoor access and hunting in a rural area as a feral (free-living) cat.

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### Introduction

When considering the differences between Pet cats hunting in urban areas with Feral cats hunting in rural areas, there are a number of obvious assumptions, but also a number of other resulting factors. All owners of pet cats will have seen their cats chase balls, play with string, and watch birds fly by their garden – all characteristics which are based on hunting instincts.

Many, if not most, domestic cats have the ability to hunt in the same manner as wild predators. However, they differ from wild predators in three important ways:

- 1) Pet cats have owners who provide shelter and protect them from disease and other predators
- 2) Pet cats have a dependable source of food, with no competition from other 'predators', and
- 3) As they have a dependable source of food, pet cats are not influenced by seasonal factors and other causes of changes in populations of prey<sup>1</sup>

These three factors may allow domestic cats to exist at much higher densities than native predators<sup>1</sup>, but this does not necessarily mean that domestic cats will always outnumber their feral relations. The truth is that the population of feral cats will always be primarily determined by the availability of prey, mating partners, predators and other threats, while the population of domestic cats is determined by the number of home owners wanting feline pets<sup>2</sup>.

### Overview of Pet cat hunting in Urban area

Hunting is a cat's instinct, and their desire to hunt is not suppressed by the presence of a constant and safe source of food<sup>1</sup>. Even the best-fed domestic cats will hunt and kill birds, mice, rats and other small animals in the vicinity. They often present such trophies to their owner. The motivation is not entirely clear, but friendly bonding behaviours are often associated with such an action<sup>3</sup>.

It has been reported that the domestic cat can hunt and eat about a thousand different species, while many big cats will eat fewer than 100. Although, theoretically, big cats can kill most of these species as well, they often do not due to the relatively low nutritional content that smaller animals provide<sup>4</sup>.



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It is suspected that, given a choice of rich hunting grounds, this statistic will be similar in a comparison between domestic and feral cats, with domestic cats killing a wider range of creatures and Feral cats being slightly more productive due to the increased survival need. I believe this is because pet cats kill for entertainment, and nutritional value is not a factor, while feral cats kill for food – low nutritional foods may not justify the hunt. I suspect that the low-nutrition creatures are only hunted when they are easy targets, when there is a lack of high-nutrition alternatives, as 'playthings', or as a part of the process of learning how to hunt (as kittens).

This is likely to affect the geographic area covered by pet and feral cats. I would assume that with no need to hunt high-nutrition foods, pet cats are more likely to wander over a wider range of areas and 'play' with whatever comes into its vicinity (depending on the density of the local cat population), while feral cats would move depending on availability of prey, mates and threats.

## Overview of Feral cat hunting in Rural areas

Factors 1-3, mentioned on the previous page, can all be controlling factors in the population of wild predators including Feral Cats. Feral cats need to kill for nutrition – when prey becomes scarce, or the number of other predators, hunting the same prey, increases then the population of feral cats in the immediate area is likely to fall. Some will move to nearby areas, which will then have an impact of the food chain in their new surroundings. All these factors combine to ensure that the population sizes and distribution of wild felids are limited to a number that the environment can sustain<sup>3</sup>.

Domestic cats tend to kill a wider range of species, as feral cats hunting in rural areas will make kills focussing on the nutritional value. Several studies found that up to 90% of free-ranging rural cats' diet was wild animals. In the US, it has been estimated that rural cats probably kill over a billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds each year<sup>5</sup>. However, this is not to say that Feral cats will not kill creatures with less nutritional value - The amount of food given to a cat made no detectable difference to its kill rate. In fact, a good diet simply seemed to make the cat fitter to carry out more recreational killing, although overweight cats did tend to kill less<sup>6</sup>.



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Due to their hunting behaviour, in many countries feral cats are considered pests<sup>3</sup>. I believe that this leads to the presence of humans becoming a potential threat to feral cats, and as such, they would be expected to hunt away from human residences unless desperate or there is a low risk of capture (e.g. night time). Feral Cats are more likely to remain within low risk, target-rich environments where there is sufficient food, but lack of threats from competition and higher species in the food chain.

A further difference between feral cats and their domestic relations is that feral cats are free to hunt when they desire, while pet cats are limited to times when they are allowed outside their owner's houses.

## A brief comparison of Pet and Feral Cats

	Pet Cats	Feral Cats
<u>Home</u>	Safe, warm, protected houses	Sheltered areas in wild
<u>Threats</u>	Traffic, minimal threat from other domestic animals (dogs), foxes, "foul play" (theft, poisoning, etc)	Higher animals in food chain (e.g. foxes?), animals competing for same food sources, other human threats (e.g. farmers), disease, lack of available food.
<u>Population</u>	Dependent on desire of human population for pet cats	Dependent on availability of food and mates, and related to presence of threats
<u>Availability of food</u>	Unlimited – provided by owners	Dependent upon prey and presence of other predators
<u>Reason for hunting</u>	Instinct and entertainment	Survival – primary food source
<u>Typical prey</u>	Any low-risk creature which moves – birds, spiders, rodents, amphibians, flies, etc.	High nutrition, but ideally low risk (rodents, amphibians, etc)
<u>Hunting time</u>	Whenever let out of house, occasional in house (if a spider appears, etc)	Typically dawn and dusk (twilight) due to increased chance of success (better eyesight), but possibly through rest of day as hunger and/or opportunity arrives.



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## Conclusions

Hunting is an instinct in all cats, but for different reasons. Pet cats hunt for entertainment, while for feral cats, it is a survival necessity. The presence of 'owners' provide domestic cats with a constant source of food, shelter and healthcare – luxuries which a feral cat does not have, which in turn can present threats to their daily survival.

The population of pet cats depends on the desires of home-owners in any given area, while the population of feral cats is dependent on the presence of prey, mates and threats. Feral cats tend to focus on high-nutrition creatures (but do also kill for entertainment) while Pet cats kill a wider range of animals, focussing solely on entertainment value.

Feral cats tend to prefer hunting at dawn and dusk, but will also do so when they become hungry, or an easy target presents itself. Pet cats can only hunt when let outside by their owners.

I believe that house cats tend to hunt more for entertainment as they do not have to hunt for food. I would think that Feral Cats would occasionally hunt for entertainment, but more in their kitten stages – this also acts as practice and training for later life.

In summary, I would state the relative benefits of each as follows:

Pet Cat hunting in city:

- Availability of prey less limited by presence of other predators, as wider range of creatures hunted

Feral cat hunting in rural area:

- Can hunt whenever they desire – do not have to be 'let out' first
- Hunting success not limited by preventative measures imposed by humans
- Effective hunting against wide range of prey taught from young age

## References

- (1) <http://wildlife.wisc.edu/extension/catfly3.htm>
- (2) <http://www.shef.ac.uk/aps/apsrtp/sims-victoria/research-project.html>
- (3) <http://animals-pictures-dictionary.com/rec/378-Cats-Hunting-and-Diet/>
- (4) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cat>
- (5) <http://wildlife.wisc.edu/extension/catfly3.htm>
- (6) <http://www.petfinder.com/journalindex.cgi?path=/public/animalbehavior/cats/1.2.522.txt>

