

Living Gardens

Keeping Cats Indoors to Save Birds

By **Lorrie Preston**, Appalachian Audubon Society (Revised Nov. 2018)

We've all seen it before...the telltale pile of feathers near the bird feeders that let you know there's been a violent altercation in your backyard while you weren't looking. You wonder what predator took out one of your feathered friends and look for clues...hawk...owl...or is it that **neighborhood cat** that you've seen around lately? You look closer at the feathers to try to make a postmortem ID. In my case, the bright feathers that lay scattered across the ground were unmistakable. One of the cardinals was gone. I had my suspicions about who was responsible, but it wasn't until I saw it with my own eyes that I had the facts. As another bird landed at the feeder, a black and white blur pounced out from under a nearby plant, did a half twist in the air and grabbed! Feathers flew, but this time, the bird got away. And now, I knew for sure who the culprit was...the same one that I had caught lurking in that general area a dozen or more times over the summer, the one I have chased home on numerous occasions, and the same one that I now knew was responsible for the other piles of feathers I had found nearby over the last month. It was a *Felis catus*, a cute, furry, and most likely described by his family as loveable, domestic cat.

Once I discovered his hiding place and how he was accomplishing his dirty work, I immediately cut the plant back to the ground, only to discover a bowl-like indentation in the soil he had made smooth by his frequent use under my old fashioned bleeding heart near the feeder. Although the plant was only 18" high, the cat had found a way to position himself under there, completely unseen, and wait for the right moment...the moment to kill.

Nearly 100,000,000 pet cats live in the U.S, and most of them spend at least some time outdoors. Millions more cats are free-ranging cats that have been abandoned or live on their own. Cats hunt and kill by instinct, as their ancestors did. It doesn't matter whether they are hungry or not. Two separate parts of their brain discern hunger and the desire to hunt. Nationwide, cats kill well over a billion small mammals each year and an estimated 2.4 billion birds in the U.S. alone. Sometimes they are common backyard birds that can be replaced, but sometimes cats kill birds and mammals that are already experiencing population decline due to habitat destruction, pollution, and pesticide poisoning. Studies have shown that a bell hung on a cat's collar to alert wildlife to danger does not reduce the number of killings, as cats learn to stalk their prey silently, and wildlife may not associate the bell with danger.

The American Bird Conservancy, the Humane Society of the U.S. and the American Humane Assoc. teamed up in 1997 in a campaign to educate cat-owners and others about the dangers to both wildlife and cats when cats are allowed to roam outdoors. It is called ***Cats Indoors! The Campaign for Safer Birds and Cats***. They have excellent publications, as well as a DVD that can be ordered and used to teach others the facts about this important subject. Check out their website at www.abcbirds.org/cats/ or call them at 202-234-7181.

I am a devoted cat person, by the way, as well as a bird and nature-lover. My much-loved cats, Misty and Patches, spent a lot of time watching birds out the windows, and long summer afternoons on the screened porch watching butterflies, frogs and other interesting creatures pass by – right in the middle of our Audubon and National Wildlife Federation certified Backyard Wildlife Habitat.