

MAD ABOUT CATS

New Zealanders are dotty about cats. We have the world's highest number of households with cats — a bizarre statistic in this land of slow-moving native birds. And though adored and well-fed moggies predominate, many cats and kittens are neglected, abandoned or treated with casual cruelty — while an unknown number of feral cats scratch an existence in the bush. Tauranga cat lover Jenny Argant reports.

Cousin Ellie is not herself a cat lover, preferring dogs — she owns a fox terrier called Skipper. But she was brought up by a mum totally besotted with cats and knows what is due to them. Normally Ellie tolerates cats well, but for the past four years her forbearance has been tested to the limit.

That's because the house she and her husband bought as their family home is overrun by stray cats. In spite of Skipper's vigilance, the garden is regularly used as a cat loo, and smells like it. Ellie's eldest boy has already had two attacks of toxoplasmosis (a parasitic disease spread through contact with cat faces), and the sandpit is unusable.

Ellie's neighbour is the source of her problem with cats. This woman lost a child in tragic circumstances and compensates herself with kittens she's unfit to care for. They're kept about the house until they're no longer cute and cuddly, and then turned loose to fend for themselves. Neither toms nor queens are spayed, so the night is full of caterwauling and the colony grows.

The adult cats are thin and desperate, and the kittens are scrawny and unhealthy, riddled with worms and diarrhea, eyes half-closed and weeping pus. The council is uninterested. A friend Robin Lee Robinson, formerly of Tauranga but now Opotiki-based, has also been troubled by stray cats. She lost her own beloved pet to feline Aids, transmitted during a fight with one of these marauders. Robinson paid out nearly \$400 for treatment, then paid again to have Monty put down, and her other two cats tested for the disease.

Robinson painstakingly trapped the stray mother cat - another abandoned pet - and three of her kittens, and took them to the Tauranga SPCA for humane euthanasia. She was told to take them away: that she was the wrong for catching them, and would be more in the wrong if she released them elsewhere than their "own territory". The mother cat was then regularly gang-raped by prowling toms and produced three more litters of kittens in little more than a year. All but one died in misery.

New Zealand SPCA chief executive Robyn Kippenberger is disturbed by Robinson's story. It's not SPCA policy to turn away captured and seemingly abandoned cats, although she says the organisation's mainly volunteer staff have to establish ownership, as best they can, before accepting animals.

She also agrees there's a grey area of responsibility in regards to "strays", which aren't pests (under the Biosecurity Act only feral cats are designated pests and therefore subject to control under a pest management strategy). But it seems local branches of the SPCA sometimes classify stray cats as "wild" or feral, therefore outside their remit.

City and regional councils' cat strategies vary widely: their websites generally provide screeds of information on dog ownership and controls; Western Bay of Plenty District Council also advises on pig and poultry problems and what to do if you see cattle or horses wandering along the road but, like many others, it makes no reference to cats. A ring-around of city councils suggests many redirect cat inquirers and complainers to the SPCA.

Tauranga City Council does have a "Cat issues" web page, but its first bullet point states: "Council has no jurisdiction over cats..., a cat problem is the responsibility of the land owner." It does make an exception for "stray cat colonies..., consisting wholly of cats and kittens that are NOT owned". It says animal services officers will lay traps for a maximum of three days but, curiously, should some kindly soul have left a few scraps for the strays, the deal is off: "If council finds that a colony is being managed (fed) then it is no longer considered to be a stray cat colony."

"Council has no jurisdiction over cats... a cat problem is the responsibility of the land owner."

There's no New Zealand-wide legal limit on the number of cats allowed per household: to do in a neighbour with a property overrun with cats - unless your council has ownership restrictions — you've really got to prove the animals are being abused or pose a major health hazard to get any action from the authorities.

To be fair, council animal service officers are over-burdened with rounding up stray and dangerous dogs or dealing with rats, but it means hard-pressed SPCA officers and cat charities end up dealing with nearly all the country's stray cat problems. Of the thousands of unwanted cats dumped on the SPCA's doorstep every year, most don't have happy endings. In 2006 the SPCA received 41,818 cats and kittens; 21,937 of those could not be "rehomed" and had to be put down.

The 2007 statistics aren't yet complete, but Kippenberger believes the death toll will be down on the previous year, thanks to the organisation's mobile desexing programme and campaigns like the Auckland SPCA's "Desex and the City" drive. "Our mobile unit's been on the road since February 2006," she says. "We take it to towns and suburbs where we know there are a lot of unneutered cats and dogs, and offer free desexing to low-wage people. [At veterinary clinics spaying costs \$70-\$150; neutering a male cat \$50-\$80.] "We've desexed more than 5000 animals in the past two years."

It's a slow chipping away at our unwanted pet population, however. Kippenberger says one warm summer can allow cats to get in another breeding cycle; a female cat can have three litters a year, producing more than 300 kittens in its lifetime. "It's tough on our staff and the vets we work with. I was talking to one of our senior inspectors in Kerikeri, who had a young vet working with him over summer. She was in tears euthanising kittens and puppies... in the end she couldn't go on. It's a miserable job, but the alternative is more sacks of pups and kittens tossed from bridges." New Zealand's cats stats are surprising in light of our island geography and fragile native bird and reptile populations.

There's no single international survey on cat ownership North & South could find, but we were able to compile a list of more than 20 countries, their total cat numbers and percentage of households with one or more cats. Fifty-one per cent of New Zealand households have at least one resident cat (a number confirmed by the SPCA). No other country comes close: Canada and Switzerland haul in second and third, with 38 per cent and 35 per cent respectively. In Australia and the UK, only 25 per cent of households have cats.

The conservative estimate of New Zealand's domestic cat population is 1.5 million, plus an unknown number of stray and feral cats. And definitions are important, says Auckland SPCA chief Bob Kerridge, because they determine our legal - and moral — obligations to the animals. He refers to the Code of Welfare for Companion Cats issued by the Government in March 2007, which makes the following classifications: Companion cat - common domestic cat or kitten that lives with humans as a companion and is dependent on them for its welfare.

51 per cent of households have at least one resident cat. No other country comes close.

Stray cat — a companion cat that is lost or abandoned and lives as an individual or in a group (colony). Strays have many of their needs indirectly supplied by humans and live around centres of human habitation. They're also likely to interbreed with the unneutered companion cat population.

Feral cat — a cat that is not a stray and has none of its needs provided by humans. Feral cats generally don't live around centres of human habitation. Their population size fluctuates largely independent of humans, is self-sustaining and is not dependent on input from the companion cat population. Ferals can be traced back to the 1800s, when cats were deliberately released into the bush to keep rabbit numbers down. They had some success but rapidly became pests themselves and, as with ferrets, stoats and weasels, found the New Zealand bird life, lizards and frogs easy prey.

Strays can “go feral” when dumped near bush and conservation land; kittens born in the wild, with no exposure to humans during the socialisation period (three to eight weeks) end up as wild animals. The contrast between our beloved family pets and these unkempt outlaws is painful. But mother cats are courageous and will struggle hard to raise a litter in the cruelest of circumstances: no shelter, insufficient food and kittens that fall easy prey to infection and disease. In spite of such fierce devotion, most of their offspring die in misery. But sufficient numbers survive to breed more of their kind.

In rural and conservation areas, the problem of feral cats as predators is taken seriously, and there are eradication programmes - permitted under the Biosecurity Act — although those engaged in the exercise are obliged to use humane methods of catch and despatch. Hamilton-based DoC scientist Craig Gillies is an expert on predators and “mainland islands”. He doesn't dismiss the feline-defenders' argument that cats kill rats and mice (a survey in Orongorongo Valley near Wellington analysed feral “cat scat” and showed rats, mice and rabbits comprised the bulk of their diet; the remains of birds were found in 12 per cent of the droppings and included non-native, ground-feeding birds such as blackbirds and thrushes).

“For a DoC officer in a South Island braided river area, cats are their number one enemy.”

But cats’ rodent-catching skills are small compensation for the damage they do to native wildlife, says Gillies, who adds they pose a greater threat to birds in wetlands, braided rivers and shorelines than they do in bush areas like Orongorongo. “A [DoC] officer working on pest control in the bush wouldn’t put feral cats top of their list for worst offenders. Rats, possums, stoats and ferrets do far more damage — but for an officer in a South Island braided river area, cats are their number one enemy. They’re a critical threat to ground-nesting birds like black stilts and wrybills. Brown teal on Great Barrier Island are hugely vulnerable to cats; likewise yellow-eyed penguins and dotterels, anywhere they nest on the mainland.”

DoC doesn’t have a specific policy on feral cats; they’re controlled as part of species programmes and usually only when it’s known they pose a threat to a particular species, says Gillies, be it giant skinks at MacRaes Flat in Otago or dotterels on Stewart Island. They’re despatched by kill-trapping (the traps pass all animal welfare guidelines) or by soft-catch leg-hold trapping (traps are checked daily and the feral cats are usually shot). It’s quick and fatal. Transporting panicked cats out of deep bush to a vet for euthanasia would be far harder on them, says Gillies. Bob Kerridge’s concern is chiefly for strays’ status under the Biosecurity Act, which provides that stray cats, “when passed to an animal shelter, must be cared for, have their needs fulfilled for a period of seven days, after which time they may be adopted or disposed of if the owner has not been located”.

Rescuing feral cats is deemed by agencies like the SPCA to be well-nigh impossible. And kittens born to strays must be caught and taken in hand at an early age if they’re to be tamed and treasured. A few caring people go to great lengths to socialise them, with some idea of relocating them to loving homes, only to find no one is willing to adopt them. Either they must keep them - not always practicable - or have them put down at their own expense. The SPCA will rent out traps, but it is your job to catch strays, then negotiate with your local vet what euthanasia will cost (a minimum of \$15 per animal).

There’s debate over how best to humanely reduce stray cat colony numbers. A Forest and Bird website on ‘responsible cat ownership suggests people “don’t feed stray or feral cats”. Although most animal control agencies support trapping and rehoming as many as possible and euthanising the rest, Kerridge favours a procedure referred to as TNR — trap, neuter (vaccinate) and return. “Fair to say there’s a lack of support for TNR in New Zealand,” he said at an international conference on human-animal interactions in Tokyo last year, “but in the practical sense the management of cats in this manner is likely to reduce the incidence of stray cats rather than the reverse when eradication is undertaken.”

Celia Hammond was a British supermodel in the 1960s who in later life became a passionate campaigner to end the suffering of stray cats in urban areas. For 30 years she operated nightly rescue missions with bands of volunteers. In 1986 she founded the Celia Hammond Animal Trust (CHAT) to run low-cost neutering clinics to control the feral animal population, and to recover and rehome these cats.

CHAT relocates neutered adult stray cats to farms, stables, smallholdings or larger gardens. Once the cats are delivered to their new homes, they're confined for two to three weeks to a holding pen that has beds, litter trays, food and water. This establishes the territory as theirs and, once released, the cats return for daily feeding, and earn their keep controlling rodents.

Auckland has its equivalent of CHAT - The Lonely Miaow. This is a non-profit organisation set up by Peter Dorman that is dedicated to the rescue and care of stray and abandoned cats. "We're not the only organisation deeply concerned about strays," he says. "All SPCAs have some necessary involvement, and in Auckland there's also Auckland Cat Rescue, Forgotten Felines, the Cats in Need Trust and the Humane Society. On Waiheke Island there's CLAWS; the Cat Protection League in Wellington and Christchurch, also Cats Unloved Christchurch. Gavle and Barry Anset do valuable work in Pukerua Bay, and so does the Nassus Animal Shelter in Feilding.

"Others we know of are Humane Alternative in Hamilton, the Horowhenua Animal Shelter in Levin, the Oamaru Cat Group, Thames Animal Rescue and the Kiera Animal Shelter Charitable Trust in Whangarei."

You might think that ought to be enough: it is not. Every day The Lonely Miaow get calls about injured, starving and abandoned cats and kittens, doing their best to survive in carparks, gardens, building sites or patches of bush. The suffering they endure is heartbreaking — a daily battle with dangerous cars and dogs, and against cruelty, starvation and disease. The Lonely Miaow cares for these cats and kittens, which are — where possible — tamed, neutered and rehabilitated.

Without government or local body funding, money is a major problem; there are vet bills, cat food and medication, traps and holding cages. "Catching these animals is difficult," says Dorman. "You could start by talking to someone sympathetic at the local SPCA, maybe borrow a rescue cage and gradually work on the cats colony by colony, taking each captured animal to the SPCA for assessment and, hopefully, rehoming. It's rarely possible to save the adult cats; they're usually too sick or scared. Best to prop up the mesh door with a block of wood, about 18cm high, attached to string, so as to catch the kittens first. Wait until they are feeding at the back of the cage before pulling the string."

Dorman believes it is a humane responsibility of any civilised society to ensure that no living creature is mistreated or exposed to unnecessary suffering. Social bonding between humans and their cats is a therapeutic relationship that benefits everyone, he says. Yvonne Brown is another of the cat world's unsung heroines. She bought a house and adjacent boarding cattery - Cats 'n' Jammies - in Mangere Bridge, South Auckland, 11 years ago. But it's been a long time since the income from her paying guests and occasional donations has covered the costs of feeding and nursing the hundreds of abandoned and injured cats that have ended up in her care.

She established the Cats in Need charitable trust in 2003 and launched a website to help adopt out her rehabilitated charges, like Sammy, whose eye had been stubbed out by a lit cigarette. Brown has found loving homes for dozens of felines deemed too dangerous and damaged to live. But it's hard yakka; she runs the trust on a shoestring and is constantly short of energy and funds.

She works as a caregiver from 7pm until 11.30pm seven nights a week “to pay the mortgage and feed the cats” and works in the cattery and cat rescue operation during the day. Her cat food bill, mostly bulk chicken mince from a Bombay pet food company, tops \$320 a week (she currently has about 80 cats besides her boarders); her vet bill, even at Humane Society rates, is \$400 “in a good month”.

Council animal management officers give out her number to people who’ve found dumped and abandoned kittens, she says, “or pass the buck to the SPCA which often passes it to me. It frustrates the heck out of me.”

It is a humane responsibility of any civilized society to ensure that no living creature is mistreated.

But she seldom turns away a cat “in need”. Most of all, the cruelty and neglect of animals she witnesses “breaks my heart”. I’ve seen people spend \$200 at the Lotto shop while their cats are so thin you could play ‘God Save the Queen’ on their ribs. I’ve seen local kids kicking a kitten round the street for fun. “And there are people like the woman who left her part-British blue at the cattery, paid one week’s board and never returned. That was September last year; I’ve left messages on her cellphone but she’s never phoned back. So Bluey’s now up for adoption... she’s lovely.”

When I decided to make a permanent home in New Zealand, that decision included inviting a cat to come and live with me, so off I went to the SPCA in Tauranga. I had a fixed notion it had to be a kitten, the younger the better. It was a heartbreaking sight to see so many sad little cats in cages. I wanted to take them all home and love them. But the one that caught my eye was a pewter tabby with golden eyes, about four months old, batting elegantly at a ping-pong ball. As soon as I scooped her up and snuggled her close, she was mine. I opened my mouth to say so, when I felt another cat run lightly up my skirt and onto my shoulder. Her downy fur was a medley of grey and white and peach.

The SPCA lady smiled. “That’s our littlest kitten. The grown cat has been looking after her.” “Seems like I’ll be going home with two,” I said. Over the years since then, Minnalouche and Blossom have brought me endless hours of pleasure. They’re worth every cent I fork out on cat food, regular treatment against worms and fleas, on the occasional vet’s bill for a bite on the rump or sticky eyes, or on toys they turn up their noses at. I go to sleep every night to a comforting lullaby of purrs.

Blossom, an unwanted kitten responsibly handed over to the SPCA, has grown up confident and playful, trusting any human to be a cat’s best friend. Minnalouche was rescued from the streets. She remains wan and needy, still hurt and damaged even after years of TLC. But she loves and trusts me and tells me so.

Additional reporting for this story was done by assistant editor Virginia Larson, who describes herself as “cat-neutral”.