

Outside kitties a catastrophe for birds

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Would a bell have stopped Sylvester from chasing Tweety?

Unlikely.

And you probably don't have much chance of discouraging your own putty tat from going after the birds at the neighbour's feeder either, says Erin Luther of the Toronto Wildlife Centre.

Luther is project coordinator for a public education campaign launched this summer that is aimed at persuading cat owners to keep their animals inside or contained in the backyard.

Domestic cats are savaging the North American songbird population, with some U.S. estimates suggesting cats kill 1 billion birds a year. Too many cat lovers mistakenly believe their animals are innocent bystanders in the slaughter, said Luther.

There's no evidence other birds or small mammals associate bells with predators and many cats can learn to move silently in spite of a bell on their collars, she said.

But even cat owners that don't care about birds and small mammals should be thinking about the safety of their pets, said Luther.

"It is the responsibility of pet owners to make sure their animals and others are safe," she said. "It's a lose-lose situation if cats go outdoors." Studies show that outdoor cats' life expectancy is less than five years, compared with 15 to 17 years for indoor cats.

The Toronto Wildlife Centre at Downsview Park is leading the campaign, which is focused online at keepanimalssafe.ca. Staff and volunteers have also been circulating information in the Beach, where coyote concerns have some cat and small-dog owners worried.

Luther advises cat owners to buy or build a cat enclosure for their

backyards, train their cat to a harness and leash or simply keep the pet indoors.

The education campaign is being funded by a \$70,000 grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

A website, www.keepanimalssafe.ca, has been designed to stamp out some of the myths regarding cats, says Nathalie Karvonen, director and founder of the wildlife centre.

Here's what she and Luther had to say about the age-old tension between cats and birds:

Q: Why did the Toronto Wildlife Centre decide to take on this particular project?

A: The issue of cats and birds comes up on the centre's hotline all the time, usually many times a day during the spring and summer when many birds are on the ground. Some birds spend five to 10 days on the ground before they can fly.

Q: How many birds and animals does the average cat kill?

A: Some studies show that cats kill about 100 animals a year.

"If we were able to convince 50 people to keep their cats inside and each of those animals was killing 100 animals a year, that's 5,000 animals. That's how many we treat in a year," Luther said.

Q: Why do domestic cats hunt and do they usually eat what they kill?

A: "All sorts of studies show it doesn't matter how well fed a cat is. It will still do just as much hunting as a cat that's looking for food," said Luther. "The urge to hunt and the urge to eat are controlled by different parts of the brain in cats. The species of cat that we have as our pet cats we've been domesticating now for over 4,000 years, so they're really dependent on people. And they've still got this hunting instinct, a sort of behavioural relic. But it's not really necessary for their survival."