

How the “No Kill” Movement Betrays Its Name

By keeping cats outdoors, trap-neuter-release policies have troubling consequences for city residents, local wildlife—and even the cats themselves.

By Jonathan Franzen

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A long-serving animal-control officer described a system intensely pressured to keep animals moving through it. “No Kill sounds great,” the officer said. “But it’s a myth.”

Illustration by Antoine Maillard

This past June, at the height of kitten season in Los Angeles, Gail Raff got a call for help from the neighborhood of Valley Glen, where a young woman had trapped a cat that needed fixing. Although the City of Los Angeles subsidizes the sterilization of unowned cats, appointments at clinics are hard to come by, and Raff was known in the animal-rescue world as a trapper who secures as many appointments as she can. Arriving in Valley Glen, she learned that the young woman, alarmed by the number of cats in her neighborhood, had been doing her best to feed them. Now they were having babies all over the place, and she wanted to do the socially responsible thing. She gave Raff the address of a "problem" house, not far from hers, where the cats were concentrated. Raff promised to come back and start trapping as soon as she got more appointments.

A month later, on a warm evening in the San Fernando Valley, I joined Raff on a mission to the problem house. With us was Orly Kroh, a good friend of Raff's for more than forty years, who is also a trapper. Both women are outgoing and glowingly complected, in the Southern California way, and both were wearing black. In gathering dusk, Raff took two cage traps from the back of her Mazda CX-7, covered their floors with newsprint, which protects a desperate cat from injuring its claws, and baited them with chunks of sardine.

Valley Glen is a neighborhood of single-family houses and tree-lined streets, notable for its large immigrant population. The problem house, which stood at the corner of a block with a cheerful plenitude of parked cars, had a lonely and embattled look. Every shade and curtain was drawn, nothing stirring inside. Raff assured me that, despite appearances, the owners were home. The first time she'd trapped here, three weeks earlier, a frail old couple had emerged from the house speaking Farsi and summoned a bilingual friend, who conveyed to Raff their enthusiastic approval of her trapping. The couple had been feeding the cats, thereby drawing further cats to their yard, and they didn't know anything about getting them fixed.

Leaving one trap by the curb, Raff carried the other one up the house's driveway and placed it near a dirty, half-empty swimming pool. She was seeing things I couldn't see—cats on the back wall of the yard, cats in transit from the house of the socially responsible young woman. Then I saw a cat myself, spectral in the dusk. It was entering the trap.

"I think I may have one," Raff called to Kroh.

The cat made a deft U-turn, scampered out of the trap, and vanished. We joined Kroh in the street, where she was watching another cat. Its wariness visibly warring with the lure of sardine, it crept into the second trap. When the door fell shut behind it, Raff hastened over to check its ears. Every street cat that's taken to a clinic has the tip of one ear clipped off, to mark it as fixed.

"No ear tip," Raff said.

The cat was silent in the cage, sporadically thrashing.

"Put your finger in there, Gail," Kroh said. "See how friendly she is."

In contrast with truly feral cats, which shun close human contact, cats that have run away or have been abandoned after losing their fear of people are known as friendlies. This particular cat was not a friendly. Raff draped a beach towel over the cage, and Kroh secured the door with zip ties.

Behind the house, more cats had arrived. One of them nosed around the trap and tentatively entered it. After a moment of suspense, the door fell shut, and Raff relaxed. "Usually it's not this easy," she said.

She had a third trap in her Mazda, and she wanted to use all three of the appointments she'd made for the following morning. Most of her cats go to a nonprofit clinic near the Burbank airport, FixNation, which performs more than forty per cent of city-sponsored surgeries. Raff used to get Saturday appointments every week, but the demands on FixNation are so great that she can now get them only once or twice a month.

Behind the house, while Raff set the trap, Kroh heard something inaudible to me: the cries of newborn kittens. She groped around in a bank of dense bushes and then, finding nothing, played the sound of a mother cat on her phone. She and Raff were reminding me of birders, who see and hear things that unpracticed people don't, and who sometimes resort to using playback. As a birder, I was interested in cats because they kill staggering numbers of birds in the United States. But I also had sympathy for

the animals we were trapping. The cats were skittish and hungry, endearing. It wasn't their fault that they were on the street.

Kroh had extended her search to the far side of the problem house. "I found a baby," she reported, "and I found the feral mom, she's in the bushes. I think she just rejected this one."

From the sidewalk, we watched a tiny black kitten teeter on the edge of a window well. Before it could fall in, Kroh scooped it up and placed a call to a group that she and Raff trusted, Kitten Rescue. All around us, feline shapes were flitting along fences and pausing in the street. "There's like a hundred cats here," Kroh said, cradling the kitten. "There's two cats right there, spraying the house, spraying away."

No one knows how many cats live outdoors in Los Angeles. The city's Animal Services Web site offers a mysteriously precise estimate of nine hundred and sixty thousand; other sources put the number as low as three hundred and fifty thousand and as high as three million. "It's getting worse and worse," Raff had told me. "There used to be a kitten season, and now it's kitten season 24/7." Cats are impressive reproducers—females can become pregnant at the age of four months and can have more than one litter in a year—and a warming climate seems to have increased their fertility. In addition to the cats dumped on the street by renters whose new landlords forbid pets, and by the children of deceased cat owners, large numbers are said to have been abandoned by people who acquired them during the pandemic or whose budgets are now pinched by inflation. Los Angeles is also a city of immigrants, many of whom come from cultures in which cats are a casual outdoor presence, belonging to no one, and sterilization isn't widely practiced.

While we waited for Kitten Rescue, two women with similar short haircuts approached us suspiciously. Learning that we were there for cats, they immediately warmed. "That's amazing that you're doing that," one of them said. "There are so many cats that need homes." When Raff explained that, rather than finding homes, she'd be returning the cats after they'd been fixed, the women declared that this, too, was amazing.

To be finished for the night, Raff needed to catch one more cat, but the sardines were now eliciting little curiosity. The rejected kitten had gone still in the towel in which Kroh had wrapped it. "Are you alive?" she asked it.

"This is why we do this," Raff said to me. "Because the babies have babies."

Unexpectedly, the front door of the problem house opened, and a small old man leaned out. "How many?" he said.

"Two," Raff called.

"How many."

"Two! Two!" we all said.

The man spoke over his shoulder, presumably in Farsi, and turned back to us. "Thank you very much. Thank you."

After the door had closed, Raff remarked, "I think he thinks I'm not returning them. I don't ask questions—I just get them fixed."

In municipalities throughout the United States, a policy of trap-neuter-return (T.N.R.) has become the preferred approach to the problem of unowned cats. The hope is that, if enough cats are fixed before they can reproduce, the population will gradually dwindle. But few, if any, municipalities have the resources to engage in T.N.R. themselves. Instead, they may revise laws forbidding the abandonment of animals ("return" could be considered a form of abandonment) and leave the hands-on work to cat-welfare groups, and to freelance volunteers like Raff and Kroh.

To freelance like this means staying out late to trap, keeping the captured cats overnight, delivering them to a clinic in the morning, picking them up in the afternoon, housing them for a second night, and then returning them to where they were trapped. Raff, who works in member services for an H.M.O., and Kroh, who had a long career in management with Panasonic, devote much of their free time to the endeavor. Even at clinics that accept city money for sterilizations, volunteers are obliged to pay for the antibiotics the animals might need, and most clinics charge them for vaccines as well. Earlier, Raff had told me that she has three companion cats, her "roommates," which live indoors with her. "We're not crazy cat people," she said. "I just want the overpopulation to stop. Cats don't deserve to be outside. They're getting killed—Only

and I drive around and look in the gutters. I don't want to put them back on the street, but there is no other option."

The kitten rescuer, Christine Hernandez, arrived in a four-door sedan and apologized for not coming sooner. She took the kitten from Kroh and kissed its head, whose shape recalled E.T. She agreed that the cat situation was dire, and she laughed about the feral cats in her own yard, which, she said, wanted only "human level" food; they wouldn't touch Whiskas. After snapping some pictures, soon to be posted on Instagram, she departed in a chorus of thanks.

There ensued a long vigil. The two occupied traps, draped with towels, were silent. All across the city, more kittens were being born. Raff's days begin before six in the morning, but she hates to quit before she's filled her quota. "It's luck, not science," she said. "Some places, we have to go three times—the cats are too smart. They'll sit outside the trap and just look at it."

Close by us, a cat in heat let out a yowl. Another sat for a long while by the trap, just looking at it. Toward eleven o'clock, a curtain stirred in the problem house. We were still being observed.

"Let's give it five more minutes," Kroh said.

"You guys can go," Raff said. "I'll sit in my car and watch."

"She'll get that third one," Kroh assured me.

"It's very addicting," Raff allowed.

"Trapping is actually really fun," Kroh said. "When I come home, my husband's always, like, 'How many did you get?'"

When I come home from birding, my partner asks me much the same question. With a feeling of defeat, I got in my car and drove back to my hotel. There I found that Raff had texted me a photo, time-stamped 11:35 p.m., of a short-haired cat in her last trap. "Ear tipped!!" she'd written, in frustration. "I'm done."

Both cat-specific advocacy groups, such as Alley Cat Allies, and national animal-welfare heavyweights, such as Best Friends Animal Society, maintain that trap-neuter-return is the only approach that's been proved to be effective in addressing the problem of outdoor cats. Whether this is true depends on the effect you're looking for. If the aim is to keep feral cats out of city shelters, then the "return" part of T.N.R. is, by definition, effective. If the aim is to quiet public complaints about yowling and spraying, the "neuter" part can be locally effective. If the aim is to protect more cats against certain diseases, the "trap" part can be coupled with mandatory vaccination. But the City of Los Angeles, like most places that adopt T.N.R., promises more than that. A stated objective of its Citywide Cat Program is to reduce the number of street cats, through T.N.R., while leaving them in their "natural outdoor home."

When I spoke to the general manager of Los Angeles Animal Services, Staycee Dains, at one of the city's six shelter facilities, she was frank in her assessment of this objective. "There's a lot of evidence that T.N.R. is not effective at reducing the cat population over all," Dains said. She added that T.N.R. is effective in preventing individual cats from breeding. "It's better than nothing."

When T.N.R. is done well, as Gail Raff and Orly Kroh do it—getting to know a particular cat colony, revisiting it until every adult cat has been trapped and fixed, and continuing to monitor it for new arrivals—individual cats will benefit, and the colony population may stabilize. At the most local of levels, Raff and Kroh are making a difference that's meaningful to them. At a larger scale, however, the math doesn't work. Because cats multiply so quickly, at least seventy per cent of a population needs to be sterilized before the numbers will plateau. Even if Los Angeles could sponsor hundreds of thousands of surgeries in a short span of time, it would be impossible to quickly trap three-quarters of a population so vast and fluid and furtive. As long as the streets are considered cats' natural outdoor home, there will also be further abandonment of house cats by people unwilling or unable to take responsibility for them.

The handful of studies reporting success with T.N.R. have been seriously flawed in one or more ways. The methodology for keeping track of cats was porous, or the cats were confined to a strictly patrolled location, such as a university campus, or the population reduction was achieved by removing lots of cats for adoption. One of the best-known demonstrations of T.N.R., at the Ocean Reef Club, in Key Largo, Florida, has been running since 1995. The project sharply reduced the number of cats on the property,

but, despite being in a gated community, and despite continuous neutering and adoption, a sizable breeding population stubbornly persists.

The embrace of a strategy with no firm basis in science, in city after city, has coincided with the rise of a movement known as No Kill. Fifty years ago, American animal-control facilities euthanized perhaps a million cats and dogs a month for population management. By the early two-thousands, that number had fallen dramatically, owing largely to public awareness of the importance of having one's pet fixed. The No Kill movement, which came to be led by Best Friends Animal Society, sought to bring the number down to zero. (No Kill doesn't mean no euthanasia; to allow for untreatably sick or aggressive animals, Best Friends deems a shelter to be No Kill if it releases, alive, at least ninety per cent of the animals it takes in.) Having worked to reform shelters in Utah, its home state, Best Friends set its sights on Los Angeles, where a persistently high kill rate had made city officials the target of protests and property crimes. Best Friends launched a vigorous advertising campaign and organized a coalition of animal-rescue groups to work with L.A. Animal Services, which was perennially under-resourced. By increasing its private partnerships, Animal Services could off-load more rescue and adoption work, thereby raising its live-release rate and saving money.

By the time Best Friends began these efforts, in 2010, Animal Services was developing a new program for feral cats: rather than accepting them at shelters, the city would promote T.N.R. Under state law, the policy would require environmental review, and the city had promised to comply. When it failed to do so, it was sued by the Urban Wildlands Group, whose science director, Travis Longcore, an urban ecologist, was deeply skeptical of T.N.R. (One of the co-plaintiffs was the American Bird Conservancy, with which I have a long association.) The plaintiffs argued that the new policy, by allowing more cats to remain on the street, without stemming population growth, would lead to further predatory pressure on local wildlife.

Longcore also feared that the policy would leave city residents with no defense against nuisance animals. Over the years, as feral cats had become ubiquitous in much of L.A., the city had received countless applications for permits to trap them and remove them. Some of the applicants reported grievously sick or injured cats:

A tabby with a huge tumor-like growth on its side. 2 sway-backed, deformed looking cats.

Feral cats in area have some type of skin disease causing lesions. . . . Also one of the feral kittens is in desperate need of medical attention. Approx 2" of colon is protruding from anus.

Many more of the applicants were literally beleaguered:

A rogue feral cat is wreaking havoc & hurting our cats. One of our cats was hurt so badly last week, she had to be euthanized.

They find ways to get into our crawl space & urinate everywhere, which affects our breathing.

The cats also kill the birds in my yard and leave the partially eaten bird bodies laying around.

Feral cats (between 7 & 10) have torn our patio furniture cushions (just spent \$500 to order replacements). . . . A feral cat was observed vomiting on our lawn. I have small grandchildren that play in the yard and consider the situation a health hazard.

They fight and cry outside our window at night and have been killing squirrels to eat. Recently I found a squirrel with its limbs torn off and guts hanging out in my back yard. The cats are also using my flower beds as a litter box.

A city resident who trapped a cat was obliged to surrender it to Animal Services, which, in the past, if the cat wasn't a friendly, had had little choice but to euthanize it. The city's new cat policy was specifically developed to change this. Its key objective was to reduce the city's kill numbers.

In their lawsuit, the plaintiffs presented evidence that Animal Services, without performing the requisite environmental review, had been promoting T.N.R. and had made it increasingly difficult to obtain nuisance-trapping permits. In 2010, the relevant judge issued a permanent injunction, ordering the city to revert to its earlier policy. The injunction earned Longcore the enduring enmity of local cat advocates. (Gail Raff is still angry at him: "Why would a person who cares about wildlife not want me to do T.N.R.?") Longcore, when I met him on the campus of U.C.L.A., where he is a

professor, told me that the injunction never prohibited volunteer T.N.R. efforts, and that he didn't care if the city wanted to "waste" money to support them. His objection had been to a policy with no alternatives. "People couldn't believe that their rights had been hollowed out by zealots," he said. "The city's policy would result in a preschool having no recourse if children were playing in a place full of fleas and cat feces. That's what the city wanted, and the lawsuit was about proving it was what they wanted."

To comply with the injunction, the city eventually commissioned a formal environmental-impact report. The draft report, released in 2019, included a mathematical model of T.N.R.'s long-term effect on the city's unowned-cat population. It predicted that, if the city achieved a goal of twenty thousand additional sterilizations each year, the population would decline by thirteen per cent in thirty years. Given the many imponderables in a thirty-year time horizon, it's hard to place full faith in the model's predictions. For the purposes of environmental review, however, all that mattered was that the model not predict a population increase. In December, 2020, the city council approved a cat program much like the one that had been proposed more than a decade earlier. The most significant difference was that it explicitly preserved the right to remove nuisance cats.

A few months after the council vote, Best Friends and L.A. Animal Services announced that its shelters had attained No Kill status in 2020, with a live-release rate of just over ninety per cent. Best Friends, which is campaigning to achieve No Kill at every shelter in the country by 2025, declared a major victory in Los Angeles and shifted its focus to other cities. But the declaration was premature. The city's live-release rate has since fallen to about eighty-five per cent. Its cat program, an outgrowth of No Kill, is also struggling. Although L.A. Animal Services maintains that the program's goals will be achieved in the near future, its published statistics indicate that only about ten thousand Citywide Cat Program vouchers will be redeemed this year—well short of the twenty thousand surgeries that the environmental review assumed. The city lists twenty clinics that accept the vouchers, but when I called them I learned that eight of them did not accept the vouchers, did not have appointments available, or did not respond to multiple messages. Even if T.N.R. were effective in reducing populations, it isn't clear that the Citywide Cat Program can hit its target number.

Gail Raff blames Animal Services and the city's lawyers, for not resolving the legal conflict sooner, and also Best Friends, for chasing donors and headlines while failing to

fund T.N.R. "They're just dollar signs," she said. "They created this mess. How do you get to No Kill without spay and neuter?"

Raff isn't alone in her disenchantment with No Kill. To maintain a low kill rate, shelters in many cities have resorted to warehousing animals under inhumane conditions, and have deflected unadoptable animals to open-admission shelters and let them do the dirty work of killing, the stigma of which can lead to harassment and low worker retention. Increasingly, city shelters simply refuse to accept certain animals, referring citizens instead to private groups. (This is the situation in Los Angeles, where rescue and fostering groups report being overwhelmed with cats and kittens.) A long-serving animal-control officer, who asked not to be identified, described to me a system intensely pressured by No Kill to keep animals moving through it—dangerous dogs and frightened feral cats being placed with unsuspecting adopters, abusive or psychologically disturbed people being given animals without even a basic background check, because there aren't enough good homes for all the animals. "No Kill sounds great," the officer said. "But it's a myth."

In recent years, to soften the image of street cats, their advocates have popularized the term "community cats." (The word "feral," besides having a horror-movie ring to it, excludes the friendlies that are often found in cat colonies.) The new term could be taken to imply that outdoor cats are cherished members of human communities. Since, however, the cats are cherished mainly by the people who feed them, the term may be better understood as a message to communities: Love them or hate them, these cats are here to stay. Staycee Dains, who developed a community-cat program in San Jose before becoming the head of L.A. Animal Services, suggested to me that citizens simply need to accept the presence of outdoor cats. "If cats are healthy and safe in a neighborhood," she said, "why should they be denied this just because a person doesn't like cats?"

How healthy and safe the cats are is a matter of dispute. The position of Best Friends—that "community cats thrive outdoors"—echoes that of many cat-specific advocacy groups. But the groups' own fund-raising appeals, such as this one from Alley Cat Allies, paint a different picture:

Maeve had no teeth and couldn't eat properly. She was weak, starving, and suffering from a respiratory condition. Maeve was also feral—completely unsocialized—and very

afraid. But with support from people like you, we were able to trap her and give her the second chance she so urgently needed.

Although it's generally agreed that outdoor-kitten mortality is high, it's difficult to find a broad quantitative study of adult longevity. Well-fed cats in a mild climate undoubtedly fare better, especially if they've been fixed and have received some vaccinations, but they typically have a higher risk of communicable diseases, such as mange and feline immunodeficiency virus, than indoor cats. Large numbers of free-roaming cats are also killed or maimed by vehicles, by predators, by poisoning, and, presumably, by exposure to harsh weather. The American Veterinary Medical Association advises that their life expectancy is "radically reduced" by living outdoors.

The risks to humans are also consequential. Flea-borne typhus has been steeply on the rise in Los Angeles, and cat fleas were a suspected vector in one of several typhus deaths reported in the city in 2022. A more widespread threat is toxoplasmosis, which is caused by a parasite that cannot reproduce without cats, is transmitted through their feces, and may result in miscarriages and birth defects when pregnant women are exposed to it. (In a marvel of parasite evolution, rodents infected with toxoplasmosis can lose their fear of predators, not least cats, apparently owing to changes in their brain chemistry. Some studies have shown an association between the parasite and mental illnesses in humans, including schizophrenia.) Rabies is relatively rare in cats, but more cats than dogs are infected with it, and they represent a significant source of human exposure. And then there are the coyotes.

In July, in response to citizens' complaints about the menace to their pets, the Pasadena city council invited the public to a discussion of lethal control of coyotes. Like its neighbor Los Angeles, Pasadena has many of them. Although coyotes have been amply demonstrated to be ineradicable, one councilman, Steve Madison, spoke passionately about the need to protect the city's cats and dogs from their attacks. "These pets enrich our lives," he said. "They're like family members." The rest of the council, along with most of the public commenters, was squarely against lethal control. One commenter held up a picture of overflowing Pasadena trash cans and said, "We're basically inviting the coyotes for dinner." Another, Lisa Lange, observed that outdoor-cat feeding stations are notorious attractors of coyotes, which come to eat the cat food, stay to eat the cats, and thereby become dangerously habituated to contact with humans. (A forthcoming study in *Human-Wildlife Interactions* reports finding cats in

more than a third of coyote stomachs with identifiable contents.) The refrain of the discussion was that, if residents didn't want coyotes harming family members, they should keep their toddlers close, their dogs on a short leash, and their cats indoors. After listening to more than thirty comments, the council voted unanimously against lethal control.

Lisa Lange is a senior vice-president of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Last year, when I recorded a short video for PETA, urging people to keep their cats indoors, I'd been surprised to learn that the group opposes both No Kill policies and trap-neuter-return. "We're opposed to outdoor cats, period," Lange told me, at her home in Pasadena. "T.N.R. isn't 'better than nothing'—it's worse than nothing. It doesn't reduce the number of homeless cats, but it does normalize the idea that cats should be outdoors, and it turns a blind eye to their suffering. We see it every day in the diseased faces and broken bodies of feral cats. There is a fate worse than death."

To be outdoors, watching birds, is to be at home with death. Every spring, outside my back door, in Northern California, I count twelve or fourteen little fluff balls dashing after their quail parents; by midsummer, only half a dozen adolescent chicks remain, and by September, when the quail retreat into the underbrush, there are only two or three. In the United States alone, the annual death toll of birds is probably upward of fifteen billion. Their base population is on the order of seven billion, but these seven billion birds breed prolifically, in many cases raising more than one brood in a season. A conservative guess would be that, on average, every summer, each mature bird brings two young birds into the world. Since the population returns to its base level by the start of the next breeding season, this would suggest that, in the course of a year, at least two-thirds of all American birds do not survive.

In the past fifty years, their base population has fallen by thirty per cent, from an estimated ten billion in 1970. Habitat loss and degradation account for much of the decline, but, because the remaining habitat could still support a larger population, an increase in modern threats is also implicated. The greatest of these threats are collisions with obstacles, especially windows; powerful classes of pesticide, such as neonicotinoids; and a non-native predatory species, cats.

A paper published in 2013 in *Nature Communications*, an offshoot of the journal *Nature*, estimated that cats kill between a billion and four billion birds annually in the Lower

Forty-eight states, along with far greater numbers of small native mammals. The paper's authors based their modelling on a synthesis of numerous existing studies, plus straightforward math: How many American cats live largely or entirely outdoors? (More than a hundred million.) What proportion of them kill birds? (More than half.) And how many birds does a bird-killing cat kill in one year? (Perhaps three dozen.) Each of these multipliers had a range of uncertainty, so the model needed to be run repeatedly. The number it generated most often was 2.4 billion birds a year.

Outdoor-cat advocates were quick to dismiss the paper as "junk science." Their intellectual authority, Peter J. Wolf, on his cat-science blog, *Vox Felina*, seized on the reported base population of birds, ignored its huge expansion in summer, and asked how anyone could imagine that cats kill more than half of all American birds every year. Other criticisms of the paper partook of similarly misleading arguments. But I, too, at first, being skeptical of models, had trouble believing that the numbers could be so vast. Only after I looked at the underlying literature did I feel more comfortable with them. For example, one study, in Oklahoma, found birds in the stomachs of two of twenty-two cats roaming freely in a residential area. From this, since cats generally digest food in twenty-four hours or less, it's reasonable to infer that, on average, a cat eats a bird every eleven days, which comes to thirty-three birds per year, per cat. Similar studies have reported similar figures. Even if you mentally adjust the number downward to allow for the outdoor cats in urban areas with little birdlife, you have to adjust it upward to allow for the many birds that are killed or fatally wounded without being eaten (few small animals survive infections from cat bites) and the young birds that starve when a parent is killed.

The most dismal number in the *Nature Communications* paper was its median estimate for the birds killed annually by cats with owners: six hundred and eighty-four million. Unlike the death toll from unowned cats, this number could be zero, because tame cats can be kept indoors. In my experience, people who let them outside have various rationales regarding wildlife. They say that their cat doesn't kill birds, or that it must not happen often, since their cat rarely brings them a dead bird, or that a well-fed cat loses its drive to hunt, or that their cat would suffer indoors for want of stimulation, or that, although the toll on wildlife is regrettable, their cat also kills rats. Some cats do, in fact, show little interest in birds, but the other rationales are more wishful than evidence-based. Anyone can see that cats that are well fed still pounce on small moving objects, and that cats can lead healthy and seemingly contented lives indoors. Research has

shown that cats typically bring home only a fraction of their kills, and that, while they do often kill mice, they are much more reluctant to attack a full-size rat (for that, you need a terrier). I also have friends who, if I suggest that they might not want to let their cats outside, respond not with rationales but with uneasiness. My guess is that, just as I will sometimes eat a tuna sandwich, despite knowing what I know about tuna fisheries, my friends are doing a small thing that they know isn't right but is convenient. In a darker way, I wonder if one of the attractions of having cats as pets is precisely that, however affectionate they may be, they have a savage side as well, sharp of tooth and keen of claw.

These teeth and claws account for a significant percentage of bird mortality in the United States. Although cat defenders dispute the scale of the numbers, few of them go so far as to deny that cats kill lots of birds. Instead, they may assert that the killing, rather than adding to over-all mortality, merely "compensates" for premature deaths by natural causes. They point to studies that have shown that birds killed by cats are less fit, on average, than birds killed in other ways, such as collisions with buildings. (Other studies indicate that the presence of cats causes birds to waste energy in defense and alarm, and to neglect their young; it could be that birds killed by cats are less fit because they were already stressed from living near them.) Undoubtedly, in many instances, cats are only doing the deadly work that nature would have done anyway, at worst depriving native predators of meals they might have had. But it's hard to see how a non-native predator, likely responsible for a billion-plus bird deaths a year, and for a much larger number of mammal deaths, has had no net negative effect on American ecosystems.

But maybe the predator isn't actually non-native? Alley Cat Allies, on its Web site, assures its supporters that domesticated cats have lived outdoors for more than ten thousand years, "sharing the environment with birds and wildlife." Unfortunately, although this is true in some regions of the Old World, where domestic cats originated, it isn't true in the New World, where cats are an introduced species with a population vastly greater than what could be sustained in the wild, without human subsidy. Worldwide, in ecosystems where cats have been introduced, they've contributed to the extinction of at least sixty-three bird, mammal, and reptile species. Thus far, to be sure, the extinctions have occurred only on islands and in Australia, and cat advocates stress that cats are highly unlikely to cause extinctions on the North American mainland. Peter Wolf, who is employed by Best Friends, has emphasized on his blog that cats tend to

kill common bird species, rather than rare ones; since it's hardly a surprise that rare birds are killed more rarely, the point of his emphasis seems to be that additive mortality is O.K. as long as no species is threatened with extinction. A more subtle implication is that, while cats are valued as individuals (toothless, starving Maeve), birds need be treated only as populations, and, further, that these populations are evenly distributed. In places like Los Angeles, the fragments of remaining habitat are functionally islands, where species can and do disappear, and are mourned by the people who knew them. A bird-lover's attachment to a local family of quail is easily as strong as a cat-lover's feeling for the feral cats that prey on it. The difference is that nature put the quail there, while human beings put the cats there. The cats don't have a choice, but people do.

Best Friends Animal Society began, in the nineteen-eighties, as an independent animal sanctuary, situated in scenic red-rock canyon country near Zion National Park. Some of the sanctuary's founders had been associated with the Process Church of the Final Judgment, a hippie-era group that sought to integrate satanic and Christian energies, and they'd determined that kindness, specifically kindness to animals, should be their guiding principle. Although the Process Church has since disbanded and Best Friends has no religious affiliation, a Christian flavor lingers in the motto that became its trademark, Save Them All. The sanctuary today employs more than three hundred people, and it has grown to occupy six thousand acres, on which there are electric-vehicle charging stations, a pair of R.V. campgrounds, and a spacious vegan café. Of the thirty thousand people who visit in a given year, many are Best Friends members, for whom the trip can be something like a pilgrimage. Some have paid to have a pet interred in the Angel's Rest cemetery. Others have been honored, for past donations, with a plaque on a wall or a bench. But the sanctuary's chief attraction is that it's a model of animal-rescue best practices.

The sanctuary is a working care-and-adoption facility, not a place where animals roam. On a clear morning in August, I toured it with one of the founders, Francis Battista, a vigorous and prepossessing man in his seventies. Battista was quick to tell me that he, too, is a bird-watcher. As we proceeded up through juniper-piñon woodland, in his dusty S.U.V., he handed me a laminated guide to local birds and mentioned his particular love of juncos. We made a stop in Horse Haven, where horses are rehabilitated in an enormous roofed enclosure, and another in Dogtown Heights, where octagonal "lodges," designed in the manner of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, are

grouped around a state-of-the-art canine “fitness center.” One of the lodges had been specially outfitted to rehabilitate the traumatized dogs that Best Friends took in from the N.F.L. quarterback Michael Vick. “We used their stories to engage the public,” Battista said.

Every animal in the sanctuary has a name. In a unit for cats with special needs, in Cat World, I met Aurora, who was blind; Howard, who’d been treated for feline infectious peritonitis; and a small cat, Circleville, who was missing a foreleg. Passing by some cats afflicted with cerebellar hypoplasia, an incurable and crippling condition, we came to an area where visitors can interact with potential adoptees. On the floor was a flat plastic puzzle, with paw-size openings on top, from which a handsome gray cat was trying to extract treats. A young woman, sitting with a different cat, told us that the sanctuary had been on her bucket list, and that she’d come down from Washington State with an empty pet carrier. It was moving to see her there, and to learn that many of the special-needs cats find homes within a year. Then again, although the sanctuary is the country’s largest No Kill facility for companion animals, with an operating budget of twenty million dollars, it houses fewer cats than can be found living outdoors in one Los Angeles neighborhood.

For lunch, in a green glade at the foot of red-rock cliffs, Battista and I were joined by his son, Judah. When I asked them about the problem of outdoor cats, Francis cited statistics indicating that they suffer less than people may think, but he allowed that both cats and birds are at risk. Judah, who co-founded Best Friends when he was only fourteen, hewed more closely to its official line. “We would like to manage and decrease the free-roaming cat population,” he said. “We believe it can be done through a more holistic engagement with a broader community.” In the meantime, he suggested, cats are not a threat to native ecosystems: “They’re not out here in the wild. They’re in urbanized environments with a dramatic number of negative influences for wildlife—pesticides, traffic, glass windows, you name it. They live where there are people.”

A family of quail had emerged from the shadows near our lunch table. I commented that people and cats are pretty much everywhere now, not just in city centers, and that cats and dogs seem to have been granted special status as animals, higher than that of wildlife. I asked the Battistas if an individual cat’s life has more value than the lives of the animals it kills.

"We believe that the lives of all animals have intrinsic value," Francis said. "I don't disagree with you that there is an elevation of value of domesticated dogs and cats. But I don't think we regard those quail, or the other little animals around here, any less."

"Dogs and cats are the first step outside of 'Humans are the only thing,' " Judah said. "If we can establish a value of solving problems not by killing animals, there's no reason not to extrapolate that more broadly. If we can break the pattern with our companion animals, which most people consider family, it sets the stage for doing things differently going forward."

I said that, being pessimistic about human nature, I fear that we've merely made dogs and cats into honorary humans and added them to our families, and that a family is defined by what it excludes—in this case, wildlife. The Battistas agreed that this was pessimistic of me.

When I brought up T.N.R., Judah proposed that it seems ineffective because we've never tried it at a large scale, with full funding and community engagement, and given it time to work. "There's this idea that it doesn't work, and so we're not going to fund it fully," he said. "Right now, in Los Angeles, the approach is very passive—'There are vouchers available if you're interested.' "

I struggled to imagine how T.N.R. efforts could be vastly scaled up. Francis acknowledged that there is already a shortage of veterinarians nationwide, and that more and more vets work for corporations that emphasize premium pet services, rather than low-cost spay/neuter. At Orly Kroh's request, I asked why Best Friends couldn't sponsor some mobile clinics in Los Angeles. Judah explained that its current priority is promoting adoption, not providing direct services. "L.A. is not a resource-poor environment," Francis added. "We're heavily invested in some of the worst parts of the country, like South Texas and New Mexico." In those "resource deserts," he said, the group's chief veterinarian trains vets to do high-volume spay/neuter surgeries. At the same time, Best Friends opposes laws requiring that pets be sterilized, on the ground that such laws are costly to poor people and difficult to enforce, and it did not object to a recent decision by PetSmart Charities, which has been a funder of Best Friends, to suspend its requirement that young animals be fixed before being adopted from a PetSmart store. In defense of PetSmart, Judah said that leaving spay/neuter to the adopters encourages them to become "participants."

Participation and community are recurrent Best Friends themes. Like the stories it tells in its promotional materials, accompanied by pictures of cats with fetchingly startled expressions and dogs smiling or frolicking, the story the Battistas told me about humanity was inspirational. They envision a world in which adopters actively participate in animal-loving communities, unowned-cat populations dwindle as communities participate in caring for them, and humanity as a whole evolves in a kinder direction. Critics of Best Friends are unimpressed with its stories (“It’s a lot easier to raise money on Save Them All than Spay Them All,” Lisa Lange, of *peta*, said), but neither of the Battistas struck me as venal or phony. I got the impression, instead, of true belief—militantly pure in Judah, more nuanced in Francis. Although their politics are generally liberal, and although No Kill doesn’t preclude some euthanasia, the imperative to “save them all” is reminiscent of the anti-abortion movement’s faith-based insistence on saving every unborn life, regardless of the circumstances. In its simplicity, the imperative also recalls the nostrums of progressives: “Open the borders,” “Defund the police.” The allure of simple prescriptions derives from an aversion to hard choices, and to the truth of human carelessness and cruelty. Everyone wants to tell their children a happy story: If we take a homeless cat to a shelter, it’s sure to find a loving home.

When I went out again with Gail Raff and Orly Kroh, two nights after the trapping mission, Kroh had sad news from the kitten rescuer. “Poor Christine,” she said. “The little kitty died. She gave it fluids, she did oxygen, she did everything.” She shook her head. “The kitty got to know love.”

Our destination was a charmless residential neighborhood, abutting the Hollywood Freeway, where Raff and Kroh feed street cats. Their first station, an upended plastic bin, stood by a weedy lot on which a boat had been parked for as long as they could remember. As Raff approached the bin, carrying water and dry food, a cat named Tory materialized in the twilight. “How could you not fall in love with this?” she said, admiring Tory. “You see the ear tip? She’s been here a long time.”

“We name them all,” Kroh told me. “We don’t want them to be just cats on the street.”

Several dozen adult cats live outdoors in the immediate area. Raff and Kroh not only know all of them, they know most of the human residents as well. Around a corner from the first station, we passed the house of a man who feeds four or five of the cats. He knew an acquaintance of Kroh’s spin-class teacher, and the teacher alerted Kroh to

an abandoned house where an old woman had been feeding cats. Kroh and Raff came to trap and fix them, and they've been feeding them ever since. When a young couple bought the house and had a baby, Kroh and Raff relocated the cats by moving the feeding station away from it, house by house. One cat refused to leave, but the couple decided to live with that. "It's one cat, not sixteen," Kroh said.

The other cats now feed near an overgrown grassland, attractive to birds and coyotes, that is bordered by the freeway and by a fence with a large hole in it. In failing light, Raff emptied cans of wet cat food onto a broken slab of concrete. She also dispenses kibble, about sixteen pounds of it a week, at various locations, but "these guys," she said, "get treated right." I asked her how much she and Kroh spend on cat food. She couldn't even guess, but Kroh said she knew, because her husband brings it up. "It's a few thousand a year."

Cats were emerging from bushes, from beneath a yellow Hummer in the nearest driveway, and from lawns farther up the street. Among them were Crystal, Batman, Brave, and Tofu. None of them seemed to be in a hurry or to be interested in the others. All of them were ear-tipped, and many looked reasonably healthy, but one of them had peritonitis and was lacking an eye. Raff and Kroh spoke of others that had been poisoned or had simply gone missing, as cats will do when coyotes are present. To keep out the coyotes, a local homeowner repaired the fence along the grassland, but homeless people have since reopened the hole in it, and sometimes they appropriate a plastic bin from the feeding station. A woman once explained to Kroh that she needed a bin to put her clothes in.

For an unhoused person, feeding unhoused cats can be a way to feel good about giving. Even among the housed, feeders tend to live on the margins. Among the classic cat-feeding types in the Valley, Raff and Kroh mentioned an elderly Hispanic man and a solitary woman with kibble in her shopping cart. Staycee Dains, of L.A. Animal Services, said, "It's hard to stop feeding. You feed your family, you feed what you love—the person becomes almost biochemically bonded. When you tell them to stop feeding the cats, it's like you're asking them to kill them." Animal Services does not discourage feeding, but it recommends that food be put out for no longer than thirty minutes, and that any leftovers be collected, so as not to attract native predators. This recommendation appears to be universally disregarded. Raff and Kroh have their own definition of responsible feeding, which is to make sure that the cats they feed are

fixed. "There are lots of feeder-breeders," Kroh told me once. "They don't want them fixed, because they love the kitties."

Such feeders are effectively outdoor-cat hoarders, akin to the people who hoard cats in their dwellings. Raff and Kroh's third feeding station was by the house of a woman who, while seemingly prosperous, allows numberless cats to come and go through her windows. As Raff walked along the side of the house, attracting four of them, the front door opened a few inches and closed again.

"We don't know what's in her house," Raff said.

"One of the neighbors checks on her," Kroh said. "She'd tell us if there were kittens."

"You'd think she might ever say thank you."

"I left her a bottle of wine at Christmas to thank her for letting us feed her cats."

At this station, too, Raff put out wet food. "These cats are so inbred," she remarked. "This black-and-white one only has one eye."

Wet or dry, cat food consists almost entirely of animal parts. Watching the inbred cats eat their meat, in the loneliness emanating from the house, I glimpsed a dystopian future in which, to quote Judah Battista, "humans are the only thing." Los Angeles has abundant habitat for resident and migratory birds, and for all manner of mammals and reptiles; the city should be full of wildlife. Instead, more and more, it belongs to one domesticated species, sustained by meat from elsewhere.

If everyone in the country stopped letting their cats run free outdoors, the predatory impact on American ecosystems would be dramatically reduced. To go further, and humanely reduce the unowned-cat population, would be a slower process. It might include T.N.R., provided that the cats are registered, microchipped for identification, and released to safe and confined locations. Since T.N.R. will never be enough, there would also need to be ongoing efforts to remove cats from the environment, partly through adoption, partly through placement in sanctuaries, and partly through euthanasia. This, in turn, would mean reassessing No Kill. The preoccupation with shelter kills has resulted in more cats outside, and it has taken focus off the deeper

problem, which is reproduction. Saving a nest of unweaned kittens is a heartwarming act, but there's no shortage of adoptable kittens, and neonatal care can be very expensive. In theory, saving kittens shouldn't preclude increasing support of spay/neuter and educating communities about its importance. In practice, even a city like Los Angeles is a resource desert. When I asked Annette Ramirez, an assistant general manager of L.A. Animal Services, approximately how much of its budget is earmarked for education, she had a precise answer. "It's zero," she said.

A neighborhood overrun with cats is a spectacle of contradictions. Our sympathy for animals has created a situation that's terrible for animals. Cats are considered creatures of the natural world but also members of the family. (If a child had a penchant for disembowelling wildlife, would his parents shrug and say it's just his nature?) Human progress is the argument for reforming the shelters, while long tradition is the argument for leaving cats outdoors. The people who feed feral cats are owners who don't own them, and No Kill doesn't mean no killing. At the root of the contradictions are difficult choices that haven't been made. Both cats and nature pay the price. ♦

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