



BEHAVIOR  
SERIES

# Discouraging Free-Roaming Cats

**M**ANY PEOPLE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH free-roaming cats who hunt wild birds as they feed or nest in their yards, who use their garden as a litter box, or who upset their pets by invading their territory. You certainly have the right to enjoy your yard and the birds who visit it. However, it's your responsibility to solve your free-roaming cat problem humanely.

## Why Are They Picking on Me?

Although a destructive neighborhood cat can be frustrating, don't take it personally. The cat isn't acting out of spite or picking on you for some unknown reason. He's behaving naturally. The problem, of course, is that he's doing so in places you find inappropriate. The solution lies in making those places undesirable so the cat will behave naturally somewhere else.

Most cats won't eat birds, but they do enjoy the "thrill of the hunt." Cats have preyed upon birds for thousands of years, and there's no foolproof way to discourage this natural instinct.

Another natural feline instinct is to defecate in areas where the cat can cover his scent by burying the waste. Therefore, a cat who spends most of his time outdoors appreciates the soft, pre-dug dirt of your garden—or your child's sandbox—as a handy toilet.

When a cat naps on the hood of your car or in the center of your flowerbed, he's simply sunning himself in a nice, warm spot and doesn't realize the damage he's doing. He won't connect your negative reaction with the place where he naps, and although he may learn to avoid you, he won't avoid the place or stop the activity.

A free-roaming cat may approach your window or patio door and challenge your cat or dog through the glass with body language or vocal insults. The best way to protect your pet from this situation is to keep the outside cat away from the areas that your pet can see by using the techniques described below.

Of course, the ideal solution is for all cat owners to keep their cats safely confined. Unfortunately, not all cat owners are willing to do this, so you'll need to take steps to solve

the problem without harming the cat, the birds, other animals, or your yard and garden. Because each situation is different, you may need patience and ingenuity to find the appropriate deterrent through trial and error.

## Repellents

Repellents and devices designed to startle the cat "in the act" will work best to condition him to avoid the area. Never use poisons. Not only is poisoning animals inhumane and illegal, it's not an effective solution to the problem. Poisons will only rid you of one "pest" and won't deter any others. You'd have no way of knowing or controlling who might find and ingest the poisonous substance.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has registered more than 30 compounds for safe use in repelling domestic cats. Check with any pet supply store or garden supplier for commercial cat repellents. Most commercial repellents are based on the simple mothball compound. Mothballs or moth crystals, encased in cheesecloth bags to help protect the soil, work well to keep cats from digging in garden areas or potted plants.

Keep in mind that the effectiveness of any repellent will deteriorate with moisture and time. Whether you use mothballs or a commercial mixture, you'll need to reapply the solution after each rain, heavy dew, or watering. Check with your garden supplier to be certain that the solution you choose won't harm plants growing in that area, especially if you use fertilizers or other soil additives.

For areas where cats want to dig, ornamental pebbles may be an effective deterrent. Avoid pebbles that are very round or smooth, as they make a great cat bed. Rocks or pebbles should be placed in a way that makes it difficult for them

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