



A Study Guide

ten
million

WILDCATS

LIBBY TUDBALL AND MERRIN EVERGREEN

A FERAL CAT DISPLAYS THE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR FOR WHICH THEY ARE RENOWNED

INTRODUCTION

Wildcats have been given some very bad press in the last few years. Feral cats, rather than looking like cute playful domestic moggies, are portrayed as nasty, destructive sabre tooth tigers. The film, *Ten Million Wildcats*, challenges some of the current ideas about feral cats. It not only provides details of some of the negative exploits of feral cats within the Australian ecosystem, but also remarks on some of their valuable contributions. The film accounts for the survival of these cats in our many diverse and sometimes harsh environments. Details of current biological research and genetic studies are outlined, with these studies providing information about the origin and adaptive features of feral cats in Australia. Suggestions for methods to control the increasing cat population are also considered and discussed. This film provides a fresh, informative and challenging view on the exploits of feral cats and their position in our Australian environment.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Ten Million Wildcats will have interest and relevance for teachers and students of General Science, Biology, Studies of Society and Environment, Integrated Studies, English and Geography, from upper primary to upper secondary levels.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

First, brainstorm the students' views on the following questions, then check your answers with information from the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, or other library and Internet sources.

(Source: Landcare notes – <http://www.nre.vic.gov.au/web/root/domin>)

What are feral cats? It is difficult to give a precise definition of feral cats. Generally speaking, feral cats are those cats which survive and reproduce without a close association with humans. These cats may live either in close proximity to human habitation or be completely isolated in the bush. It is important to note that feral cats are not the only environmental problem; there are also many semi-domesticated farm cats or roaming domestic cats who have a negative impact on our environment. (Visit http://www.geocities.com/meowerpower_99.geo/ to explore American definitions of feral cats.)

What do feral cats look like? Feral cats are similar in size and physical appearance to domestic cats. Male feral cats normally weigh from 3.4 to 6.4 kg, and females from 2.4 to 4.4 kg. The most common coat colour of feral cats is striped tabby, but blotched tabby and black are common. Long hair is uncommon in feral cats, and exotic or fancy breeds of cat such as Siamese or Persian are not found in feral populations. Can you suggest reasons why these cats are not found in feral populations?

What do feral cats eat? Feral cats, like domestic cats, are carnivorous. They eat introduced species such as rats, mice and rabbits, and native species such as birds (zebra finches, red cap robins), bird eggs (red-backed kingfishers), frogs, lizards and other reptiles, bilbies and hopping mice.

How do you think urban and rural feral cats find food? Urban populations get much of their food by scavenging human food scraps. Remote wildcats survive by hunting naturally occurring prey. The European wild rabbit is their major food item, but they will also eat mice, smaller native mammals, reptiles, birds or invertebrates.

Where are feral cats found in Australia? Describe their habitats. Today, feral cats exist over much of Australia and have successfully colonized most habitats. In Victoria, for instance, feral cats are distributed throughout the state, from the high rainfall areas of the eastern highlands to the semi-arid Mallee region.

ACTIVITIES AFTER WATCHING TEN MILLION WILDCATS

Exploring The Historical Background. There are no certain facts about how feral cats arrived in Australia. Aboriginal people report that cats may have been here before the arrival of Europeans, and have been hunted by Indigenous Australians for generations.

- What clues are there in the film about where, how and when cats might have arrived?
- Describe three different theories of how cats arrived in Australia.
- What does the colour of the cats suggest?
- Why do you think Aboriginal people in the desert are better at catching the cats than non-Indigenous people?
- What have genetic studies discovered about the origins of different cats?
- Why did Europeans bring cats with them to Australia and take them into rural areas?
- What factors hastened their spread through the countryside?

FERAL CATS, KITTENS AND THEIR GENES

Using information from the film, answer these questions:

- How long is a cat's pregnancy?
- How often can a cat give birth each year and how many kittens can she deliver?
- How do cats behave when they are about to give birth?



HUNTING FERAL CATS



top right: RACHEL PARTRIDGE AND PINTUBI ABORIGINAL WOMEN, MITJILI NAPANGANGKA GIBSON, SARAH NAPANGANGKA DANIELS AND CINDY NAKAMARRA GIBSON, TRACKING CATS IN THE TANAMI DESERT, NORTHERN TERRITORY

top left: FERAL CAT IN ARID AREA, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA. CATS CAN SURVIVE IN THE DESERT BECAUSE THEY CAN GO WITHOUT WATER. bottom: A DANGEROUSLY EFFICIENT PREDATOR

Find out more about the reproduction of cats on the Internet at Landcare notes: <http://www.nre.vic.gov.au/web/root/domin>.

- Explain the theory about cat colour and the origin of the cat. Does genetic testing support this theory? Explain your answer.
- State whether the following statements about results from genetic testing on feral cats are True or False:
 - 1 Indonesian and Australian cats are not at all genetically related.
 - 2 British cats colonized our continent in less than 100 years.
 - 3 Domestic and feral cats belong to different species.
 - 4 A domestic cat can never be a feral cat.
 - 5 The colour of the cat's fur is only determined by the environment.
 - 6 The colour of the cat's fur is only determined by genetics.
 - 7 Tabby or ginger desert feral cats have a better chance of survival.

SURVIVING AS A FERAL CAT

- Who are the cats' enemies in the desert?
- How does the mother cat teach the kittens to hunt?
- When the food supply runs out, what happens?
- How do the cats survive in the harsh desert climates?
- How does the reproductive cycle of cats increase their survival?
- What hunting patterns do they have?
- Do you think the diet of the cats helps their survival?
- Cats are described as being 'territorial'. What does this mean?
- Suggest some advantages of territorial behaviour.
- Describe how territorial behaviour can lead to an increase in the numbers of feral cats.

FERAL CAT FOOD

Ten Million Wildcats presents information about feral cats' diet.

- What do they mainly eat?
- Are they herbivores or carnivores, or both? Explain the difference.

Explore the diets of different animals further by finding out more about:

native herbivores
 native carnivores
 introduced herbivores
 introduced carnivores

- Construct a food web which includes feral cats.
- Are cats solely responsible for the extinction of many of our native species? Explain.

You can find out more about the negative and positive environmental impact of feral cats by visiting 'The Rights and Wrongs of Cats' www.calacademy.org/calwild/sum98/habitats.htm.

FERAL CATS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

- Make a list of evidence concerning the impact feral cats have had on native animals in Australia.

- Is the impact of feral cats all negative?
- Do you agree or disagree with this statement: 'In the last 200 years, sheep have had more of a devastating impact on the environment than cats'? Do some further library and Internet research and then either hold a class debate on this question or write an essay expressing your point of view.
- Is it true that some endangered species are further threatened by wild cats?
- How many mammal species have already been lost in Australia?

FERAL CATS ABROAD ...

- What does the film tell us about why feral cats have been less of an environmental problem in North America?
- What other reasons do you discover in the film to explain why the cat problem is different in the USA?

In the USA, there are many organizations trying to look after the welfare of feral cats and save them from being killed.

- What positive actions are members of these organizations involved in?
- Why do you think people would become involved in these activities?

CONTROL SUGGESTION	FOR	AGAINST
use poison bait (e.g. chipolata sausage)		
reintroduce extinct/endangered scavengers to compete with cats		
hunt and kill all cats in Australia		
use electric fences to keep cats out of designated areas		
use German Shepherds to scare away cats		
increase the populations of cat predators e.g. wedgetailed eagles		

- What does it mean to 'spay and neuter' the cats? Why would they suggest this as a strategy?
- Visit http://www.geocities.com/meowerpower_99.geo/ to find out what the Meowerpower Feral Cat Coalition does to protect and help feral cats.
- On that web site, look at the case study of feral cats at the Norfolk Naval shipyards in Virginia. Write a newspaper report or prepare a video news broadcast update on the story.

FERAL CATS, ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS AND THE DESERT

One real problem with feral cats is the fact that they are very difficult to catch. In *Ten Million Wildcats*, we see that it is a challenge, even for experienced female Aboriginal hunters, to catch the cats.

- Why is it sometimes necessary to catch feral cats?
- In small groups, talk about possible methods of catching feral cats.
- Visit <http://www.alleycat.org/our-work/trap-neuter-return/> to see some further suggestions for trapping feral cats.
- Aborigines have been hunting feral cats for generations. Outline a method shown in the film used to locate and catch cats in the desert.
- Describe four ways that feral cats use to conserve water.
- Explain why feral cats in different environments look different.
- Describe the research of the biologist Rachel Paltridge in the film. How did she keep track of the distribution of the feral cats?
- Find out more about Australian 'bush tucker'. Organize a class 'bush tucker smorgasbord'.

THE CONTROL OF FERAL CATS

- What positive steps are already being taken to stop the increase in the wildcat population?
- Explain what is happening with Project Eden.



- How can a chipolata sausage help to control the feral cat population?
- Why are Sandy and the Walpari people so sad about the loss of so many native wallabies?

Visit <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/factsheet-tackling-feral-cats> to find out more about the latest research on feral cats and how they can be controlled.

- Suggest practical strategies people could develop today to stop the spread of feral cats.
- For each of the suggestions on how to control feral cats, give a FOR and AGAINST comment or opinion. [see chart on previous page]

- Brainstorm factors which may:

- increase feral cat populations;
- decrease feral cat populations.

- Do some further research on the control of cats by visiting these web sites:

1 Threat Abatement Actions Research –

www.biodiversity.environment.gov.au

2 Ockham's Razor: The Feral Outrage

Techniques and Impact

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/ockhamsrazor/the-effect-of-domestic-cats-on-australian-wildlife/3555788>

3 Cats and Wildlife

<http://www.australianwildlife.org/media/27964/AWC-Wildlife-Matters-Summer-2012-2013.pdf>

4 Feral Animals: should they be culled?

<https://theconversation.com/culling-pest-animals-can-do-more-harm-than-good-40702>

5 Councils: should they be allowed to place a curfew on pet cats?

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/push-for-24hour-cat-curfew-to-protect-native-animals-20150727-giloew.html>

6 When the fox is away, the feral cats play.

www.csiro.au/news/mediarel/mr1998/mr98215.html

7 Wildlife of Tasmania Threats: Feral Cats

<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspX?base=3035>

- What have they done to attempt to protect the wallabies?

- What else can be done to stop the spread of feral cats?

THE FUTURE OF FERAL CATS

Conservationist, Dr John Walmsley, says 'Now that calici-virus is getting rid of rabbits in South Australia, feral cats will become one of the most common bush animals. But they prey on native animals'. He believes that we should consider cats as resources and harvest them for food. (Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/earth/stories/s1644.htm>)

- What do you think of his suggestions?

- In a class discussion after the film, talk about the range of likely future scenarios for feral cats.

FURTHER EXTENSION ACTIVITIES ON CATS

- Write a story titled 'A Day in the Life of a Feral Cat'.

- Construct a web page or PowerPoint presentation on feral cats.

- Write the lyrics for a feral cat song, using the music of a nursery rhyme or pop song.

- Research and prepare a poster or page on one of the native or introduced species that the film tells us feral cats eat. Collate all of the class members' posters or pages together into a magazine or book.

- Construct a Feral Cat 'Snakes and Ladders' game, with positive cat statements as ladders and negative statements as snakes. Your board design may assist the cat to get to its dinner.

- Make a Feral Cat word find or crossword, based on information in the film.

- Do a web search on feral cats and collate your information in a scrapbook.

- Prepare a newspaper article or brochure:

- FOR killing all cats in Australia
- AGAINST killing all cats in Australia.

INVESTIGATING THE MALA RECOVERY TEAM

The film shows the work of the Mala Recovery Team, who have spent twenty years trying to reintroduce rare wallabies into the wild, to ensure their continued survival. Their efforts have been continually hampered by feral cats.

(iii) Select which stance you would like to take and debate the issue: ALL CATS IN AUSTRALIA SHOULD BE KILLED!

- Brainstorm questions about feral cats and then:
 - (i) find the answers to the questions;
 - (ii) make a FERAL PERIL – CAT TRIVIAL PURSUIT game; and
 - (iii) divide into groups and play the game.
- Investigate stories or research:
 - (i) Egyptian cats in history
 - (ii) witches and their cats
 - (iii) 'cats and their nine lives'
 - (iv) the origin of some 'cat' sayings and jokes
e.g. the physical laws of cats: www.pol-us.net/lite_side.html

FERAL CAT SONGS

The following are some examples of songs written by secondary school students in fifteen minutes after viewing the film.

MEOW MEOW FERAL CATS

By Alanna Tourney and Corallie Ablondi.
To the tune of 'Baa Baa Black Sheep'.

Meow, Meow feral cats,
You don't seem too nice.
Why is it that you keep eating
All of our native mice?

Bounce, bounce little bilby,
Find a place to hide.
Feral cats find you tasty
And are spreading nationwide.

Tweet, tweet little robin,
Stay up in the sky.
'Cos of the cats on the ground
You're likely to die.

Crawl, crawl little lizard,
Cats think you look yummy.
So watch out, look around,
Or you'll end up in their tummy!

FERAL FOOD

By Kirsten Singleton, Stefanie Hartley and Daniela Mattiuzzo. To the tune of 'Smelly Cat', from the TV series *Friends*.

Feral cat, feral cat,
What are they feeding you?
Feral cat, feral cat,
We've done tests to find out.

Feral cat, feral cat,
You're quite partial to introduced mice.
Feral cat, feral cat,
But you find red coat robins are also nice.

Feral cat, feral cat,
And you're also quite partial to a liz-ard.
Feral cat, feral cat,
To keep full, your territory you do guard.

Feral cat, feral cat,
You can survive anywhere.
Feral cat, feral cat,
'Cos you've adapted coloured hair.

Feral cat, feral cat,
Pommie cats are black and white,
Feral cat, feral cat,
But you all have the same bite.

Feral cat, feral cat,
As the rabbits spread
Feral cat, feral cat
You bred, bred and bred.

Feral cat, feral cat,
How can we get rid of you?
Feral cat, feral cat,
Before our natives are gone.

Feral cat, feral cat
Poison sausages we tried to drop,
Feral cat, feral cat,
But total death you did not cop.

Feral cat, feral cat,
Frightened you with barking dog,
Feral cat, feral cat,
But the land you continued to hog.

Feral cat, feral cat
Maybe we will have to shoot,
Feral cat, feral cat,
To give feral cats the boot.

THREE FERAL CATS

By Marissa Thompson and Isabelle Brennan. To the tune of 'Three Blind Mice'.

Three cats for Christmas
Three cats for Christmas
You never loved them
You never loved them.

You forced them out on the street
one night,
They involved themselves in lots of fights,
You'll really regret this later in life,
Those three cats for Christmas.

Those three feral cats
Became six feral cats.
They moved into the desert
And all the rest of Australia.

They all arrived with the farmer's wives,
Who used them to chase off the rabbits
and mice.
We thought they would help but god
damn we were wrong,
And now it's a different song to be sung.

Lots of feral cats
In central Australia.
It's not like home,
It's dry and very hot.

Conditions are tough and it's hard
to survive
And so you've changed your coats, how
very wise.
You seem to have many more than
nine lives,
Those three cats for Christmas.

Ten Million Wildcats

Director Gary Steer

Writer/Co-Director Alice Ford

Producers Gary Steer, Tina Dalton-Hagege

Executive Producer Stefan Moore

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