

While a popular pet, the domestic cat has contributed to the extinction of 33 species worldwide....

The domestic cat is a beloved house pet, with over 77 million pet cats nationwide. Of these, about 43 million spend some time outside. Additionally, there may be 60 to 100 million homeless stray and feral cats.

Domestic cats are very effective predators on rabbits, squirrels, mice, lizards, snakes and many species of wild birds. They are responsible for the deaths of billions of birds and mammals each year in the United States alone. On islands such as the Florida Keys, these small felines can cause big problems with wildlife.

Feral and free-ranging (outdoor) cats will hunt and kill even if well fed, and that can make them a major threat to native wildlife. Unlike wild predators that switch to other prey or locations when food becomes scarce, domestic cats that are fed can afford to continue to hunt and kill prey even when prey populations decline. In some cases, particularly on islands, cats can hunt endangered wildlife to the point of extinction.

Outdoor cats have also been identified as the primary host in the transmission of toxoplasmosis to wildlife, a disease which has caused death in manatees and other mammals.



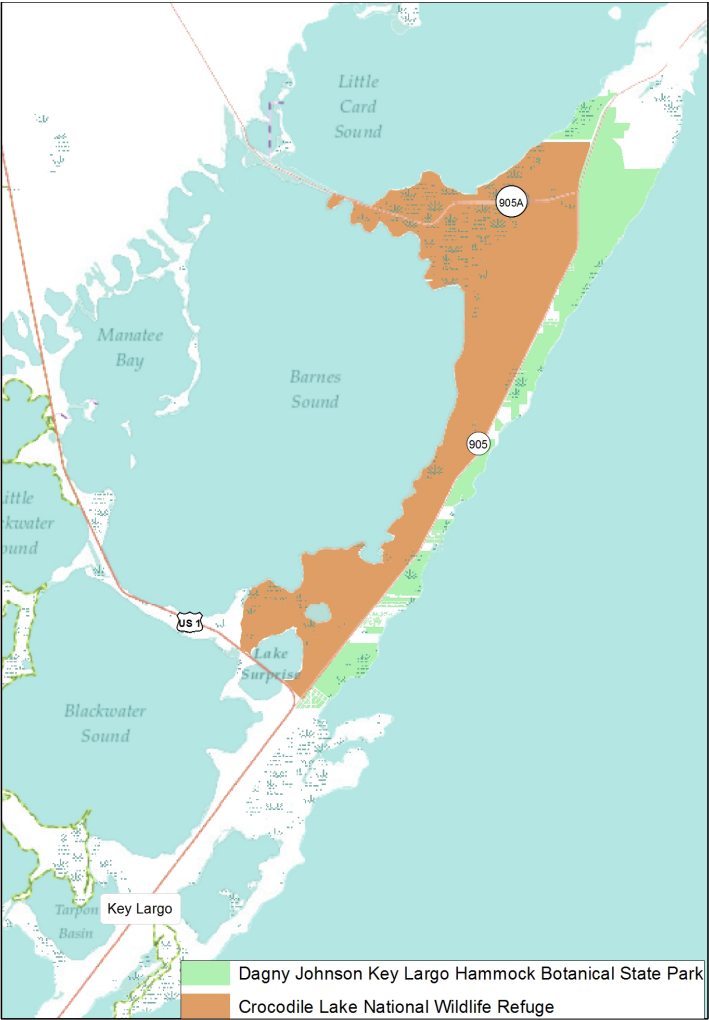
Choiseul Created Pigeon, extinction attributed to feral and free-roaming cats. Illustration: J.G. Keulemans (1904)/Wikipedia



Key Largo Woodrat, photo: Clay DeGayner

Here on Key Largo, outdoor cats are a major factor in the severe population decline of the endangered Key Largo woodrat and the endangered Key Largo cotton mouse. These endangered species play a critical ecological role in the function of tropical hardwood hammocks as they disperse seeds and serve as a food source for threatened species, such as the eastern indigo snake.

The Key Largo woodrat builds multi-generational stick nests in which many other species depend. The behavior of dragging sticks through the leaf litter and building these nests makes these nocturnal animals particularly vulnerable to predation by cats.



The Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge and the Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park are the last remaining habitat for these endangered mammals. Unfortunately, these conservation lands are used by cats, some of which come from Key Largo’s neighborhoods. Cats from these neighborhoods have been trapped up to 8 miles from their owners’ homes.

The endangered Key Largo woodrat and Key Largo cotton mouse need your help to persist...

■ Do not feed feral cats!

■ Keep cats indoors!

Most of the time, the life of an outdoor cat ends in tragedy; the life expectancy of an outdoor cat is less than 5 years. Outdoor cats are exposed to a host of diseases, such as rabies, ringworm, feline leukemia virus (FeLV), and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Outdoor cats are also injured and killed by dogs/coyotes and are frequently hit by cars.



Proper sanitation practices can help prevent cats and native wildlife from becoming a nuisance. photo: USFWS

Trap, Neuter, Return (TNR) programs do not protect cats from the hazards of outdoor life, but they lead to the loss of native wildlife because these cats continue to roam and hunt when released.



Feral cat on top of a Key Largo woodrat nest. photo: USFWS





photo: Boksi/Wikimedia Commons

### Protect People: Keep Cats Indoors...

According to the Florida Department of Health, “Continued tolerance for roaming feral cats is not tenable on public health grounds because of the persistent threat posed to communities from injury and disease.”

Outdoor cats frequently encounter wildlife such as raccoons that can be carriers of diseases that can affect humans. In some cases, the outdoor feeding of cats promotes the spread of disease by allowing other animals (raccoons) to feed alongside outdoor cats.

Cats are the primary domestic carrier of rabies with approximately 300 rabid cats reported in the United States each year.

Outdoor cats are the primary host for toxoplasmosis, a disease that can cause serious health problems in pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems.

Outdoor cats can spread toxoplasmosis, ringworm, hookworm, and other diseases to children by defecating in playgrounds and sand boxes.



photo: Eliya Selhub/Flickr

### There are several laws that address cats on conservation lands, some of which can lead to fines for the owners/feeders of cats...

50 CFR Wildlife and Fisheries Part 26.21(b), 27, 28.42, 28.43 and ESA (Section 9)



photo: Eddy Van/Wikimedia Commons



# Protect Wildlife: Keep Cats Indoors

**Crocodile Lake  
National Wildlife Refuge**  
 10750 County Road 905  
 Key Largo, Florida 33037

**Dagny Johnson  
Key Largo Hammock  
Botanical State Park**  
 102.5 Overseas Hwy  
 Key Largo, Florida 33037

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**Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge**  
  
**Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock  
Botanical State Park**

photo: iStock