



Make a little in your soul

Watching wildlife enjoying your garden is a delightful pleasure for both humans and felines and the love of both species need not be mutually exclusive. Our domestic cats will always have the inherent desire to exhibit hunting behaviour and, as cat owners, we have to accept this but we can take steps to control this predatory nature and encourage more appropriate and positive play. With some practical steps regarding cat and garden, you can provide a welcome retreat for all comers to your backyard.

The first step to reducing predation is to keep your cat indoors at night when birds and small mammals are at their most vulnerable. It is preferable that they remain indoors at least an hour before sunset and an hour after sunrise to allow nocturnal mammals to retreat home and for birds to feed.

Some believe that the more birds you attract to your garden, the greater the risk to their safety from predators, but according to a survey in 1997 conducted by the Mammal Society, it was found that the number of birds brought home per cat was significantly lower in households that provided food for birds. The more eyes watching mean a predator is far more likely to be spotted.

Food for thought

It is best to feed birds from high bird tables and away from surfaces from which a cat could pounce. A thin, metal shepherd's hook makes for a great feed holder and your cat will not be able to climb up towards the feeding birds. The wooden posts of bird tables can be made slippery and impossible to climb by placing a piece of drainpipe or cut-up water bottles around them. Just make sure there are no sharp edges that could harm a cat determined to give it a go!

Try not to leave food on the ground where feeding wildlife will be more vulnerable to attack, but if you have a ground feeder you can assemble a dome of chicken wire around it. Fruit such as apples can be pronged on tree branches for the blackbirds and thrushes. If you leave out food for foxes or hedgehogs that would be just as attractive to your cat; try and place this well away from where the birds feast.

Positioning

Prickly plants such as *berberis*, *pyracantha* or hawthorn placed near the base of a feeding station make for an uncomfortable settling place for a cat. Just ensure it doesn't give the cat enough cover to stalk from. The berries from these plants can provide birds with a food source and their thorny branches allow for secure nesting sites.

The anti-catnip of plants is said to be *Coleus canina* which is an attractive grey-green foliage plant with blue flowers in summer. Its scent is one that cats and dogs tend to avoid. A similar plant is the *Helichrysum italicum*, sometimes known as the curry plant. These could be planted around feeding places for birds and, perhaps, areas in which unwelcome visiting cats tend to make an entrance.

Nesting boxes should be placed where cats are unable to settle close by. If in a tree, place these away from any nearby branches where a cat could sit. If attached to a fence, plastic spiked strips can be placed along the length above the box. These measures will help stop a cat getting too near; worrying the birds or preventing the parents from entering. Ensuring that the box lid is secure can also assist in deterring squirrels from raiding the nest.

birdhouse

Francesca Watson investigates the available options of improving that delicate relationship between cat and wildlife

Out of bounds

There are motion-activated deterrents that can be connected to your hose pipe, emitting a jet of water when sensing the heat or movement of a passing cat. One important point to remember, however, is that the protected zone can extend quite far and could prevent your cat from enjoying his own garden!

There are several odour deterrents but most, it seems, have a limited effectiveness once the great British element of rain is added to the equation. Some are based on cats' dislike of citrus smells. Orange and lemon peel can keep cats at bay and Citronella, a commercially available essential oil, can also be dotted around areas where cats are not welcome. However, you can purchase plastic rods which are impregnated with Citronella which would bypass the weather problem and last for several weeks. As with all oils, ensure that your cat cannot ingest it, as it can prove toxic.

Lion dung pellets are fêted by some and for those who aren't best pals with the local zoo's big cat keeper you can buy these at most garden centres. The pellets are scattered in the areas you want to protect. A similar option is chicken dung but, again, rain can reduce any dung's effectiveness.

Hearing is believing

Bells on cat collars have been disputed as an effective deterrent but a survey from the RSPB states that a correctly fitted collar and bell can reduce cat predation by a third or more – 34 per cent fewer mammals and 41 per cent fewer birds.

Claire Bessant, Chief Executive of the Feline Advisory Bureau (FAB), adds: "Only a small proportion of cats develop the 3D skills necessary to catch adult birds. Giving these cats a collar with a bell to wear will help save birds but, for the safety of the cat, make sure that it is a quick-release collar that snaps open if it gets caught on a branch.

"It needs to be firmly fitted so that the cat cannot pull one leg through or it is loose enough to catch on things. You should be able to fit two fingers snugly between your cat's collar and his neck. If in doubt about collar fitting, ask your vet for advice. Always check if your cat is still growing – or putting on weight – so that the collar does not get too tight." Another use of bells could be to tie some to the branches of your hedges or along the tops of fences, giving an extra warning to birds and wildlife of a stealthy feline approach.

A patch of earth to call my own

You may want to consider dedicating a corner in your garden specifically for your cat away from your wildlife feeding or nesting areas. In this space you could plant all those 'cat-friendly' plants such as catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), mint, cat thyme (*Teucrium marum*) and lavender. A patch of unmowed grass can provide a soft bed and also that requisite roughage to help cough up furballs. Plants – without thorns – can be placed to give your cat a shady spot to lie in during those hot and sunny days while logs provide excellent outdoor scratching posts. Short ribbons tied securely to low branches of a tree can be a great diversion.

To allow for your cat's natural hunting instinct you can scatter some of his dry food in the safe areas of your garden to encourage him to seek it out. Puzzle feeders and dry food placed in toilet rolls will also provide great entertainment for your cat and can help distract him from his nearby feathered friends. Cats are often inspired to hunt by movement. Interactive play with moving toys, such as fishing rods, helps a cat to exhibit his natural behaviour, reducing his desire to seek out such behaviour elsewhere.

Nature is a joy to behold and, with some forethought, the garden can be a place where cats and wildlife enjoy a much more peaceful coexistence. ●

