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Survival rates of cat-attacked birds admitted to RSPCA wildlife centres in the UK: implications for cat owners and wildlife rehabilitators

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Abstract

*Free-ranging pet cats (*Felis catus*) frequently kill wildlife but also return live prey to their owners. This raises welfare concerns if live animals released by cat owners subsequently die, since this is preventable, eg through prompt euthanasia. To estimate the mortality rate of birds released alive by cat owners, we examined the fates of 3,597 cat-attacked individuals submitted to four RSPCA wildlife centres in the UK. Individuals from 64 species were received but most cases (77%) involved just seven species commonly found in urban areas. The overall mortality rate (based on all individuals received at centres, ie including those which perished in transport, those which were euthanased on arrival and those which were admitted for care after having been triaged) was 78%; the post-admittance mortality rate (n = 2,070 birds admitted for care) was 62%. On average, individuals that perished (n = 2,798) survived for 3.0 days before dying or being euthanased. Juveniles were more likely to survive to release than adults, possibly because their small size means they are less likely to receive injuries that are ultimately fatal. Extrapolating from the limited data currently available, and applying conservative estimates at each stage, we estimate that a minimum of 0.3 million birds are released annually by cat owners but subsequently die. Substantial welfare improvements could be achieved if owners were more prepared to adopt strategies to limit hunting behaviour (eg fitting cats with collars and bells) and if owners and rehabilitators were able to effectively identify individuals with fatal injuries. The latter will require studies that quantify the effects of identifiable physical injuries on the likelihood of survival to release, in order to establish effective triage criteria.*

Keywords: *animal welfare, depredation, domestic cat,* Felis catus*, hunting behaviour, wildlife rehabilitation*