

GREEN SCENE: A bib... on a cat? It's for the birds. Really



This cat bib, which is designed to keep domestic felines from eating wild birds, does not interfere with normal motions except when the cat is crouched in a hunting position.

Bruce Brandhorst photo

By [Elaine Golds - The Tri-City News](#)

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Perhaps I should state at the outset that we share our house with two cats. At other times in my life, I have also enjoyed the companionship of dogs, so I am well aware of the satisfaction that comes from sharing a life with household pets.

But it's no secret that people and our pets can have quite deleterious impacts on the environment. For example, when people walk with dogs off-leash in environmentally-sensitive areas, birds can be interrupted in such vital activities as foraging for the food that ensures their survival. Similarly, when cats roam at large in suburban areas, their instincts to hunt can put unwary birds and small mammals at grave risk.

This time of year, when so many young and inexperienced birds are on their own and searching for food, creates a situation that makes for relatively easy pickings by outdoor cats. What sort of impact do outdoor cats have? Well, it can be enormous. There are examples on islands where domestic cats have hunted some species of birds to extinction. In the United States, it is estimated that a billion birds may be killed each year by domestic cats.

The ancestor of domestic cats was a wild cat from the Middle East. House cats are now so different they are considered to be a separate species from this wild cat. But their hunting instincts have not disappeared despite 10,000 years of domestication. Most of the estimated 600 million domestic cats now reside in areas where their wild cat ancestors never roamed. As a consequence, most wild animals have not evolved in the presence of these wily feline predators and, thus, have not developed adequate behaviours or defence mechanisms that would help them escape. In most ecosystems, domestic cats are an exotic, non-native predator that can have devastating impacts on native species.

In a natural ecosystem, the number of predators is controlled by the availability of prey as well as by competition and disease. These natural controls have no impact on domestic cats which are fed and vaccinated by their owners. Despite what people say about a cat's natural instincts to hunt, it is simply not natural for domestic cats to be roaming at large anywhere in North America.

Studies have shown about one third of cat owners keep their cats indoors. That's what we do because we also enjoy watching the birds in our backyard. There are several advantages to keeping cats indoors. Such cats have been shown to live longer and be less prone to develop diseases. I can also vouch for the fact that indoor cats are always available and appreciative of an offer of a warm lap. Indoor cats that have never been outside apparently express little interest in the great outdoors.

I have to admit our two cats have not quite bought in to this "always-indoors" rule. One of them in particular is most adept at streaking out the door whenever visitors enter. When I garden in the backyard, our cats sometimes accompany me on leashes. No doubt, these seasonal excursions in the backyard account for their love of the great outdoors. Some cat owners, concerned about their cat's propensity to kill birds and other wildlife, have placed collars with bells on their cats in hopes this might provide some early warning system for birds. Alas, it seems such collars are quite ineffective.

For many years, I thought the only effective strategy to prevent cats from killing birds was to keep cats indoors or, if outdoors, on a leash. But on a recent trip to the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC in Burnaby, I discovered an intriguing bib that can be attached to a cat's collar with Velcro and is designed to release if a cat becomes caught by it.

Invented by a bird-feeding cat-lover in Oregon, the bib is effective because, as soon as a cat crouches into a hunting position, its front feet trip on the bib. These bibs, which come in two sizes, are reported to prevent more than 80% of the cats that wear one from killing birds.

My friend Liz, who has tested a bib on her outdoor cat, is really pleased with its effectiveness. She reports the bibs are prone to soak up moisture during wet weather and sometimes detach because of this extra weight. Consequently, she has written her phone number on the bib so when neighbours find it in their yards, they can contact her.

We tried a bib on one of our cats and it wasn't bothered at all. The bib did not prevent regular movements; it was only when it crouched into a hunting position that the bib interfered with its forward movements.

I am impressed because this bib appears to finally provide a fairly satisfactory solution for cat owners who don't want their cats to kill birds but hesitate to keep them indoors all the time.

The Wildlife Rescue Association of BC is selling these bibs for \$10. If your cat is an accomplished predator, the larger size is probably preferable. As a bird-watcher and nature-lover, I would certainly recommend a cat bib to cat owners who don't want to keep their felines indoors.

Elaine Golds is a Port Moody environmentalist who is vice-president of Burke Mountain Naturalists, chair of the Colony Farm Park Association and president of the PoMo Ecological Society.

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