

York Region's unknown killers

People don't realize the damage their cuddly cats do to wild animals

Part two in a series on animal and human co-existence

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

You may unknowingly be sharing your home with a creature that kills more wild animals in York Region than any other.

It's the common house cat.

Yes, naturalists and shelter staff say, that fuzzy lump that seems to spend its days sleeping and rubbing its face becomes, once you let it outside, a natural born killer of birds and small mammals.

This week, Sylvia Penny held in her hand's cupped palm the victim of a probable cat attack: a rabbit about 10 days old, found with blood around its nose last week by children in Richmond Hill.

After a few weeks at Wildcare Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre, a Vaughan shelter that survives on donations, the rabbit will return to the wild.

But Ms Penny said the damage cats do to small animals often proves fatal.

"These little guys, once they have a puncture wound, you can just say goodbye. They don't make it," she said as the tiny rabbit hungrily sucked formula from a syringe

fitted with a dropper.

Not so fortunate was another young rabbit, brought to Wildcare on Friday by a cat owner in Markham whose pet had maimed it.

That rabbit was put down, said Ms Penny, a supervisor at the shelter. "His skin was torn away from his leg and he had a fractured leg."

Some people tell the shelter their cat was involved, and some don't, said Csilla Darvasi, a Wildcare supervisor for 10 years.

"People will swear up and down that, 'Oh, he's never caught anything before,' and you know the animal has."

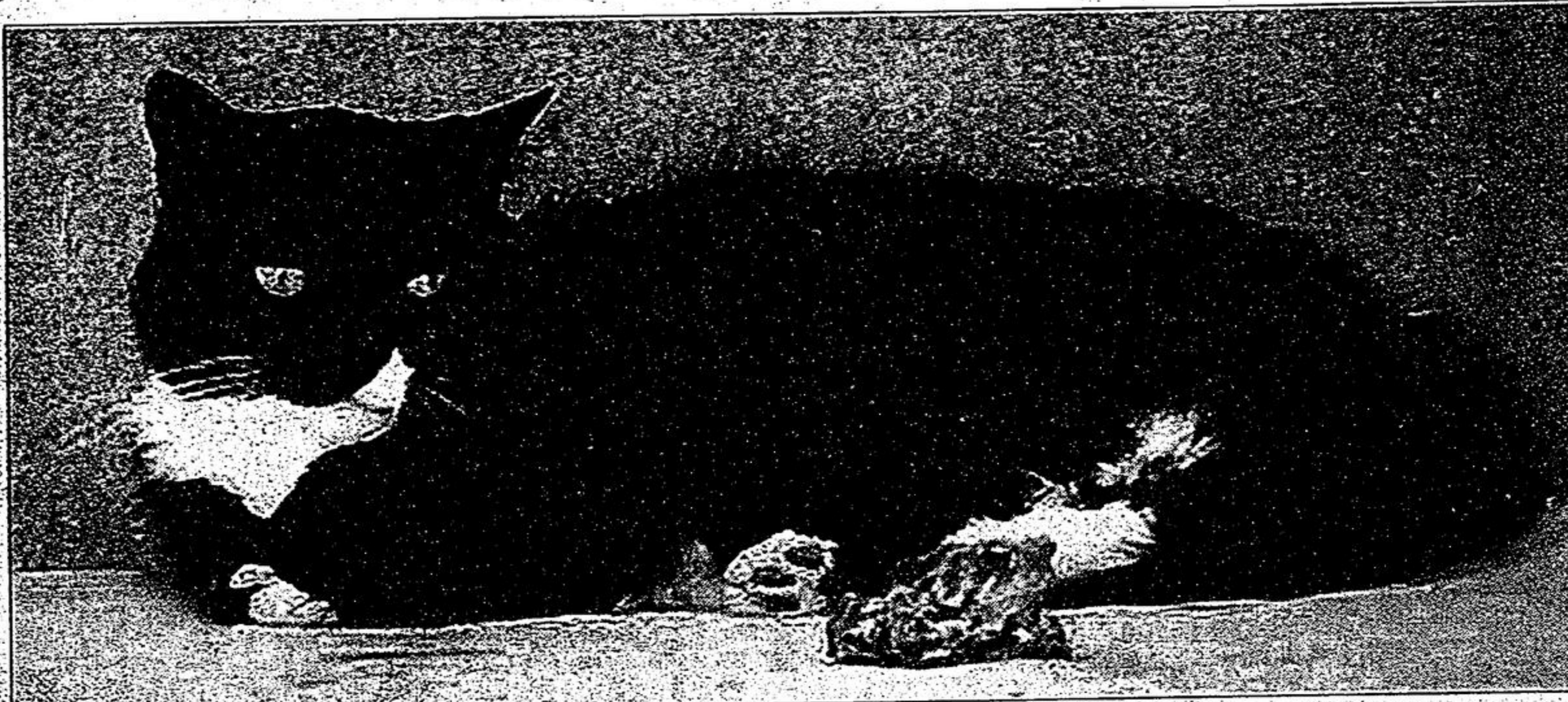
Owners need to be taught their cats are predators, said Nathalie Karvonen, executive director of the Toronto Wildlife Centre in Downsview, who believes domestic cats are the number one reason animals are brought to the shelter.

"It's a phenomenally bad problem," she said.

The problem escalates at this time of year. A lot of birds, especially fledgling birds being fed on the ground, are vulnerable because they can't go anywhere.

Young rabbits are not well hidden in their nests, and once a cat knows where a nest is, it will keep coming back.

And, Ms Darvasi said, for every mouse or garter snake or baby bird a pet cat brings home, it leaves



PHOTO/ANNE SALVAGNA

Stouffville's Anne Salvagna was surprised to find her old housecat, Bobo, quietly getting along with a toad that happened to hop up on the family's outdoor swing. Most house cats aren't this benevolent with wildlife.

many more some place else.

"It should be a crime for any cat to be allowed to roam free," Dan Stuckey, a naturalist at the Kortright Centre for Conservation in Vaughan, said this week.

Domestic cat attacks are something we can control, and just as most people now expect dogs will not run at large, they should accept that cats belong indoors, he said.

"People should do it willingly first, because ultimately I think it will be legislated."

What makes cats more dangerous to wild mammals and birds is that they have an important advantage — their owners.

People protect cats from diseases and other things that limit animal populations in the wild.

Well-fed cats, ranging out from their homes or barns, are actually more effective hunters than wild animals could ever be.

"They represent an over abundance of a top-level predator," said Mr. Stuckey, adding that on any given day, he sees two or three cats roaming around Kortright, supposedly a sanctuary for wildlife.

Just how many wild creatures are

killed by cats can only be guessed at. A study by The Mammal Society released last year estimated Britain's nine million cats kill 100 million birds and small mammals a year.

In Nova Scotia, a local biologist counted 1,600 mammal or bird kills by a single farm cat over an 18-month period.

'(Cats) represent an over abundance of a top-level predator.'

A group called Alley Cat Allies, however, says, estimated cat kills in the British study are unrealistic because it assumes catches by urban cats equal those by rural cats.

Brian Henshaw, a senior ecologist for Gartner Lee Limited, a Markham consulting firm, said more study is needed on whether roaming cats are affecting our ecosystems.

In 2000, he studied bird populations in Pickering's Altona Forest, comparing data as far back as 1949, before residential development

encroached on the forest.

"It didn't strike me that the cats were a major player there," said Mr. Henshaw, adding he saw a cat in the forest only once during a two-year period.

He said there may be many reasons for a dramatic decline noted for certain birds in the forest, including increased levels of noise and "urban-sponsored predators" — blue jays, crows and gray squirrels supported by backyard bird feeders.

"Often in ecology there isn't one smoking gun."

Still, Mr. Stuckey and others want the feline carnage to end. They argue letting your cat out isn't doing it any favours, since the pet will be exposed to cars, not to mention natural predators such as coyotes and birds of prey.

Dr. Gilbert Plummer, a vet at the Nobleton Veterinary Clinic in King Township, said he knows a lot of people who are "missing" cats; in some cases, the local coyotes are suspected.

His advice is to try to keep cats inside, or outside on a leash or halter.



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Sylvia Penny of the Wildcare Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre in Vaughan takes care of a baby rabbit that was likely injured by a housecat.

'Glass is the hardest product to recycle'

From page 1.

Mr. Bergart said building a glass recovery and processing plant at the region's planned recycling site in East Gwillimbury would divert glass and create substantial savings for the municipality.

"Glass is the hardest product to recycle in your (material recovery facility)," Mr. Bergart said.

"Glass is 50 per cent of the weight of a blue box system."

Regional councillors will investigate the proposal, a number of alternatives that could eventually

be on the table.

The region pulls in most revenues from recycling paper products, with aluminum the second most lucrative resource. PET plastics, such as bottles, account for 7 per cent of the revenues recovered on the market.



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