

Cats Do Roam, Tracking Shows

Feral cats can cover hundreds of acres, while house cats are found to sleep or sit still most of the time.

By [Emily Sohn](#) | Fri Jun 10, 2011 09:42 AM ET

When your cat leaves the house, it may roam farther than you think, suggests a new study, covering as much as five acres.

But even adventurous house cats cover much less ground than feral cats, whose ranges sometimes exceed 370 acres. Owned cats also move around a whole lot less, especially at night. They visit fewer kinds of habitats. And -- cat owners may not be surprised to hear this -- they sleep much more.

The study was one of the first to document where cats go and what they do when people aren't around. And as mysterious as cats may like to think they are, getting a better idea of their patterns may ultimately help people protect felines and the environments they live in. Roaming cats hunt birds and other animals, and they can spread diseases to wildlife, people and other pets.

"If your cat goes outside and there's no way for you to know what happens to it, it's very difficult for you to make educated choices," said Nohra Mateus, a veterinarian and epidemiologist at the Illinois Natural History Survey in Champaign, Ill.

NEWS: Cats Adore, Manipulate Women

Only one previous study has used radio collars to compare owned cats with wild ones, said Margaret Slater, a veterinary epidemiologist with the ASPCA in Champaign. That study, which took place in Texas, found that feral cats roamed farther than owned cats did. A group of feral cats that was fed in designated locations had smaller ranges than unfed wild cats, but they still traveled further than free-roaming house cats did.

For the new study, Mateus and colleagues [put special collars on](#) 18 owned cats and 24 unowned cats, all living in Champaign-Urbana. All of the collars were equipped with radio transmitters. More than half of the collars also held activity sensors, which measured tilt and vibration as indicators of how active cats were at any given time.

After following the cats for 16 months, the researchers documented a dramatic difference in how much the two groups moved -- both in distance covered and number of minutes spent being frisky.

While house cats wandered over a range of just under two hectares (4.9 acres), the researchers reported in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, feral cats covered an average of 157 hectares



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(388 acres). One wild cat covered close to 550 hectares (1,359 acres). The feral cats also entered a larger number of landscapes, from farms and grasslands to forests and urban areas.

cats and dogs drink liquids using entirely different methods.

On a day-to-day basis, house cats were much more relaxed -- sleeping or sitting quietly 80 percent of the time, compared to their wild peers, who were inactive just 62 percent of the time.

Even during their waking hours, house cats were pretty mellow. They spent 17 percent of their time doing low-intensity activities. High-intensity action took up just three percent of their time. Feral cats, on other hand, were highly active 14 percent of their time and were involved in low-intensity activities 23 percent of their time.

In a smaller sample of 39 cats, the researchers reported that one of 12 owned cats died during the study period after being struck by a car. Meanwhile, six of 23 wild cats died or were presumed dead. Coyotes killed two. One was found in a dumpster. Three just disappeared.

"I see this as a cautionary tale for cat-owners," Slater said. "If you allow a cat outside, there's a chance it's going to get into trouble and get killed."

NEWS: U.K. Cat Makes Loudest Purr Attempt

The study also supports arguments for neutering, feeding and providing shelter for feral feline populations, Slater added. Those efforts shrink the animals' ranges, which puts less pressure on prey animals and minimizes the risk of conflict with roaming house cats.

Perhaps most interesting to cat-lovers, the study offers new insight into what their furry friends do all day and all night long.

"Just last night, I was sitting outside, talking with friends, and their cat was hanging out with us on the front porch," Mateus said.

When the cat took off, Mateus asked her friends if they had ever wondered where their cat goes. The owners said the cat just wandered around the house. But when they took her suggestion and followed the cat, they all ended up across the street in a neighbor's backyard.

"They said, 'Hm, we better go get him before he gets into trouble,'" Mateus said. "It's kind of interesting how far these cats go without us knowing."
