

# Nico Dauphiné, Researcher at the Smithsonian National Zoo: Preying on Cats? Bird Conservationist that calls TNR “cat hoarding without walls” turns the tables on cat predation.

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In an exchange of comments on the Audubon Magazine’s blog, *The Perch*, in response to a post “[Feral Cat Predation on Birds Costs Billions of Dollars a Year](#),” in a discussion of Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR), [Travis Longcore](#) (Science Director, The Urban Wildlands Group; Associate Research Professor, University of Southern California, Spatial Sciences Institute; Associate Adjunct Professor, UCLA Institute of the Environment) had the last word. In the last paragraph of his response (December 14, 2010), he wrote,

“When a jurisdiction mandates TNR as the only approach to “manage” feral cats then the people who are adversely impacted by them turn to inhumane methods to deal with them -- poisoning, boarding them up under buildings, direct abuse, etc. These are inappropriate and inhumane ways to deal with stray and feral cats and the shelter system was set up to prevent these very things from happening. So when TNR programs leave people with 40 stray and feral cats on a city block (all neutered) and no recourse to deal with fleas, feces, and the lack of birds, there will be consequences that are inhumane. Just as much as you say that you can't stop people from feeding stray and feral cats, you can't stop people from poisoning them when you take away humane means of control. Again, your program might not do this, but it happens when these programs are adopted and the no kill/TNR movement forces cities into rejecting feral cats from shelters to lower their euthanasia rates.”

Mr. Longcore’s comments were prescient. On May 11, 2011, a wildlife professional dedicated to bird conservation, Nico Dauphiné (one of whose pieces Longcore reviewed prior to publication), was charged with attempted animal cruelty, apparently poisoning feral cats with rat poison and antifreeze in her Columbia Heights, D.C. neighborhood. According to [NBC Washington](#), after a Washington Humane Society officer stakeout, police reviewed surveillance video and determined they had enough evidence to issue a warrant for Nico Dauphiné’s arrest. Her court date is the first week of June. Through her lawyer, Dauphiné “vehemently” denies the charges, stating “her whole life is devoted to the care and welfare of animals.”

I believe Dauphiné, who works at the zoo’s [Migratory Bird Center](#), meant her whole life has been devoted to the care and welfare of *birds*. Dauphiné has contributed (almost more than any other single ecologist) to polarizing any potential dialogue between wildlife conservationists and cat advocates with her “cats or birds” approach. In fact, she and her former professor at the University of Georgia’s [Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources](#), [Robert J. Cooper](#) most recently authored a piece for The Wildlife Society’s special section, *The Impact of Free Ranging Cats*, in its Spring 2011 issue of The Wildlife Professional, “[Pick One: Outdoor Cats or Conservation, The Fight over Managing an Invasive Predator](#).”

Despite her claims to address “cumulative effects, including population level effects, of outdoor domestic cats in the United States on the *best available science*,” (in an earlier piece coauthored with

Professor Cooper in [Proceedings of the Fourth International Partners in Flight Conference](#), 2009) Dauphiné consistently appears to intentionally misrepresent the research and science (and use pseudo science) as it relates to studies on domestic cats, trap-neuter-return programs (TNR), and cat predation. Her claims that cats kill a billion birds (or more) annually in the U.S. are not based on **any** scientific research, yet she continues to promote the notion as if it were based in some sort of reality. When she does provide estimates and assumptions, she grossly inflates the numbers of feral cats, free-roaming pet cats, and bird depredation rates. Her misrepresentations and pseudo-science are well documented in Peter J. Wolf's blog, [Vox Felina](#), and in a piece I published last year, "[One Billion Birds: Disputing the guess of Rich Stallcup as presented by Nico Dauphiné and Robert J. Cooper...](#)"

Dauphiné and her coauthors in "[What conservation biologists can do to counter trap-neuter-return: Response to Longcore et al.](#)" (Lepczyk et al. 2009) wrote that "trap-neuter-return is essentially cat hoarding without walls." (p. 628). David Jessup ("[The welfare of feral cats and wildlife](#)" 2004) first promulgated this idea, proposing that some colony caretakers are suffering "collectors psychosis," and that "it is possible that TNR is enabling and supporting some people who need psychologic counseling and assistance." (p.1381).

I, for one, would not be surprised to find that Dauphiné is in need of psychological counseling and assistance for her pathological hatred of cats. Despite her claim of liking cats (in [Apocalypse Meow, 2008](#) *updated to reflect the lecture was removed from the Warnell School of Forestry (UGA) website*), Dauphiné's work and actions indicate quite the opposite. In numerous letters, presentations, and publications, Dauphiné vilifies cats, portraying them as a major enemy of wild birds. [In a letter](#) written to the St. Petersburg Times in response to an article, "[Attention turns to strays: Tarpon Springs looks at neuter, release programs.](#)" (February 1, 2008), Nico Dauphiné wrote:

"In my own back yard, I have found 26 feral and stray cats over the past two years. I began trapping and removing cats from my yard after I observed a single cat move into the yard and kill all the other animals there over a period of months, decapitating but often not eating them. The cat was a well-fed cat that turned out to belong to a neighbor."

Of course, trapping cats for removal from your own yard is neither criminal nor (necessarily) inhumane. But after I published the "[One Billion Birds](#)" piece, I was contacted by several people from Athens, GA who informed me that Nico Dauphiné was an avid and active cat trapper. They portrayed a much darker side to her "cats versus birds" work trapping cats: one that was not limited to her yard, resulted in far more than 26 cats being trapped and turned in to local Humane Society, and where I live would have qualified as a criminal offense. Official charges were never proffered. Those in Athens believe this was due to her being a... "friend" of the person who would have been responsible for bringing such charges, the Superintendent of Animal Control.

In "[Pick One: Outdoor Cats or Conservation, The Fight over Managing an Invasive Predator](#)," Dauphiné and Cooper state, "Cat predation is among the most significant anthropogenic causes of bird mortality in the U.S., responsible for an estimated annual death toll of at least one billion birds (Gill 1995, Dauphiné and Cooper 2009)." (Note that Gill 1995 simply references Stallcup, "[Cats: a heavy toll on songbirds.](#)" Mr. Stallcup references no cat predation studies for his guess, and recommends "discouraging cats from attacking birds around your home by shooting them with a B-B gun or pellet gun."). She and Cooper go on to ask, "Where is the outrage over such slaughter?" (p. 52). Outrage indeed: in her lecture, *Apocalypse Meow*, Dauphiné says there is an "urgent need for conservation action." Nico Dauphiné has

not had her day in court – but it would seem she decided to answer her own call to action using something more lethal than a B-B gun.

If Nico Dauphiné is found guilty, perhaps [The Wildlife Society](#) (TWS) and its leadership will take it as a cue that it's time for a bit of introspection. A generally respected conservation organization, The Wildlife Society has taken [its position](#); and that is to force each of us to choose: cats or birds. That position takes a successful and valuable management tool - TNR - out of the toolbox and prevents productive community dialogue. Yet across the pond, [The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#) has access to the same science – yet does not arrive at the same conclusion. When they ask the question, [“Are cats causing bird declines?”](#), their answer is

**“No Evidence**

Despite the large numbers of birds killed, there is no scientific evidence that predation by cats in gardens is having any impact on bird populations UK-wide. This may be surprising, but many millions of birds die naturally every year, mainly through starvation, disease, or other forms of predation. There is evidence that cats tend to take weak or sickly birds.

We also know that of the millions of baby birds hatched each year, most will die before they reach breeding age. This is also quite natural, and each pair needs only to rear two young that survive to breeding age to replace themselves and maintain the population.

It is likely that most of the birds killed by cats would have died anyway from other causes before the next breeding season, so cats are unlikely to have a major impact on populations. If their predation was additional to these other causes of mortality, this might have a serious impact on bird populations.

Those bird species that have undergone the most serious population declines in the UK (such as skylarks, tree sparrows and corn buntings) rarely encounter cats, so cats cannot be causing their declines. Research shows that these declines are usually caused by habitat or loss, particularly farmland.”

Instead of portraying proponents of trap-neuter-return as people in need of psychological help, The Wildlife Society may want to consider how their virulent opposition to its role in animal control is affecting their membership – and their leadership.