

DANGERS FOR OUTDOOR CATS

and how to protect your cat from them

‘If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it’s yours - forever,’ Confucius once said. Granted, he probably wasn’t talking about a house cat. Nevertheless, this quote fits well with our beloved felines, to whom we grant this freedom, trusting that they will come back home time after time.

But it is a freedom that comes at a price, as many dangers lurk outside. You can take preventive measures against some of these dangers, but you will have to learn to live with the others. Try to appreciate every time your cat returns home, healthy and happy – and loudly demanding food. But when should you start worrying? And what sort of things are there to worry about?

Essentially, you should ‘make an agreement’ with your cat about when it should return home. Yes, this might sound strange, but it actually works better than you might think. This is because most cats quickly get used to being fed at a particular time. If you announce feeding time using a particular sound (e.g. a loud whistle, a loud rustling noise, knocks, rattling or any other sound that the cat associates with feeding time), your cat can be conditioned to the sound and is likely to return home even when some distance away. If it does not return for feeding time, that’s when you might start to worry. You start getting this horrible feeling in the pit of the stomach and can’t help but think about all the possible danger scenarios that you had successfully pushed to the back of your mind. In this guide, we will provide a brief summary of the potential dangers for outdoor cats.



TRAFFIC

Road traffic accidents are among the most common causes of death in cats. Young cats in particular are prone to be hit by vehicles because they cannot yet properly assess the danger and have a tendency to run across a street on an impulse. But even older, streetwise cats can fall victim to cars, for example when they are running away from something or when a car is driving too fast. This why you should never consider having an outdoor cat if you live near a busy or fast road. Most accidents happen at dusk or dawn or during the night. For this reason, cats in general, but especially young animals up to three years old, should only be allowed to freely roam outdoors during daylight hours. If you do let your cat out at night, make sure it wears a reflective safety collar to help drivers spot it more easily. Incidentally, unneutered cats are far more likely to suffer road accidents because their territories tend to be much larger.

THEFT

Cats can fall victim to theft. Friendly, affectionate animals who like to rub against the legs of any stranger crossing their path are at particular risk. A safety collar with the cat's name and the owner's phone number is likely to make a potential catnapper think twice. A safety collar is a collar that will open immediately if it gets caught somewhere. Please never use a collar without a safety lock as this is an additional source of danger; the cat could strangle itself if the collar catches on something, which all too often results in an agonising death. In addition to reporting your missing cat to animal reporting centres (in Switzerland, this is the Schweizerische Tiermeldezentrale, STMZ), you should also report the disappearance to the relevant chip registration office as soon as possible (ANIS in Switzerland), provided your cat is chipped. They will put a note in their system indicating that the cat has gone missing. This way, if someone tries to re-register the chip to themselves, they will be caught out.

MOWERS/AGRICULTURAL LAND

Many cats are drawn to fields with tall grass. They are perfect places to hide and have a long, undisturbed snooze. Unfortunately, there is a danger: At some point, the grass will be mown. And sadly, not all cats will run when they hear the noise from agricultural machinery. Some might freeze and duck instead, in the direct path of the machine. Injuries caused by combine harvesters and other agricultural machines can have devastating consequences, with the loss of a leg being the least evil. You can prevent this by contacting the farmer in advance and asking him or her to notify you one day before mowing (e.g. by text message). This way, you know when to keep your four-legged friend at home until the mowing is done. Mowing isn't the only danger lurking on agricultural land. An open silo or a manure pit are places from which your cat will not be able to free itself on its own. Here, too, a friendly conversation with the farmer can work wonders.



HUNTERS

If you live near a forest, hunters are another danger to your cat. Ginger and ginger-and-white cats are particularly at risk, as they are often mistaken for foxes. And sadly, under certain circumstances, hunters are legally permitted to shoot a cat that has strayed from its home. While many hunters will not do this, there are other individuals who will not hesitate to shoot a cat. This is another reason why it makes sense to put a safety collar with your cat's name and your contact details on your cat – hopefully, this will stop a hunter from shooting at a cat, or if they still do, they should at least be able to notify the owner.

DISEASES

Unvaccinated and/or unneutered cats are at enormous risk when it comes to the transmission of diseases. In this case, however, the solution is really easy: Simply have your cat neutered and ensure that all vaccinations are up to date.

PARASITES

Cats can contract internal and external parasites, including worms, giardia, mites, lice, fleas and ticks. These are tiny animals or single-celled organisms that feed on a larger animal. Outdoor cats are much more likely to contract parasites than indoor cats. And it often isn't the parasites per se which the owner becomes aware of, but rather the cat's changed behaviour: it might start scratching certain areas of the body or you might come across live worms or larvae in the cat's faeces by chance. Skin irritations or diarrhoea may also be indicators of a parasitic infestation. Untreated parasites can lead to disease. This is why prevention is key. Ask your vet for advice on how to deal with parasites.

IMPORTANT: NEVER use an anti-parasite product meant for other animals, e.g. for dogs, on a cat, as it can result in death!



INJURIES



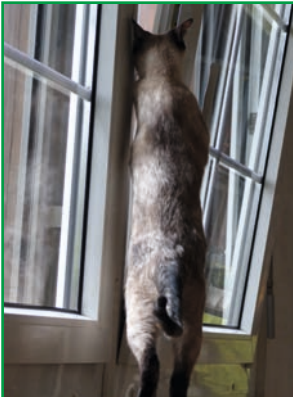
Take a close look at your cat at least once a day, preferably in the evening after it returns from its final round of the day. Give your cat a cuddle in a playful way and run your hand across its whole body as if you were stroking it. You should be able to feel/spot any injuries requiring treatment or any ticks that need removing. Additionally, this little daily ritual will help get your cat used to being touched, which is important in emergencies.

DOGS

Not all dogs like cats. And not all dog owners act responsibly by keeping hunting dogs on a leash. Ensure that your cat can return to the safety of its own home at any time (cat flap) and that there are sufficient hiding places outside so that your cat can get to safety in case its pursued by a dog.

TILTING WINDOWS

Tilting windows are dangerous – and not just in your own home. Curious cats love climbing into neighbouring apartments. The injuries from getting wedged in a tilted window are often fatal. Talk to your neighbours and ask them to secure their tilted windows. The easiest solution is a rolled-up towel, which can be stuffed into the window cracks.



POOLS

Just like other animals, and even small children, cats can also fall into unsecured swimming pools, ponds or rain barrels. Without exit aids, they can be death traps. If an animal falls into a pool with smooth vertical walls or a pond with steep banks, it will not be able to get out on its own and will suffer an agonising death from drowning. For this reason, garden ponds and swimming pools should have flat banks or an exit ramp. Check whether those dangers are present in your area (for example, by looking at Google Maps) and talk to the relevant owners.



FIREWORKS

Whether on New Year's Eve or a national holiday, fireworks cause panic in most animals. Lock your outdoor cats in the house early on, close any windows, lower any shutters/blinds and make sure that the cats can retreat to a dark space. Just let them be and don't approach them in order to 'comfort' them, as this may exacerbate their anxiety. Should your cat actively look for your company, then, of course, allow it to do so.

ADVERSE WEATHER

Keep your cat indoors if storms or adverse weather has been announced. Many cats are scared of thunderstorms, and it is best if the cat is already at home when a thunderstorm starts. There is also a significant risk of injury from hail, falling tree branches etc. which should not be underestimated. Apart from that, the same rules apply as for fireworks.



These and many other dangers lurk outside. Whatever danger has struck, any caring owner will be distraught when their beloved pet doesn't return home. The faster you try to find your cat, the higher the chances of success. It may well be that your cat has inadvertently been shut in somewhere during one of its explorations. Do the following as soon as possible: Post flyers, inform your neighbours and report missing animals to the animal reporting centre. There even are search dogs who can help track down the missing animal, although you will need a good scent source for this to work. So, if you want to prepare for this eventuality, you can regularly put hair that you have combed out of your cat's fur in a clean glass and seal it well. Hopefully, you will never actually have to use this, but it is better to be safe than sorry. Alternatively, you could put the hair in a freezer bag and place it in the freezer, but this is something you will need to repeat every six months.

One final tip: Responsible pet owners will have their cat microchipped. When animal lovers find injured animals, they will usually take them directly to a vet. If the pet's owner cannot be found, euthanasia is sadly all too often the step chosen by those vets who don't care much about animal welfare and don't want to cover the costs involved with helping the animal recover. Being chipped could therefore save the cat's life. And if an animal has suffered a fatal traffic accident, there is a much better chance that the owner will be notified by the police or the cadaver collection point.

It's true, the price to pay for freedom can be high. However, there is hardly a happier cat life than one where they are free to explore their territory unrestricted, feeling the grass under their paws and the wind around their ears. Climbing trees, catching mice and chatting with the cat next-door make for a varied life and a more contented and well-adjusted cat. May every cat be allowed to experience such a happy life! As a responsible cat owner, you can contribute to your cat's well-being (and your own peace of mind!) in a simple manner by implementing the recommendations and safety measures set out in this guide.



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