

GARDEN FOR WILDLIFE

Jessie, our 'enviro-Cat'

By Sue Morrish, Garden for Wildlife Member

I grew up with cats and, having been adopted by a few over the years, have tried to take a responsible attitude toward them. For example when I returned to Melbourne for a year from Alice Springs the cat which had adopted me (following the departure of its owners, my neighbours) was surrendered to the RSPCA. She was an intrepid hunter and I couldn't find her a home, so it seemed the best thing to do.

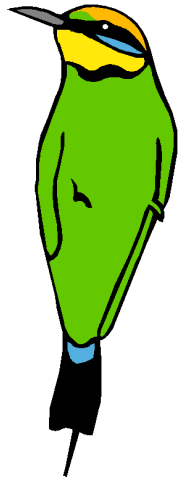
Anyway, I was pretty happy not to have a cat eating all the birds, and was busy enough with a young family. However when my kids were a bit bigger the whole 'pet' thing started coming up. Chooks sufficed for a while. Then goldfish. Too many visits to the Reptile Centre had my eldest son asking for a bearded dragon, but sometimes they visit our yard for free, so that seemed silly. And anyway, I was, at heart, a cat lover, so wasn't that the answer?

Having joined Gardens for Wildlife, we found out about cat parks that can keep cats away from the birds and reptiles, we decided to try just that. I wanted a kitten we could train to be an inside cat, not an adult which was used to having the run of the yard. So we went off to the RSPCA on the 1st of June and it was flooded with kittens. I'm not sure why I took all 3 of my offspring – they all had their own opinions, which all differed from mine. Eventually after lots of lobbying ('look at mine, mine's the best!') we settled on a tortoiseshell shorthaired 3 month old kitten, 'Jessie' and home we went. We then rang our handyman, and several hundred dollars later we had a nice mesh cat park off the side of the house with a cat flap and a gate for us. I furnished it with a tipshop ironing board and some tree prunings, some toys and some piles of sand. I also grow wheat grass for her to eat, in a pot, using wheat from the chook food. She loves this!

I had borrowed the 'Enviro-cat' book from the library and was sold on how easy it was going to be. Plenty of cats live entirely indoors in big cities elsewhere, it wasn't cruel, no worries. However there have been a few things that have made it tricky. In retrospect I didn't put in enough effort to train her to want to stay inside. The Enviro-cat book suggests allowing her to try to escape out a door and lying in wait outside and spraying her with a water mister. I did try this once or twice, but it wasn't enough. Maybe if I'd had more time I could have done this better.

My youngest son was 3 when we got the kitten, because I figured this was about the youngest I could train him to shut the door whenever he went in or out of the house. I hate mozzies or flies in the house so we have a pretty strict attitude to doors anyway. However our back door is a wooden door that doesn't always shut well, so we've had to get the handyman back a few times to get it all working well – if it is at all ajar Jessie pushes her way out and escapes.

So basically I can sum up the good things and the bad things about our enviro-cat experience so far.



Bad Things:

1. Jessie does escape, especially when we have visitors. It's good exercise for the kids to catch her, and they are truly amazing at it, but in the time she is out she probably has managed to kill lizards and grasshoppers. So far there has been no sign of bird deaths. [With one exception – a feral dove got stuck in our (empty) chook run, so I locked the cat in there and the dove was dead within minutes. And that was a cat that had been locked up for most of its life, between my house and the RSPCA's cage.]
2. It is annoying to have a major mouse problem in your backyard, and a cat, and not be able to put the 2 things together. We did recapture her once with a mouse in her mouth, but the cat-and – mouse game that ensued for the next 2 hours was so macabre I couldn't bear it. So maybe I couldn't stomach the cat solution anyway... We have bought a lead and harness from the petshop, so maybe next time the mice increase we could let her out on that under supervision. The kids have tried taking her for 'walks' but all she wants to do is hunt when she is out of the house. The lead is handy for going to the vet though.
3. Unless I get a housesitter, I feel bad leaving her at home for long stretches and just getting the neighbour to feed her (as you would normally with a cat) because she is locked up and I worry she'd get lonely with no other living things to interact with. And for a housesitter, the whole escaping thing is pretty annoying I imagine. At least we now know that she never goes far.

Jessie the enviro-cat very content in her cat park



Good things:

1. Until the cat park was up and running, we were using kitty litter which I found horrible. Buying this stuff was an environmental minefield – the clay-based stuff (which I found cleanest and easiest to use) was mined from somewhere (where? What was the effect of it?). The paper-based stuff was messier and bulkier and I felt weird putting it in the wheelie bin but it was apparently unsafe for composts. So once the cat park was finished we moved her litter tray out there but happily she started just using the ground there for her toilet. It means I have to go out and pull on the gloves and lift out all her poo every week or so, and I put fresh sand in there from time to time – but compared with daily cleaning a litter tray, this is nothing! And because she can't get into the yard we don't have to worry about cat poo in the kids' sandpit.

2. Although she escapes, basically I feel that the bird population is safe, and the lizards to a lesser extent. I have lived with a cat that hunted and finding wings of red-backed kingfishers is not my idea of fun.
3. We do spend a lot of time inside, especially on hot summer days, and it is nice to have a cat for company. In winter she has lots of sunny spots to lie in, and the kids love her. It has really helped our family dynamic to have a pet – someone ‘around’ to distract them, who isn’t a human to fight with! She loves playing hunting games with them, and I think having children around definitely makes for a happier indoor cat.

So in conclusion I’m not sure that I’m a good role-model for an enviro-cat owner. My cat wants to escape all the time, and is desperate to kill every bird and lizard she sees. However she is still a very contented cat and my kids love her. I would too if she would just sit on my lap occasionally! Getting someone to build the cat park with new materials was expensive, and with the tip shop not so flash at the moment it might be even harder to find recycled materials. But I would still recommend to a frustrated catlover to give it a go, if they have the resources and the time to train a cat – or kids willing to catch one!

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- Big thanks to Sue for writing her enviro-cat article! It’d be fantastic to have more articles written by Garden for Wildlife members in our newsletters. If you’ve observed anything of interest on your block, or have knowledge in a particular area, please email your contributions to lfw@lowecol.com.au.
 - On **14th of June**, there will be a Land for Wildlife/Garden for Wildlife **workshop** run by **Wildcare**. It will take place at **Olive Pink Botanic Gardens** and will commence at **9am**. Tania McFadden from Wildcare will demonstrate how to best handle injured wildlife so it can most successfully be rehabilitated. A number of case studies will be considered, common mistakes explained and there will be plenty of time for questions. Please see the attached flyer for more details.
 - **A Field Guide to the Plants of the Barkly Region of the Northern Territory**
Jenny Purdie, Chris Materne and Andrew Bubb

Written primarily for the pastoralists in the Barkly region this book will also be of relevance to those with an interest in native plants in central Australia. It contains descriptions and photos of 374 plants with references (and some photos) of a further 125 species. The plant descriptions are written in plain English, there are also distribution maps, information on habitats, nutrition data and notes on whether a particular species is a weed, an indicator of pasture condition or contains a poison.

All profits from the book go to the Barkly Landcare and Conservation Association to be used for conservation projects such as weed control.

The book is available from www.barklylandcare.org.au (plus postage and handling) and, in Alice Springs, from Greening Australia, the Desert Park, Dymocks, Book City and Red Kangaroo Books.