

FERAL CATS - CAGE TRAPPING

EQUIPMENT

Trap type

Cage traps are the preferred technique for use in urban/residential areas because:

- fewer injuries are likely to result compared to leg-hold traps
- if domestic cats are trapped, they can be released unharmed
- if required, trapped feral cats can be transported away from the area to be destroyed humanely.

Cage traps are generally made of wire mesh and have a trigger device that closes the entrance of the trap when activated by the entry of a cat. Cats are notably cautious about entering enclosed spaces, therefore a trap size suitable for cats should be selected. While there are a number of trap types commercially available, here we describe using the Havahart Model 1089 cage trap.

The key elements of good cage traps are: treadle operated, catch effectively, easy to use, light weight, portable and cost effective. [Havahart](#) cage traps are recommended. Supplier information and detailed instructions and illustrations for using cage traps can be found in Appendix 3, DOC Restraining System 2 at the [back of this guideline](#).

TECHNIQUE

Trap layout

- Effective population control in areas where cats are abundant (see below) requires an extensive trap layout: set traps 100-200 metres apart along linear landscape features (fence lines, forest edges, waterways, roads and tracks), in isolated patches of cover and other preferred microhabitat, and in areas with high prey abundance. There should be at least one trap station within a cat's home range. They have large (45.8-2083 ha), often over-lapping, home ranges [1]. Densities of feral cats, where measured, range from 0.19 cats/km to 1.18 cats/ha. the highest densities are in areas with the most prey e.g. seabird islands, farmland and/or high rabbit population areas.
- Cat abundance is strongly correlated with food availability.
- Highest numbers of cats tend to be concentrated around humans settlements, causing problems in nearby habitats.
- Localised threatened species protection requires an intensive trap layout: set traps about 50 metres apart around the area being protected. There must be enough traps available to be confident a cat will encounter a trap.
- In areas of dense vegetation, consider cutting tracks if none exist. Tracks are often utilised by cats in this type of habitat.
- Supplementary trapping around farm buildings, offal pits and rubbish dumps may help reduce the cat population and slow reinvasion.
- The large home range of cats means these animals may be the same ones entering conservation areas.

- A good track infrastructure is important, and each trap station numbered for ease of relocation and data collection. This reduces the risk of missing a trap during checking and allows capture data to be related to each trap site.
- Look for fresh sign when locating additional traps or consider moving those traps which are not catching animals. Individual cats follow particular routes and the areas they hunt can sometimes be very specific, taking the trap to the cat often works.

Timing of operations

- Timing is critical and depends on the species being protected, and the biology of cats and their prey at the site. Examples:
 - To protect species such as brown teal, weka, dotterel, kiwi, and wrybill it is necessary to control cats year round.
 - To protect yellow eyed penguins, cat control should occur before (1 month+) and during the penguins' September – March breeding season.
- Cats may become more easily trapped during times of seasonal food shortage.

Dispatching trapped cats

Animals should be killed humanely and checked to ensure they are dead. Dispatch techniques should: minimise the potential for escape, reduce the suffering of the animal, and minimise stress or injury to the trapper. Techniques that meet these requirements are:

1. A single shot to the head from a .22 cal rimfire rifle.
 - Wait until the animal is motionless. Accuracy is important to ensure a humane death.
 - The shot should be taken from as close as possible e.g. 3-5 cm from head to ensure maximum impact of the bullet and reduce bullet ricochets.
 - If taking a frontal shot, the rifle should be aimed at the centre of the head slightly below a line drawn midway between the ears. If shooting from the side, aim behind the ear so that the shot passes through the brain towards the opposite eye. The shot should destroy the major centres at the back of the brain near the spinal cord[2]
 - Trappers must hold a firearms licence if a rifle is being used to despatch cats.
2. A blow to the head with a stout stick or heavy implement to render the animal unconscious immediately, followed by cutting the carotid arteries. This technique, for experienced trappers only, requires a quiet approach so as not to disturb the cat. Once disturbed the cat is likely to attempt to vigorously extricate itself from the trap, and would experience pain and suffering as a result.

Identifying Captured Cats as Feral

Before euthanasing cats, it is important that captured cats are correctly identified as feral, especially if conducting a control operation in an urban or residential area where domestic cats are present. Check the following:

- *Presence of collar.* Firstly check for a collar and any attached tags that could indicate the animal is a domestic pet.
- *Behaviour.* Cats can become very distressed and aggressive when caged, even domestic pets, although this behaviour may be more extreme in a feral cat, and domestics can be comparatively easy to handle.
- *Physical form.* In the absence of collars, and when aggressive distressed behaviour is being displayed, there are some differences in physical form between feral and domestic cats. Feral cats in good physical condition have overall increased muscle development, being especially noticeable around the head, neck and shoulder region. They are predominantly short-haired, with coat colour ranging across all of those seen for domestic cats – ginger, tortoise shell, black, grey and tabby – and, while some white markings may be present, for example on the paws or chest, completely white feral cats are very rare.

If conducting a control operation in an urban or residential area, it is advisable to notify the public and ask owners to keep domestic cats indoors during times when the cages will be open, i.e. overnight, to reduce the chance of capturing a domestic cat.

Maintenance of traps

New Traps

These traps do not need treating to prevent rusting before being used. The catch on the trigger mechanism should be waxed to ensure it operates smoothly.

Traps in use

Regular maintenance of traps is essential, to ensure the door closes quickly and cleanly. The catch on the trigger mechanism should be waxed periodically.

Bait/lure

The key elements are: high palatability, doesn't attract non-targets, easy to use and cheap.

- Where possible, baits should consist of local food sources used by cats.
 - Cats are flexible and opportunist in their diet. The most effective baits will differ with location and natural diet of cats.
- Effective baits include: Meat - fresh and salted rabbit, hare, and possum and fish (fresh/frozen/salted).
- Baits should be changed regularly (timing will differ depending on environmental conditions) and disposed of away from the trap. Rotting bait close to the trap may deter cats.
- Pre-baiting traps may increase capture rates. If trap catch rate drops off, changing the bait type may result in more captures. Individual cats can become shy of particular baits through previous failed captures or a natural dislike for a particular bait type.
- Cats which escape from poorly set traps are often particularly hard to catch again.

STANDARDS

Animal Welfare

- Under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 all restraining (including cage) traps must be checked daily within 12 hours after sunrise.

SUSTAINING CONTROL OVER THE LONG TERM

- Monitoring conservation outcomes helps to make control programmes more effective and efficient over the long term. Control operations are useless unless outcomes are achieved.
- Currently there is no effective monitoring technique for feral cat control operations.
- Shooting and cage trapping can be used to supplement leg hold trapping.

LIMITATIONS

- Cage trapping is primarily a supplementary technique to other methods of controlling cats. It is mainly used in areas where there are concerns about catching native non-targets domestic cats, dogs, farm animals and/or people especially children.
- Cage trapping is not suitable for trapping over large areas. The traps are large and bulky to transport.
- Cage trapping is labour intensive. The traps must be checked daily within 12 hours after sunrise.
- In some environments cage traps may not be as effective as ground set leg hold traps [3].
- Non-target interference via removing bait (e.g. rodents, wasps, possums) or closing traps (getting caught or setting off) can affect ability to catch cats.
- Careful placement of traps in high public usage areas is important. Cats are highly valued by many people.
- Cats may be deliberately or negligently released by members of the public, creating an ongoing problem that may be better addressed by publicity around the programme.

REFERENCES:

1. Gillies, C.; and Fitzgerald, M. B. 2005. Feral cat. Pages 308-326 in King, C. M., editor. The Handbook of New Zealand Mammals. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
2. Sharp, T.; and Saunders, G. 2005. Trapping of feral cats using cage traps. Standard Operating Procedure CAT002-1 - Humane pest animal control, NSW Department of Primary Industries, Orange, NSW, Australia.
3. Dowding, J. E. 2000. Trapping and radio-collaring of feral cats on Tuhua (Mayor Island) April-May 2000. DM Consultants report. Department of Conservation, Bay of Plenty Conservancy, Rotorua, New Zealand.