

Love Cats, Love Wildlife? You Can Do Both

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Sugar gliders are a tiny Australian marsupial that could fit inside your palm. They spend most of their time up in the trees, where they nest inside tree hollows.

I didn't realise they lived in my backyard, until the neighbours' fat black cat (whose athletic ability I had seriously underestimated), caught and delivered one to me, dying on our doorstep.

This was ten years ago now; I've always loved cats, and animals generally, but I wasn't aware that the two shouldn't mix.



The **Australian sugar glider** (*Petaurus breviceps*) is a mysterious animal that may be secretly living in tree hollows in your backyard. Check out the membrane between its limbs; these “wings” allow sugar gliders to glide up to 50m between trees!



In 2014 we adopted the neighbours' fat black cat (affectionately named Fat Boii) and transitioned him to an indoor lifestyle with supervised outdoor time. Our main goal is to keep him safe from snakes which we often see in summer in Blackheath, but it also allows us to enjoy lots of wildlife visitors to our backyard — like our favourites, the wonga pigeons.

Over 3 million Australians have pet cats, and this number is increasing. In fact, the last nationwide survey by Animal Medicines Australia estimated that as of 2021 there were 4.9 million pet cats in Australia, a 35% increase from 3.7 million in 2019. This is not surprising – given their unique personalities and their playful, loveable, and sometimes mischievous antics.

But with this increased number comes a great concern for our native animals. Cats can jump up to six times their height, have incredible night vision, can hear sounds as far as 900m away and are very agile. This killer combination of skills makes cats the perfect predator.

Despite this, research suggests that the majority of cat owners (70%) allow their cats to freely roam outside, all or part of the day.

This is problematic – for both the cats themselves, as well as our local wildlife.

According to RSPCA NSW, cats can live up to ten years longer if kept safely at home. When cats are allowed to freely roam, they are at greater risk of being hit by a car, catching a disease or parasite, getting lost or stolen, or getting injured in a cat fight or dog attack.

Unfortunately, we also know that when allowed to roam, most cats will hunt, regardless of whether they've been fed or not. It's their natural instincts.

Across Australia, pet cats that are allowed to freely roam outside are estimated to kill a 241 million native animals annually. This equates to an average of 110 native animals killed each year, per free-roaming, hunting pet cat.

Although we can't change the nature of pet cats, we can support better choices by cat owners.

The best solution to keep cats safe and prevent them from preying on native animals is for owners to keep them indoors and only provide controlled access to the outdoors. This might look like a cat run, cat-proof fencing, taking cats for a walk on a harness and leash, or similar.



There are many ways to create a safe space for your cat, including home-made enclosures fashioned out of recycled materials. My friend created these removeable window and verandah boxes for their rental to give their two Russian Blue cats safe access to the outdoors. They love lazing in the sun!

This ensures the cat's safety, while allowing local wildlife to thrive. And as we all know, the Blue Mountains is a hub for wildlife — with over 172 threatened species found in the greater area, with at least 26 threatened animals found in our townships.

In 2021, Blue Mountains City Council was selected as a participant in the 'Keeping Cats Safe at Home Project', a project being implemented by the RSPCA NSW, funded by the NSW Environmental Trust. RSPCA NSW are working with council to deliver initiatives to reduce the number of roaming pet cats, such as education programs and subsidies for desexing.

But education doesn't work alone — we also need stronger laws, to help create a strong culture around keeping cats at home.

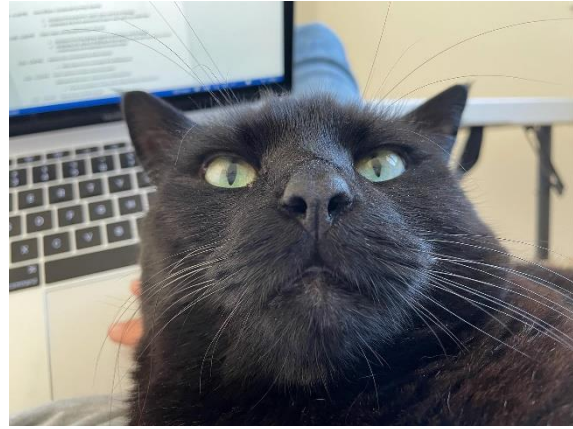
Currently, councils have no powers to enforce a cat curfew, let alone a 24-hour 'cats at home' policy.

A minor amendment to the NSW *Companion Animal Act* 1998 that would allow councils to set and enforce local policies to keep cats at home, in line with communities' needs, would be a step in the right direction. These powers already exist in other states, including Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia — NSW is really behind.

We all love animals. You can help protect them and create a safe environment for cats and wildlife by writing to your local representatives this election and asking them to:

- Amend the *Companion Animals Act* to allow local governments to enforce cat containment at a local level.
- Providing additional funding to local governments to enforce responsible pet ownership legislation.

- Increasing investment in education and subsidy programs that support the responsible cat ownership measures of: containment, desexing, identification and registration.



Fat Boii is now 15 years old and he's the best companion – sometimes he gets jealous of all the time I spend working at the computer though. I've always loved cats, and by keeping my cat inside, I can protect wildlife too.

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