

The Sandpiper

Dec. 2022/Jan. 2023



Redwood Region Audubon Society

www.rras.org

Please join RRAS at 7:30 pm on Wednesday, December 7th for an orientation on the upcoming 123rd Christmas Bird Count!

Sean McAllister, Tony Kurz, and Ken Burton will discuss the counts they will be leading as well as the Del Norte and Willow Creek counts.

Hot drinks and goodies will be served at 7 p.m., so bring a mug to enjoy cider, cocoa, or shade-grown coffee. Please come fragrance-free. In-person at Masonic Lodge, 251 Bayside Road, Arcata, or attend virtually on Zoom. **All welcome!**

The Centerville count is on January 1, and is the oldest of our local counts. The origin of this CBC has been traced back to 1947, when Dr. Clarence Crane and his wife Ruth of Ferndale began *The Humboldt County New Year's Bird Count* with their children and extended family. Ruth always made Boston Baked Beans and coleslaw for the participants after the count. A very homey affair. The event was eventually adopted as one of the Audubon Society's annual CBCs, with formal record-keeping dating back to 1962. Local birder-biologist, Sean McAllister, has been organizing the event since 2015. Contact Sean at (707) 496-8790.

The Arcata count is on December 17, and was first organized by John Sterling in 1984 and has become one of the highest recording counts in our area. This circle is comprised of coastal habitat that includes: ocean, bay, saltmarsh, and freshwater estuary. It also covers a good deal of pastureland, coastal forest (conifer/riparian), and urban habitat. Tony Kurz is currently the compiler for the Arcata Christmas Bird Count and has been for the last six years. Contact Tony at (559) 333-0893.

The Del Norte count was begun in 1962 by Paul Rail, and Gary and Lauren Lester continued this very popular count. The count circle includes Point St. George, all of Crescent City and as far east as Gasquet. This circle allows for a generous amount of coastal habitat as well as a bit of offshore waters. The count this year is on December 18, compiled by Lucas Brug. Contact Lucas at (707) 954-1189.

The Willow Creek count was started by David Anderson and Roger Weiss in 1976. Lately, and this year, the count is led by Birgitte Elbek and is scheduled for Wednesday, December 21st. Contact Birgitte at (707) 267-4140.

The Tall Trees count was started in 2012 by Ken Burton who remains the compiler. The count circle is centered on the Tall Trees Grove in Redwood National Park. A few species that are regular on this count, such as Ruffed Grouse and White-breasted Nuthatch, are not typically found on any of the other counts in the region. Contact Ken at (707) 499-1146.

Right: Clockwise from top left: Coppersmith Barbet, Emerald Dove, Fork-Tailed Drongo, and Indian White-eye. All photos by Karthik Sai.

"Vihangam" – Birds and Birdwatching in India – January 2023!

(Vihangam means birds flying, or birds-eye, in the Sanskrit language.)

Please join RRAS at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, January 18, for a program about birdwatching and the incredible birds of India. Presenter, Karthik Sai, will deliver the presentation via Zoom from India (see our website for link). Mr. Sai guided our RRAS president, Gail Kenny, and her family, on an amazing bird excursion while she was in Southern India this past August.

Mr. Sai is a wildlife researcher, photographer, guide, and conservationist. He goes by "Bird Man," in Tirupati, India where he works as a wildlife consultant to Tirupati Wildlife Management Division and a wildlife biologist at Sri Venkateswara National Park. Mr. Sai has been passionate about wildlife photography since childhood. As a Tirupati native, he always had a dream to photograph birds and animals in Seshachalam forest which is home to 215 species of birds. Mr. Sai has photographed 179 of them, and 574 bird species in India. He has an MA in Wildlife Sciences and a diploma in Ornithology.

Hot drinks and goodies will be served at 7 p.m.



FIELD TRIPS IN DECEMBER & JANUARY!

Please watch our website for more information on the monthly Women and Girls' Birding Walk, and more trips in January 2023.

Sat. Dec. 3rd – 8:30-11am. Birding at Arcata Marsh, led by Gary Friedrichsen. Bring binoculars and a scope if you have one and meet at the south end of I Street (Klopp Lake). Reservations not required.

Sun. Dec. 4th – 9am. Join Kathryn Wendel for the **Women & Girls' Monthly Bird Walk** in Elk River. Meet in the parking lot at the end of Hilfiker Lane, in Eureka. Bring your binoculars and let's see what we can spot! *Contact Kathryn at (707) 834-7134 for more information.*

Sat. Dec. 10th – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Larry Karsteadt.

Sun. Dec. 11th – 9-11am. Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge with leader Ralph Bucher. Meet at the Visitor Center.

Sat. Dec. 17th – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Keith Slauson.

Sun. Dec. 18th – 9-11am. Ralph Bucher will lead a walk on the Eureka Waterfront. This trail is paved and is wheelchair accessible.

Sat. Dec. 24th – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Kathryn Wendel.

Sat. Dec. 24th – 9-11am. Wigi Wetlands Volunteer Workday. *Contact Jeremy at jeremy.cashen@yahoo.com or (214) 605-7368 for more info.*

Sat. Dec. 31st – 8:30-11am. Arcata Marsh, led by Ken Burton.

Sat. Dec. 17th + Jan. 21st – 10-12. **Beginning Birdwatching & Project Feederwatch** at Jacoby Creek School garden on Bayside: Every third Saturday through April. Family-friendly, all ages welcome! *Contact Denise Seeger at daseeger@gmail.com for more info.*

Sat. January 7th – 7:30am-4pm. Join field trip leader Rob Fowler for a free birding trip focused on finding winter rarities. This trip will start in Arcata and end in the Ferndale area. Meet at the Arcata Marsh G Street parking lot, bring a lunch, dress warm, heavy rain cancels. *Contact Rob at (707) 616-9841.*

Sat. January 21st – 9-11am. Join a Cal Poly Humboldt waterfowl and wetlands lecturer for birding at the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge frequently hosts large flocks of geese, and many other species. Dress warm and bring binoculars or a scope.

**Contact Ralph at thebook@reninet.com for any walks he leads and all Marsh walks.*

**Contact Field Trip Chair, Janelle Chojnacki at janelle.choj@gmail.com for more information on all other walks, unless otherwise specified.*

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Kid's Korner **WOWZA WILDLIFE!** By Leslie Scopes Anderson



WHERE IN THE WORLD?

American Avocets live in our area all year. They can be seen along shores at the Arcata Marsh & Wildlife Sanctuary. They nest on the ground – walk carefully!

FUN FACTS:

American Avocets are shorebirds who's heads turn from gray to reddish-tan in breeding season. They are very protective of their young and chase away any bird that comes near – even big ducks & egrets.



President's Column

By Gail Kenny

In mid-October I found a pile of feather remains in my yard. They were mostly songbird-sized wing and tail, barred feathers; black, brown, and tan colors, with a bit of white in the tail feathers. I was curious about what bird it could have been. It was on a lawn at the side of my neighbor's yard, which is a large grassy corner lot. My first guess was a Bewick's Wren, but the white in the tail feathers didn't fit, and Bewick's Wren would be unusual in my yard in downtown Trinidad.

Then I remembered the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Feather Atlas at www.fws.gov/lab/featheratlas/. It now has a feather ID feature where you can choose feather pattern, colors, size, position, and type of bird. When I first used the feather atlas it didn't have this feature. You just picked birds you thought it might be and compared the feathers. The feather ID did not disappoint. I entered my data, and it came up with Western Meadowlark! I reviewed the pictures of the Western Meadowlark is not a common yard bird. I may have fields in my neighborhood. My feathers and agreed with it. I only noticed it a few times around next question was what ate it? I can't rule out Cooper's Hawk. These three are the most likely predators.

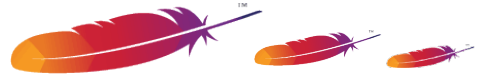


All that was left were a few tail feathers. Some of the feather were bitten off. It was eaten on the branches above the location. There hearing that a family of gray foxes is fox scat around our yard confirmed this.

I can't rule out Cooper's Hawk. These three

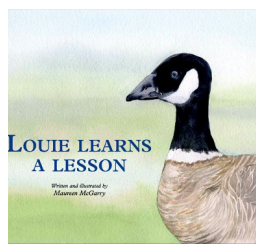
If you'd like to become more active with RRAS, we are still looking for Field Trip committee members, and a Treasurer. Please email me at gailkenny@gmail.com if you'd like to know more about these volunteer roles, and how you can help!

Center: The feathers Gail found in her yard.



Featured Local Artist: Maureen McGarry

By Gina Rogers



They're back! The first Humboldt County eBird reports for Aleutian Cackling Geese (*Branta hutchinsii*) were filed in mid-September, over two weeks earlier than usual, and by the beginning of October you could hear the big flocks of geese coming in for a landing in their favorite spots around our area's wetlands, marshes, and farmlands.

This sight brings to mind local artist and author Maureen McGarry's children's book, *Louie Learns a Lesson*. It features watercolor paintings of Aleutian Geese and tells the story of how they almost became extinct because of the foxes introduced to their Aleutian Island breeding grounds as part of developing a fur industry there. McGarry self-published the book in 2021. While the drawings came easily to her, the research and finding the right words was something new for someone who is primarily a visual artist.

McGarry's work has always centered on interpreting the elegant beauty of nature. She came to Humboldt County in 1975 to study art at Cal Poly Humboldt and has been here ever since. She is currently living in Bayside, with her art studio in Arcata. In her painting, she notes, "I experimented with various mediums (and still do sometimes), but I always return to watercolors for their pure pigments, and the simplicity of water as their solvent. For me, painting with watercolors as my medium is what is closest to nature."

McGarry enjoys painting birds. Their amazing ability to fly, something humans can't do, gives them a totally different perspective on the world that she tries to capture. But she had a broader purpose in mind when

she started writing *Louie Learns a Lesson*. The Aleutian Geese have proven to be so resilient. This species was one of the first animals designated as endangered in 1967, under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966. Over time, conservation initiatives from the Aleutian Canada Goose Recovery Program helped them recover, and they were removed from the list of ESA-listed threatened and endangered species in 2001. Now over 60,000 can be found in the Humboldt Bay area at their peak in the spring. The book's goal is to show children how something humans caused was then fixed, and in the preface, she encourages them to become guardians of the natural world.

You can view more of Maureen's artwork at www.maureenmcgarry.com, and copies of *Louie Learns a Lesson* are available at the Trinidad Coastal Land Trust office and the Arcata Marsh Interpretive Center.



Top left: Cover of Maureen McGarry's book. Above: "In Flight," a watercolor illustration in *Louie Learns a Lesson*, showing two Aleutian Cackling Geese flying over Bayside near Gannon Slough. (Sunny Brae Middle School is the large gray area right above the goose on the right's nose).

For the Love of Wildlife! (Part II) ~ an interview with local Wildlife Rehabilitator, Monte Merrick, by Harriet Hill



In Part I of the interview with Monte Merrick, Director of Humboldt Wildlife Care Center (HWCC) and Bird Ally X (see the September 2022 *Sandpiper*), Monte talked about the history of HWCC, its mission, and what motivates him, the staff, and volunteers. Here, he describes some daily encounters with animals and how their work relates to the larger issues of species decline and human intervention.

HH: How many animals do you treat annually?

MM: Ten years ago, we treated around 1000 to 1200 animals annually, but each year that number has increased – in 2020, we treated 1568, and in 2021 we treated 1612 patients.

HH: What is the most common injury?

MM: The single most common injury we see is cat attacks, followed quickly by window strikes, being hit by vehicles, and nest or habitat destruction, such as tree or limb removal. But orphaned patients make up the single largest group, nearly half of all patients, and most of these have unknown causes. Again, it's likely that tree-trimming, cars, windows, and cats would be the cause for most of the parental deaths.

HH: What species of animal is most frequently brought in?

MM: Virginia Opossum babies, almost always the result of a mother being hit by a car while her babies are in her pouch, are the number one mammal admitted over the last ten years, with Northern Raccoons coming second. Western Gulls are our most frequent avian patient, followed by Common Murres. Generally, birds make up nearly three-quarters of our caseload. Of course, birds are common neighbors in every human community, and such a part of everyone's daily life, it's no wonder why.

HH: What is the most unusual bird you have had to treat?

MM: Twice I was privileged to be the primary caregiver for a Magnificent Frigatebird. The first bird had been blown off course and was found in British Columbia during the winter of 2003–2004 and was sent to the facility where I worked in Los Angeles. Truly magnificent! The other bird was found in Healdsburg in 2008 and treated at the facility where I worked just outside of the Bay Area in Fairfield. Those were both patients who I will remember as long as I can remember anything.

HH: Briefly describe your best and worst days at HWCC.

MM: As the person responsible for ensuring we have the resources to meet our mission, the worst days at work definitely involve that aspect – the stress over money, in other words. But the part of providing care that hits me hardest is when a group of orphans for some reason stops thriving – dehydration, diarrhea, parasites, bacterial infections, and viruses can be difficult to diagnose, and many aren't realistically treatable. When wild babies don't make it, I can sometimes feel like the worst person in the world, the failures cut deep.

Conversely, the success of an orphan is the greatest joy. The very best day of work was releasing one of our Raccoon orphans after four months of care, into a remote tributary of a local river and seeing her immediately dash into the water and catch and eat a small fish. Having a close-knit staff, including my heavily relied upon assistant, Lucinda Adamson, helps turn bad days around in real, measurable ways.

HH: How do you and your staff/volunteers handle the constant stress and grief of seeing animals in pain?

MM: As you might imagine, gallows humor can sometimes be a balm on the grief we experience, but what really makes the stress and grief bearable is learning from every success and every failure. When I lead an orientation for new volunteers, or when I give a facility tour, I emphasize that every innovation in care that I've ever made or learned from another came from a patient's death. One of the worst things you can do to a wild animal is hold them captive. Every effort has to be made to mitigate the stress and danger of captivity so that the patient can survive our care, thrive under it, and be released back to their wild freedom.

HH: If animals are common human or native wildlife pests, such as Norway Rats and House Sparrows, do you still treat them?

MM: Our policy and protocols regarding introduced species are aimed at recognizing that we live in a time of steep native species decline, while treating all animals with the respect that their sentience warrants. We do not offer long-term treatment for any introduced species which peer-reviewed scientific study has determined is deleterious to native species. We do not regard natural range expansion, even if accomplished because of human changes in the environment, such as Anna's Hummingbird range expansion into the Northwest, as being introduced. We do not regard how the Wild responds to a human-modified world as ours to manage.

By that token, if we are brought a fledgling of an introduced species, such as a House Sparrow or Starling, and we know where the family is and the fledgling has no injuries or any other reason to be in care, we will return them to their family. But we do not provide long term treatment for these species at this time. This is a serious issue within our profession, and there is not universal agreement on what is the most ethical position. Many rehabilitators treat all introduced species. We do provide care to one introduced species – Rock Pigeons, because regular searches of the literature have shown no deleterious impact on native songbirds. Personally, I have deep admiration for all Columbiformes!

HH: Are you aware of changes in our tri-county region (Humboldt, Trinity, and Del Norte) that have affected wildlife since you started working here?

MM: Yes, I have noticed a couple changes. The first thing is very positive, and that is the changes made to public boat launches and fish cleaning stations that have largely ended the problem of juvenile Brown Pelicans becoming contaminated by fish waste and dying unless rescued. Another however is kind of frightening, and that's the increased frequency of wild animals killed, injured, and displaced by fire. Each year for the last four years we've treated or helped rescue wild animals, including fawns and mountain lion kittens, who were caught in the fires that have occurred at the periphery of our region, such as Ruth Lake and Weaverville.

HH: If you had one or two messages for the public in terms of reducing wildlife injuries, what would they be?

MM: There is one message that can't be expressed enough: free-roaming domestic cats are one of the greatest threats to wildlife – it's an injustice. Wildlife has a right to the space that cats have invaded; a human-created problem. Moreover, their free-roaming status seriously threatens cats, as is easily seen in the average life span difference between free-roaming and contained cats. Indoor cats, catio cats, leashed cats, and supervised cats, are longer lived and healthier, and our wild neighbors get to live their natural lives unmolested by one more anthropogenic nightmare.



Above left: Monte and volunteers treat a juvenile Brown Pelican (with the head kept covered to reduce stress). Above: **Freedom!** Board member and HWCC intern, Nora Chatmon, releases a successfully treated Barn Owl. Photos by Laura Corsiglia.

HH: What is your most pressing challenge right now?

MM: Our current lease ends at the end of this year. It took us until this summer to locate a property that fits our needs and is affordable (the sale price is a very good deal and significantly less than any other property we have seen). But the costs of moving have to come from the community. The amount we need to raise by the end of this year in order to complete this transition – in essence a transformation – is more than any goal we've ever set. We need to raise a down payment and the cost of getting enough infrastructure up and running at our new facility so that our work continues without interruption while we dismantle and clear the facility we currently occupy. It will be donations and volunteer labor that will get us through. To donate to HWCC/BAX, go to their website at <https://birdallyx.net/rare-opportunity-and-the-only-option-we-have-to-continue-our-work/>, or call (707) 822–8839.



Above: Steven, by Kathryn Wendel.

“Bird Talk Around Town,” by Kathryn Wendel
Featuring interviews with locals, on all things bird!

Kathryn, an RRAS Board member, met Steven through a friend at St. Joseph’s Hospital and asked his opinion:

Kathryn: Hello Steven, thank you so much for your time in sharing the perspective of a non-birder community member about local bird conservation. Would you mind telling me a few details about yourself?

Steven: Sure, I’m 31 years old and I work as a security guard at Saint Joseph’s Hospital. I’ve never heard of the Audubon Society before talking with you, but I do like birds and I support bird conservation.

Kathryn: That’s great, yes, the Audubon Society actively works to promote awareness about local issues affecting bird conservation. In your opinion, as someone who is supportive of bird conservation, if you had to choose between voting to preserve bird populations or voting for urban development that could create jobs but threaten bird populations, how would you vote?

Steven: I would definitely vote to preserve bird populations; I think birds are better than people. And I think the bay should be left as it is for wildlife.

Kathryn: So how do you feel about the proposed Nordic Aquafarm that may be built here along the coast in Humboldt County?

Steven: I never heard of that until now, but I would be against it. I won’t be benefiting from it much because as just a regular citizen here, I won’t be making any money off of it, not a dime. But if it did get built, I’m worried about a tsunami washing GMO fish into the bay and ocean.

Kathryn: That’s right, tsunamis are certainly a threat along the coast line here, especially on the North Spit. Alright, let’s finish up and ask a fun question: what’s your favorite bird?

Steven: Great Horned Owls, I think they’re cool because not only are they big, brown birds, but they are also really hard to spot. And I like hearing them hoot at night too!

**If you’d like to send in an interview with locals on birds, contact the editor at; giseleandco@gmail.com.*

Submarine or Pied-billed Grebe?

By Jeremy Cashen



Over the summer my wife, Breana DeMatto and I, were hiking and birding in Lassen National Park. Walking around a beautiful, but disregarded pond we spotted a Pied-billed Grebe and its juvenile counterpart. Entranced by the youngling and parent, we watched in serene silence as they took turns diving down and fishing for what lay below. While watching these two grebes, we noticed an odd sight; the head of some small animal floating casually through the water. Using our handy-dandy

binoculars we were able to discern that it was another adult Pied-billed Grebe moving slowly through the pond with just the top of its head sticking out of the water. We sat and watched curiously for fifteen or so minutes, questioning this strange behavior. “It looks like a little stealth ninja grebe trying to sneak-attack something,” I remarked to Breana. We eventually left to continue our hike and said goodbye to the eyes, nostrils, and head of our undercover grebe friend.

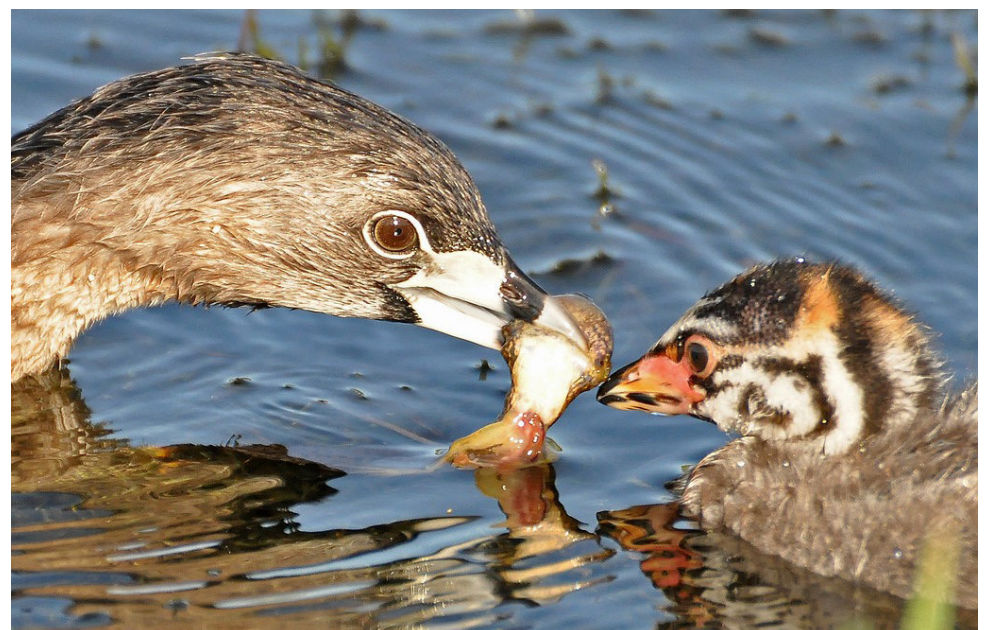
After a minute of research back home I learned, fascinatingly, that Pied-billed Grebes can, like a submarine, control their own buoyancy, allowing them to float at any level in the water. They do this by controlling how much water gets trapped in their feathers. Many times, to avoid predation, they will float around like an alligator, keeping only the top of their head from being submerged.

Unlike an alligator and much like a submarine, Pied-billed Grebes have virtually no tail. But, where they lack in one feature, they have a definitive advantage in another. The placement of their legs, unlike many birds, is at the end of their body. In fact, the Pied-billed Grebe is the only surviving member of the genus *Podilymbus*, which literally translates to “feet at the buttocks.” This placement allows them to propel themselves through water in a very skilled manner. Additionally, they have lobed, not webbed, feet. These two features, as well as controlled buoyancy, help to make them very adept divers. And divers they sure are! Spotting a Pied-billed Grebe usually means seeing it float around for a quarter of the time and seeing it disappear under the murky depths for the other three quarters. It can be a frustrating and fun undertaking to try and capture a picture of these steadfast swimmers. You have to predict where they will surface and try to snap a good one in the mere seconds before they dive again. Their physiology makes them great in the water, but very clunky and awkward on land. You may never even spot a Pied-billed Grebe out of its aquatic habitat. I know I never have.

Possibly my two favorite features of the Pied-billed Grebe are their bills and their calls. They have chunky bills, compared to other grebe species, that are used to eat large crustaceans, a variety of fish, amphibians, insects, and other invertebrates. Their

bills look pretty normal on juveniles and non-breeding individuals, but, when breeding, they get a beautiful silver color with a big vertical stripe of black right down the middle. It’s quite conspicuous and noticeable from a far distance away without binoculars. As beautiful as their bills are, their calls are even more striking. A hauntingly beautiful call emanates from them with an eeriness similar to loons. Loon calls are often used in Hollywood movies to convey a ghostly atmosphere, but I believe the Pied-billed Grebe can give any loon a run for its money. Equally impressive to the sound of their call is its amplification. It’s hard to believe that the intensity of the call is able to come from such a modest body size.

Although Pied-billed Grebes are common across much of North America, they are always an absolute pleasure to behold. Look for them in freshwater lakes and ponds with emergent vegetation, slow-moving rivers, and even brackish ponds. They’re small and frequently under water, but their shape is recognizable and their call is unique, so there’s a good chance you’ll be able to spot these diving dinosaurs. Look for them at the Arcata Marsh and Humboldt Wildlife Sanctuary. I see a few just about every time I go. Regardless of your reason, get outside and enjoy nature. The Pied-billed Grebe will be waiting for you!



Top left: Pied-billed Grebe, taken by Jeremy in Lassen National Park. Above: A Pied-billed Grebe parent, with body below water’s surface, feeds her chick. By Jessie, courtesy of Flickr.

DID YOU KNOW? From the RRAS Cat & Bird Safety Committee

Did you know that regularly-fed cats still prey on wildlife? Researchers at Columbia and Fordham Universities studied the diets of cats living in “colonies” in urban parks on Staten Island NYC. The cats were regularly fed by humans, yet 58.2% of scat samples contained DNA of natural prey (94.3% contained cat food, showing that the cats were eating food left for them by humans). Ten of the sixteen types of wild prey were birds. Please contain your cuddly killer in-doors, on a harness leash, or in a catio. Thank you!

Source: Journal of Urban Ecology, October 2021