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FERAL CAT BEHAVIOUR AND ECOLOGY

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A study is currently being undertaken of the population ecology of the feral cat in Portsmouth Dockyard, and since an investigation of this type has apparently not been conducted before, it was felt that some of the aspects of cat ecology and behaviour that have so far come to light may be of interest to those who work with cats, both in professional and amateur capacities. It should be stressed, however, that the study is still in the data-collecting phase, and no firm conclusions can as yet be drawn.

Portsmouth dockyard is a Naval base, bounded to North and West by sea (or at any rate by water). and to East and South by a high wall, in which there are six gates, four of which are usually closed. Thus the cat population is almost completely isolated, the exceptions being cats that wander in or out of the gates, and the few kittens that are 'dumped' in the yard.

The Dockyard measures about a mile in both North-South and East-West directions, but is irregular in shape and includes large basins and docks, and the actual land area is only about 90-100 hectares. From observations of the cats, which can be recognised by their coat patterns etc., it seems that there are about 300 cats living in the Dockyard at any one time.

The present method of data collection is to patrol areas of the Dockyard trying to cover all parts of each area, noting down where each cat is seen, the date, time, location, what other cats are close to it or nearby, and any other factors that may be of interest, such as what it was doing, its general state of health, or its reproductive state. This gives data on range, size, feeding habits, natality and mortality (or disappearance), activity and mobility, annual cycles, social behaviour, etc., Some of these aspects will be covered more fully in a later part of the study.

Although many of the cats are fed (some very well), very few are handleable, and most will flee if approached. Nearly all the cats are entire, and are free to live and breed as they choose.

Probably the most immediately impressive observation is the sociability of the cats. Most females live with a group of other cats, numbering about 2 to 15, and usually including both male and females. It seems likely that all the females and young in a group are related. Members of a group are often seen with other group members, feeding, sleeping or sitting around, and some cats will stay with kittens while the mother is absent. Females with milk will suckle the kittens of another cat, and it is sometimes difficult to determine who the mother really is.

In addition to these groups there are nomadic toms, sometimes wandering over large areas. These cats may be loosely attached to one or more groups, and this class merges with that of the resident toms, who are often to be seen with other members of their group, and usually do not range very far.

It is interesting to note that the social structure of these feral cats is similar in some respects to that of wild lions, as described by Schaller in 'The Serengeti Lion'. The lion has, of course, always been considered as the only social cat, but I suspect that the solitary existence of most house cats is only due to the lack of related cats with which to socialise.

The home range area of the Dockyard cats varies considerably, even between the cats of the same sex in the same group. The group range size probably depends on the food supply, number of cats in the group, and the number of hiding and resting places, but the interaction of these factors may be complex. Individual range size seems to depend on the temperament of the cat. Cats with large ranges are always males, but the converse is not true. Some cats displayed a marked centre of activity, while other cats (especially nomads) are sighted fairly evenly throughout their ranges.

Most reproductive activity occurs in the spring and summer, but some cats also breed through the winter. Unfortunately the yearly trend in the population level cannot yet be determined, since some kittens are not seen until they are several months old, and adult cats cannot be considered to have left the population unless they are found dead (which is unusual) or have not been seen for at least five months.

Within this time a vanished cat is likely to turn up again, since there is an abundance of hiding places in the Dockyard.

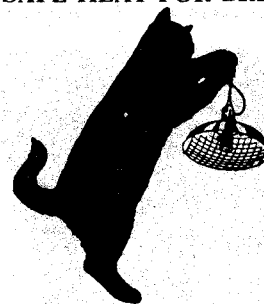
Many cats are fed regularly by Dockyard workers, either with cat food or with scraps, and cats also forage in the skips that are dotted around the Dockyard, in which ships dump their surplus food. How much cats supplement their diet with mice, cockroaches and crickets is not known, but there appears to be an ample supply of these in the yard.

The cats are generally fairly healthy, although many of the younger cats suffer bouts of 'flu, with running noses and clogged eyes. A number of cats also show clouding of one eye, which sometimes becomes completely opaque. It seems likely that feline enteritis accounts for a number of the kittens that vanish.

In general the cats seem to live happily and peacefully in the Dockyard, despite their status as a pest. Feral cats seem to be much more abundant than is usually suspected, and it is hoped that when this study is completed it will provide a useful insight into their previously unstudied way of life.

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