

On Dogs and Cats: Their Place on the Ranch

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Photos by Walt Wolff*

Of all the animals that have been domesticated by humans none have been more radically altered than the dog, and none have resisted this process as much as the cat. The only reason cats consent to live in or around our homes at all is because that's where most of the mice can be found, and they tend to seek out the cushiest existence they can find. If a neighbor feeds them better that's where they'll reside. Dogs, on the other hand, are the result of long, complicated breeding to achieve the most diverse hunting assistants and loyal companions. It's a rare household that does not have either a dog or cat or both in residence. These animals have become an integral part of our lives.

Even though the dog and cat are indisputably animals, they have absolutely no place in the wild ecosystem. I'm talking about dogs and cats that are non-neutered and allowed to run at large, or have been abandoned to fend for themselves in the wilderness. I'm not addressing those dogs who are kept inside secure dog enclosures or in the house except when they are hunting with their human masters, or are rounding up or guarding livestock. Nor am I talking about those dog owners who love their animals and are responsible enough to have perimeter trained them. This is not about neutered cats that either live inside dwellings or stick closeby to keep the mice under control.

The dogs and cats that have the potential to ruin the wilderness and upset the balance of nature are the ones that well-meaning but totally ignorant and irresponsible humans allow to run at large, or abandon in wild areas thinking they're "giving the animals their freedom". And the problem is compounded exponentially when these dogs and cats are non-neutered and allowed to breed in the wild.



We have a seriously growing problem on the ranch with cats, but mostly dogs, running loose. Most of us know who the guilty pet owners are. So far, our patience with these people has exceeded our annoyance, but it's inevitable that one of these days friendships will be stretched to the limit when someone gets bitten, or a dog has to be shot and killed because it has threatened ranch residents or wildlife once too often. The problem lies with some pet owners who simply refuse to believe that their beloved Rex or Snoopy has the potential to kill wildlife or bite a neighbor. In the case of dogs, even though they get their daily ration of dog food, if they run loose and join up with other loose dogs, they become a frantic, insatiable hunting machine and will inevitably run down wildlife and mame or kill it. Such dog packs are currently roaming the ranch and this is most frightening. Unlike cats, dogs are not equipped to make a fast, clean kill. They usually run a victim to exhaustion then pounce on the animal, tearing bites of flesh from a still-living creature. Most often you'll find dog kills with only a few

bites taken out of the carcass.

The big danger with cats running at large is if they are non-neutered and they breed with other non-neutered cats who run wild. Soon you'll have an impossible-to-deal-with population of feral cats. Feral cats can't be tamed or trapped. I know. I've tried. In state parks where I've worked I've tried to trap these wily creatures. They breed and breed and soon decimate the population of squirrels, voles, and many other small animals that many larger wild animals depend upon for food. It's not long before the whole balance of nature is tipped, and all kinds of problems result, one of which is the disappearance of the wildlife.

Dogs running loose will also bring about the disappearance of wildlife on the ranch. Dogs, by their very nature, disrupt the balance and mood of the forest, and the resident wildlife reacts to this noise and upheaval by withdrawing from their daily survival routines. Eventually, to survive, the wildlife will move out of the area.

If you consider yourself an intelligent and responsible resident of SFTR you will:

- Neuter all of your pets: puppies and kittens, dogs and cats (unless you're a registered breeder).
- Build a secure dog run for your dog and keep him in it except for when he's going to be with you. If your dog won't come when he's called, he needs to be on a leash.
- Never allow your dog to run loose when you're not at home, unless you're absolutely positive he's perimeter trained. He can guard your house much better if he's inside it rather than half a mile away annoying your neighbors.
- Never let your dog outside to run unattended, even if you're at home. This goes for cats, too, if you really care about them. We've had altogether too many instances of cherished pets getting eaten by wildlife. A cougar or coyote can't tell the difference between a pet and legitimate prey.
- Never allow an non-neutered cat out of the house under any circumstance.
- Never abandon any dog or cat into the wilderness thinking they "can fend for themselves". It's much kinder and more responsible to turn these unwanted animals over to the Humane Society or some other local organization like "Noah's Ark".

Keeping all this in mind, we can all continue to enjoy our furry domestic companions without provoking our neighbors to desperate acts or destroying the very wilderness we all came to the Santa Fe Trail Ranch for. Please, let's be good neighbors and responsible stewards of our wilderness area. In the process we will also be giving our dogs and cats the love and care they deserve.

Note: Hold the mouse over the picture to see the caption