

How feral animals impact Australian threatened species and biodiversity.

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Feral animals are having an alarming impact on our threatened species, even leading to the extinction of some. They are also negatively affecting our biodiversity and agricultural production. According to a 2021 final report from the Threatened Species Recovery Hub, species extinction is due to "accelerated habitat destruction, overexploitation, spread of invasive species, disease and global expansion of the human population". Roadkill is another major reason. These feral animals are a formidable threat, disrupting and killing our native wildlife - and they cause significant harm to our farming areas and biodiversity. There are numerous feral animals, which include cats, rabbits, foxes, camels, pigs, cane toads, goats, carp, tilapia and dogs.

Threatened species terminology

It is useful to understand the threatened species categories, which are listed under the Nature Conservation Act 1992, as

- vulnerable
- endangered
- critically endangered
- extinct in the wild
- extinct

The QLD government released a State of the Environment report in 2024, stating that during the previous five years, 48 new animal species have been listed as threatened.

(<https://www.stateoftheenvironment.detsi.qld.gov.au/biodiversity/species-and-habitat/threatened-fauna-species-numbers>)

Feral cats: a growing threat

Feral cats are one of the greatest threats to Australia's native wildlife. These predatory cats are a huge issue, and as such there is a Feral Cat Taskforce, established by the Australian Federal Government, to address this.

(<https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/invasive-species/feral-animals-australia/feral-cats/feral-cat-taskforce>) According to the taskforce, the cats hunt and kill native wildlife, spreading infectious diseases that can affect humans. The taskforce states they "threaten over 200 nationally listed threatened species" and "have already played a role in the extinction of more than 20 Australian mammal species". ABC News reported this year that approximately 3.2 million mammals and 1.2 million birds are killed across Australia each year by feral cats. These kinds of statistics are supported by the Invasive Species Council, which estimated in 2020 that each feral cat can kill around 700 reptiles, mammals and birds every year, and if we include large insects, this explodes to over 1,100 native fauna. More than two million cats are roaming in Australian landscapes. So, it is crucial to protect our threatened native wildlife and ensure a sustainable future for them and their habitats, that we urgently be proactive. Some councils in North-West QLD were even offering a \$10 bounty to help reduce the problem.

Scientists' management techniques in Northern Australia

A three-year project run by prominent conservation scientists Graeme Gillespie and John Woinarski, which finished in 2019, aimed to understand the relationship between fire regimes, feral cats and native wildlife, and to identify appropriate management techniques. They noted that "small mammal species in northern Australia have undergone catastrophic declines, including in key reserves such as Kakadu National Park...the project aims to guide management priorities to recover threatened mammals in monsoonal northern Australia".

(<https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/projects/responses-of-threatened-species-to-cats-and-fire-management-in-kakadu-and-northern-savannas>)

Organisations in this space

Protecting threatened species will require coordinated action from governments, conservation groups, Traditional Owners, and local communities. As expected, the state and Federal Governments have numerous levels of activity, universities such as QUT and JCU, local councils, Indigenous organisations, including rangers' programs, and many local wildlife groups. Internationally, there is another brilliant source informally called the Red List, which is organised by the IUCN, whereby thousands of scientists and highly reputable organisations in this field contribute to assessing the status of the world's biodiversity, which sadly is in decline. This is a comprehensive and invaluable list which is accessed by many leading authorities, and you can look at threatened species and vital information. Crucially, it guides us as to where and how threatened species can be saved. [IUCN Red List, Search a threatened species](#)

The Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water also host an excellent database where you can search for any species and check to see if it is threatened. It's a great website where you can search by both common name and/or scientific name, and where you can find the endangered species that you are seeking information about.

Threatened species in QLD

Some of these threatened species, for instance in Far North QLD, include the beautiful and majestic Southern Cassowary, the Mahogany Glider marsupial, the Northern Bettong, the Lemnoid Ringtail Possum, the Spectacled Flying Fox, the Northern Quoll, and the Golden-shouldered Parrot, which is from around Cape York, and whose predators also include feral cats. The Mahogany Glider is known by Traditional Owners from the Girramay Peoples as the Mungarru. The Northern Bettong is a small marsupial creature, which mainly lives in the Wet Tropics forests and its main predators are also feral cats.

Many frogs are threatened; it is likely four have already been lost, and another five are at moderate risk of extinction by 2040, as noted in the national environmental science program.



See above the yellow-spotted tree frog (Litoria castanea) which is likely already extinct. It is impacted by climate change, habitat loss and invasive fish. Image: David Hunter / DPIE NSW.

Another devastating feral animal

In Queensland, feral pigs cause immense damage to our threatened species and agricultural production. They were brought to Australia by the early settlers but are now considered an invasive species under the Biosecurity Act 2014. They cannot be legally "moved, fed, given away, sold, or released into the environment," and this Act mandates that we need to take all reasonable steps to reduce biosecurity risks that are posed by them. The adult boar can weigh a hefty 90-110 kg – and a herd of up to 400 was found in Cape York. It is estimated that up to 40 threatened species are at risk from these destructive animals. They carry a range of infectious diseases that are extremely harmful to threatened native wildlife and to humans.



Feral pigs at a roadside dam in QLD – photography by Neil Zoglauer, Flickr

How we can help protect threatened species

There are many activities and groups anyone can be involved in to help reduce the impact of feral predators on our native fauna - and try to help save species from extinction. For instance, FeralScan is a community pest animal control management web tool, where you can go and view current maps of the locations of where most harmful feral animals are found. You can add your own sightings, including uploading pictures, to add to our general knowledge. It is supported by the federal and N.S.W. governments and the Invasive Species Council. [FeralScan -record and check pest activity in your area](#). Further, joining local wildlife groups, supporting local council initiatives, engaging in effective social media, or if you own pets, restricting their ability to harm local wildlife- these are all activities you can do and so help towards reducing the decline of our threatened species.

(Transparency note. This paper was prepared with limited assistance from generative AI tools for research and language clarity. All research design, factual verification, analysis, ethical judgement, and conclusions are the responsibility of the volunteer contributor. AI was not used to generate data or citations.)

Sources

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