

Outdoor Cats Can Be a Challenge

By Janie Price

Roaming cats aren't against the law, but . . .

Those living in Pine Knoll Shores are almost certainly aware of our dog ordinances. It's not so straightforward with cats. The Pine Knoll Shores ordinances, "Sec. 6.1 Animals at large or on the beach strand," clearly states: "Cats maintained as household pets may be allowed to roam within the town, without leash, unless such cat regularly engages in conduct reasonably considered to be a nuisance to citizens within the town." This is where it gets tricky.

Nuisance laws are difficult to enforce, or in some cases to even quantify. An incident is not actually an "official" nuisance unless it is reported to the authorities—no matter how much it may annoy someone. While some nuisances, such as noise, can sometimes be measured, most people aren't walking around with sound meters. There's also the issue of background noise, distance from the source, etc.

While the case of a neighbor's cat using your yard as its litter box or terrorizing your cat on its own property is a definite problem, it becomes a nuisance only after you contact the police to report it. If it doesn't get reported, it's simply an annoyance that you've chosen to endure. While it may be awkward to approach a neighbor about the problem, that's probably the best first action to take.

If you don't have a productive exchange with the cat's owner (or if you don't want to confront your neighbor), your best recourse is to report it to the police. If the cat and its owner are clearly identifiable, and if it is a recurring problem, then it should be reported as such. If you don't want to take either of these actions, there's not much that can be done about the problem.

Pine Knoll Shores Police Chief Ryan Thompson says he doesn't remember a single report of a cat nuisance in the past seven years, but does say that a report will be handled by a police officer speaking to the reporting party and to the cat owner, if identified. If it is decided to try to capture the offending animal, Carteret County Animal Control will be called in to assist since our police department is not equipped to trap domestic animals. The county animal control office will be called in to assist with strays causing problems as well.

If you choose not to report the incident(s), you may consider attending a Board of Commissioners meeting and asking for a review of the ordinance regarding cats to consider tightening it up—and asking friends and neighbors who share your frustration to come to the same meeting to support your cause. You may decide to start a petition in support of your cause, or you may simply discourage the cat from coming into your yard with a water hose or a water gun. Just keep in mind—in the case of either a known owner or a stray, *nothing* can be done if it's not reported, and you're on your own.

It's also fair to mention to the owners of cats who roam: it really goes without saying that it's the responsibility of the cat owner to respond to a complaint about your animal leaving waste in your neighbor's flower beds. Beyond the fact that it's not fair for your neighbor to have to clean up after your animal, there are potential health risks with animal waste. Just because it's technically legal for a cat to roam, it doesn't make it right if it is fouling your neighbor's property.

While roaming cats are in danger from traffic on the roadways and from attack by stray or feral cats, perhaps a more meaningful caution to cat owners is that coyotes have been spotted around town, and they put your at-large animal at serious risk. We have received emails from Town Manager Brian Kramer about the number of cats that have disappeared on the Loblolly loop, but there was a recent incident on the other side of town. An elderly cat of an owner who lives near the country club insisted on going out one night recently because it was his habit to sleep on the upper deck at home. He was found on the country club property brutally killed, and a coyote is suspected. Your cats are not safe when they are out roaming.

We've all heard how difficult it is to herd cats, and it may take some creative thinking to control the behaviors of a cat that is accustomed to being outside. We pride ourselves on being a friendly town and it's a shame if a roaming cat damages relationships between neighbors. Once the police have to get involved, neighborly exchanges can get a little awkward, to say the least.

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