

## **Responsible Pet Ownership**

Pets can be a great source of enjoyment in our lives. They can be our companions, provide assistance, and can help to motivate us to get out for a walk. Many pet owners will say that their dog or cat is just like another member of the family. More households in Northern Ireland have dogs than in any other part of the UK and it is estimated that there are around 13 million dogs and 12 million cats in the UK.

However, no matter how cuddly and friendly our pets are to us, they are still predatory animals. Unfortunately, this means that they can have negative impacts on our wildlife. Dogs are a major cause of wildlife disturbance particularly for ground-nesting birds such as skylarks, lapwings, and meadow pipits, and can lead to them abandoning their nests and losing their eggs or chicks. Cats can also have devastating impacts on our songbird and mammal populations.

With one in nine species at risk of extinction in Northern Ireland, our wildlife needs all the help it can get.

**Here are a few tips to help keep our wildlife safe around pets:**

### **DOGS**

- Keep dogs on leads at nature reserves, where they are welcome, and heed any on-site signage to ensure that your dog isn't disturbing wildlife, or distressing grazing animals that look after the wildlife habitat. Make sure all dogs are kept on short leads in these areas.
- Please do not encourage your dog to swim in ponds, rivers or other water bodies. These areas are home to wildlife that your dog can disturb and there is also a risk of your pet getting injured.
- Beaches can be home to ground-nesting birds such as terns and ringed plover as well as other marine wildlife – so look out for signage which indicates areas where dogs are best to be kept on a lead.
- Pick up dog poo and dispose of it in dog waste bins or bring it home. Dog waste can be harmful for the environment, polluting water and killing invertebrates.
- Keep dogs on the lead or in at night when visiting the garden; this protects nocturnal wildlife such as hedgehogs.
- Make sure your pet is neutered; this prevents them from roaming.

### **CATS**

- Keep cats in between dusk and dawn; this is when they do most of their hunting and it makes a huge difference to the surrounding wildlife, especially bats, if they are in at night.
- Consider keeping your cat indoors or walk it on a leash.
- Make sure your cat has a collar and a bell to warn birds and other animals of their approach, giving them to flee.
- Make sure your cat is neutered; this prevents them from roaming and adding to the feral cat population.