Possums will eat the eggs, chicks and adults of native birds

YOU MIGHT EXPECT IT FROM THE hunting, shooting and fishing fraternity in the American Midwest. But you wouldn't expect it in New Zealand. Either New Zealanders are more bloodthirsty than I thought or some residents of North Canterbury, on the South Island, have lost the plot.

The North Canterbury Hunting Competition – a popular annual event for children and adults alike – recently announced a new category. It would encourage kids (aged 14 and under) to kill as many feral cats as possible for a cash prize of NZ$250 (£125). In an effort to sound vaguely responsible, organisers warned that prospective entrants would be expelled from the competition if they were to kill someone's pet cat by mistake.

The competition claims the fundraiser for the local school and pool "is about protecting our native birds and other vulnerable species". In previous years, encouraged by their parents, the children of North Canterbury have had a marvellous time competing to kill everything from pigs and deer to possums and hares. But killing cats was the final straw. The contemptible idea was dropped following a barrage of complaints and condemnation from animal welfare groups.

Don't get me wrong. There are some 2.5 million feral cats in New Zealand (and a further 1.2 million domestic cats) and the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand estimates that they could be responsible for the deaths of as many as 1.1 million native birds every year, not to mention bats, frogs, lizards and other native wildlife. These cats do need to be controlled in some way.

Evolution designed New Zealand's birds – many of which are flightless – in the good old days, before there was anything to eat them. There were no terrestrial mammals in the country (there were a few bats, which are mammals of course, but there were no *predatory* mammals). The native wildlife could run amok. Life was good.

But it was too good to be true. When the Maori and, later, the Europeans started to arrive, centuries ago, they brought a lot

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MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

of different animals with them – some on purpose, and some by mistake.

Suddenly, the country was full of hungry ferrets, stoats, weasels, rats, dogs, hedgehogs, possums – and cats. The new arrivals couldn't believe their luck. They found a smorgasbord of tasty wildlife with no idea that anything could possibly want to hurt them, let alone eat them. The native birds, in particular, were sitting ducks.

This is why, if you are a conservationist in New Zealand, the reality is that you have to be prepared to kill things. You have to kill alien species to save native species. Cats included.

Even if you are just a regular New Zealander, and not a conservationist, you are strongly encouraged to kill things. Every year, the town of Alexandra on the South Island, for example, conducts an annual Great Easter Bunny Hunt where children and

adults spend the weekend killing thousands of feral rabbits.

New Zealand is right to take a harsh approach in its determined effort to return the country to the pristine state it once was – and culling predators is broadly supported by the public. There is even a federal plan, dubbed Predator Free 2050, to eliminate the worst offenders (rats, stoats and possums) by the middle of the century. Adding cats to the hit-list, though, is a politically contentious issue.

It's not a question of whether these invasive felines should be culled, but who should do the killing? It's not rocket science – it should be undertaken only by experienced people using approved (and proven) humane methods.

Certainly not children. Far from handing them guns, and desensitising them to animal cruelty, we should be teaching them empathy towards animals. Ⓦ

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