

He Killed a Cat— To Save a Bird

Wildlife expert Jim Stevenson insists the feline he shot was a deadly predator. But to some in a small Texas town, she was a beloved pet



On a clear, blustery day last November, toll-booth attendant John Newland was at his post on the lonely two-lane San Luis Pass bridge in a remote section of south Texas's Galveston Island. Suddenly he heard gunfire. Running down a grassy embankment underneath the bridge, Newland found the fatally wounded victim: a gray-and-white tabby named Mama Cat.

Newland—who for the past five years has lovingly tended Mama and the colony of her fellow strays—immediately suspected who the perp might be, and his instincts proved correct. The triggerman was his longtime nemesis Jim Stevenson, 54, a local naturalist and bird expert who freely admits that he did Mama in. “The cat dropped like a rock,” he says, recalling how he carefully aimed his .22 before firing. “I figured I’d killed it instantly, which was what I wanted. I don’t want to see any animal suffer.”

In April a Galveston County grand jury indicted Stevenson on animal-cruelty charges. But on Galves-

“I decided that particular cat was better off dead,” says Stevenson, not far from where he shot Mama Cat.

ton Island, a stopover on one of the country's most active bird-migration routes, the controversy grows. Caroline Dorsett, executive director of the local animal shelter, admits that while the island "does have a problem with feral cats, we were appalled to hear about what [Stevenson] had done." Stevenson's supporters insist his actions are being misinterpreted. "He's not a cruel man," says his friend Luci Stubbs. "He's very much a biologist and a respecter of nature."

According to Stevenson, who heads



FERAL CAT VS. WILD BIRD

Herons (above), egrets, curlews and stilts are among the birds drawn to the wetlands of Galveston Island by its abundant supply of fish and worms.

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"I've buried more than a dozen dead cats out here," says Newland (at home with his pet cats).

the 250-member Galveston Ornithological Society, he spotted Mama Cat near the bridge stalking a flock of piping plovers—small black, white and brown shore birds on the federal endangered-species list. He then decided to do what he's been doing in his own yard for years: culling a feral-cat colony that threatens the local bird population. "I only shot the ones that used my bird feeder as a smorgasbord," he says. Newland, 69, is outraged. "I think he enjoyed killing them all. He hates cats."

For Paige Santell, assistant criminal D.A. for Galveston County, the case against Stevenson—who faces a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine—hinges on whether she can prove that Mama Cat was truly owned by Newland, since at the time of the shooting, Texas law did not deem it a crime to shoot a stray or feral cat or dog, only animals "belonging to another." Newland, who feeds and waters the cats twice a day, and has given them such names as Precious, Cuddles and Pretty Boy, claims to spend \$2,000 a year for the care and feeding of animals he calls "my babies, my pets."

Until the case goes to trial this fall, the most obvious reminders of Mama Cat's fate are the pink artificial flowers that now mark the place where Newland buried her, at the base of the bridge pilings at San Luis Pass. As for the rest of the controversy, "I don't really care," says Newland. "If they just leave my cats alone."

By Susan Schindehette. Anne Lang on Galveston Island