

This Duxbury business is literally for the birds

Duxbury resident Nancy Brennan has launched a new business, BirdsBeSafe, to sell special collars that alert birds to stalking cats. Her cat, George, hasn't killed a bird since he started wearing the collar.

Photo by Gordon Miller

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George, a gray tortoiseshell tabby, was just following his feline instincts last summer when he stalked and killed a songbird in his Duxbury back yard.

He proudly brought it to his mistress, Nancy Brennan, who was more aghast than impressed.

Brennan, you see, is a naturalist and birdwatcher.

She knew George wasn't the only cat on the prowl; it's estimated that domesticated cats kill tens of millions of songbirds each year in the U.S. and Europe.

"It's safe to say it adds up," Brennan said.

Brennan loves cats. She also loves birds. She has a degree in biology and has been "a serious birdwatcher" for about 10 years.

George, age 5, is a skilled hunter with a special fondness for birds of all sizes and varieties.

"He had a cat door and had a habit of bringing birds in," Brennan said. "It would cause a ruckus if they were still alive."

The situation came to a head a little over a year ago.

"He brought in a ruffed grouse and I said, 'This has to stop,'" Brennan recalls.

That evening, Brennan searched the Internet for advice.

"I Googled birds, cats, stop and kill," Brennan said.

After learning that birds see bright colors, she fashioned a collar out of bright cotton cloth and put it on George the next time he went outdoors.

It worked. George didn't kill any birds that day or the next. He didn't kill any birds that entire summer, fall, or winter either.

"I was surprised because he's a cunning hunter," Brennan said. "I had a chance to observe him stalking a robin and the bird flew off. I found myself saying, 'Someone should market something like this.'"

Soon Brennan — who has a background working for nonprofit organizations, including public relations, finance and sewing — realized her myriad skills would allow her to make and market the collars herself.

Last winter, she founded BirdsBeSafe LLC, set up a Web site, www.birdsbesafe.com, and began selling the collars online. They cost \$14.95 and come in a variety of cheerful colors and prints.

The collars work well because they're designed on the premise that a cat hunts songbirds by stalking slowly, getting closer, then pouncing. Cats wearing the BirdsBeSafe cat collar can't get very close before being detected because the collar is very visible to birds, from all sides, above and below. The birds are immediately alarmed and fly away to safety.

The collar has two parts: a washable all-cotton ruff and an interior adjustable collar with a break-away buckle for safety. Both the interior collar and the fabric ruff will break away under pressure and release from the cat if it gets stuck on something.

It takes about 15 minutes for a typical cat to get used to wearing the collar and relax, Brennan said.

Brennan, who sews as a hobby, has stitched 400 collars. She's also found a factory in Maine that can produce them if her orders surge.

"It's important to produce them in the U.S.," Brennan said.

So far, the collars have received enthusiastic reviews from bird-loving cat owners.

"I'm selling mainly through my Web site, but my main thrust is to sell them at stores and nature shops," Brennan said. "It's an innovative new product, which is great, but since it's a new product, people don't know about it."

The collars are sold at Guy's Farm and Yard in Montpelier and Burlington, Shaw's General Store in Stowe, and the Birds of Vermont Museum in Huntington. Brennan is pursuing other shops and eventually would like to pitch her product to specialty chain stores and national catalogs, such as the Drs. Foster and Smith catalog.

"My goal is to have it sold nationally," Brennan said. "I'm trying to protect as many birds as possible. The better I can do for my business, the better I can do for the birds."

