

# **FERAL CAT FOCUS**

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## **FAQs ABOUT FERAL CATS**

### **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A STRAY CAT AND FERAL CAT?**

A stray cat is a domestic cat that has been abandoned or has strayed from home and become lost. A stray cat may be skittish in your presence, but because stray cats once knew human companionship, they can usually become re-socialized and re-homed. A feral cat is born and raised outside with little or no human contact or is a stray that has lived outside long enough to revert to a wild state. Adult feral cats usually cannot be tamed and are most content living outside. Feral kittens up to 8-10 weeks of age can often be tamed and placed in homes.

### **HOW CAN I TELL IF THE CATS ARE STRAY OR FERAL?**

Observe the cat's appearance and behavior. A stray cat is likely to approach you, although usually not close enough for you to touch him. If you put food down, a stray cat will likely start to eat right away. A stray cat is often vocal, sometimes talking insistently, and may look disheveled, as if unused to dealing with conditions on the street. A stray cat may be seen at all hours of the day. A feral cat is silent, will not approach humans, and generally will be seen only from dusk to dawn, unless extraordinarily hungry and foraging for food. A feral cat has adapted to conditions and is likely to appear well-groomed. If you put food down for a feral, he will wait until you move away from the area before approaching the food.

### **WHY CAN'T FERAL CATS BE SOCIALIZED AND ADOPTED INTO HOMES?**

A feral cat is a cat who has either never had any contact with people or her contact with people has diminished over time. They are not socialized to people and cannot be touched, except sometimes by a regular caregiver. The ideal window for socializing feral kittens is 8-9 weeks of age or younger—beyond that point feral cats may never socialize completely or at all. This doesn't mean it is impossible – it just means it will require a lot more time and work. We do not recommend attempting to socialize feral cats older than 12 weeks—it is dangerous and stressful for both you and the cat. Feral cats live healthy lives in their outdoors homes and the best thing you can do to help them is Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return.

### **WHAT IS THE LAW REGARDING FERAL CATS?**

Feral cats are members of the same species as pet cats — and are protected under state animal anti-cruelty laws. The law in New York State is Department of Agriculture & Markets Article 26–Cruelty to Animals.

### **WHAT HAPPENS TO FERAL CATS BROUGHT TO MOST SHELTERS IN THE U.S.?**

Because feral cats are not socialized to people, they are unadoptable as pets. In most shelters in the U.S., unadoptable animals are killed. Many shelters now realize that allowing feral cats to enter their doors is a death sentence and that Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return is the humane approach for their care. In recognition of this, some shelters have a “no feral cats accepted” policy, as well as a policy of returning ear tipped cats to the place where they were initially trapped. Feral cats live full, healthy lives outdoors, but are most often killed in shelters.

## **WHY DOESN'T REMOVING FERAL CATS FROM AN AREA WORK?**

Animal control's traditional approach for feral cats—catching & killing—is endless and cruel, and it does not keep an area free of cats. Cats choose to reside in a location for two reasons: there is a food source and shelter. When cats are removed from a location, survivors of the catch and kill effort and new cats that have moved in breed to capacity. This is called the “vacuum effect”.

## **I DON'T WANT ANYTHING TO HAPPEN TO THE CATS, BUT THEY CAN'T STAY HERE.**

Cats are there because there is a food source. Is someone feeding the cats? See if they can care for the cats. Why must the cats be moved? With very few exceptions, feral cats should remain at their original colony site. Cats create strong bonds with their territory and with one another. If you relocate them, they may become disoriented and separated from one another. If you relocate the existing colony, new cats are likely to move into the area and form a new colony (this is called the vacuum effect). Relocating feral cats is not impossible, but it will only work, if you follow strict relocation guidelines. In some locations that are not safe, relocating the colony is the best option.

## **I DISCOVERED CATS OUTSIDE. WHO CAN I CALL TO COME GET THEM?**

The first step is to find out if the cats are tame or wild. If the cats are tame, they may belong to people living in the neighborhood. Observe the cats to determine if this is so. Post “lost cat” flyers throughout the neighborhood. Feral cats live in colonies and congregate near food sources. Feral cat colonies can be managed with a non-lethal method called Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return (TNVR), in which cats are humanely trapped, spayed/neutered, vaccinated, and returned to their colony site where a volunteer caregiver provides them with food, water, and shelter. TNVR is the only chance feral cats have of living safe, healthy lives, while ceasing their reproduction.

## **IS IT UNSAFE FOR FERAL CATS TO LIVE OUTSIDE?**

The safest place for your tame companion cat may be indoors, but the best and usually the only environment suitable for feral (wild) cats is outside. Feral cats who have undergone Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return and live in managed colonies can live healthy and long lives; often as long as indoor cats. Finding homes for feral cats is not a realistic option. Humane societies, animal shelters and other animal organizations rarely accept them for adoption because they cannot be touched or held by people and are thus unadoptable. Like almost all-living creatures, feral cats need warm, dry shelter to protect them from extreme temperatures and wet weather.

## **I'VE BEEN FEEDING CATS AND THEY ARE REPRODUCING. I CAN'T FEED THEM ALL.**

As soon as possible, you must trap the cats using humane traps and have them spayed or neutered and vaccinated. Trapping feral cats sounds complicated but in reality it is a simple and rewarding process and it does not hurt the cats. When the cats have been spayed or neutered and vaccinated, return them to the place where they were trapped. Kittens up to 8-10 weeks old can often be tamed, sterilized and adopted out. You and other volunteers must then provide ongoing food, shelter and care to keep the feral cats healthy and safe.

## **MY NEIGHBOR (OR LANDLORD) IS COMPLAINING ABOUT THE CATS.**

Ask what their specific complaints are and try to resolve them. Making sure that all the cats have been sterilized will reduce or eliminate most objectionable situations and behaviors. If the cats are soiling the neighbors' gardens, place (regularly cleaned) sand or litter boxes at the colony site. Consider building a cat fence that will keep the cats in (or out of) a specific area. If neighbors voice health concerns, make sure that cats are up to date with their vaccinations and share their medical records with your neighbors. If issues cannot be resolved and your neighbors insist that the cats be removed, assure the neighbors that, although removing the cats will not guarantee that new cats won't move right in, you will search for relocation sites.

### **THERE'S A PREGNANT FERAL CAT OUTSIDE. WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

Trap the queen and bring her indoors to have the kittens. The kittens are more likely to survive if born indoors although the mother may experience stress from being confined and become less able to care for her kittens. To reduce her stress, provide a warm, secluded, quiet area for her to give birth and nurse her litter. Provide a warm, outdoor cat shelter and the queen may choose to have her kittens in it. Trap the queen and have your vet determine how far along she is and whether or not to terminate the unborn kittens. The mother cat would be spayed at the same time. Some vets will not terminate if the mother is close to giving birth, so you should consult your vet and consider your own feelings about this possibility ahead of time.

### **A FEMALE CAT HAD KITTENS OUTSIDE. WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

You should trap and sterilize the whole family. How you proceed depends on the age of the kittens. Don't trap a mother who is nursing her kittens unless you can catch the kittens too. Tiny kittens cannot survive away from their mothers for long. If the kittens are newly weaned (usually 5-6 weeks), ask if your veterinarian can perform surgery and return the mother to her kittens within 12 hours. Even though eating solid food, very young kittens are unlikely to survive without their mother for body heat and protection. (If your vet cannot meet this time frame, wait until the kittens are older to trap the mother). Try to trap the kittens no later than 8-10 weeks of age. The sooner they have human contact, the easier it will be to socialize them. At 12 weeks and older, kittens can be sterilized, vaccinated and returned to the location where they were living outside.

### **I FOUND A NEWBORN KITTEN AND THE MOTHER IS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN.**

When you come across kittens living outdoors, you may wonder whether it's better to take them into your home or leave them outside with mom. Whatever you decide, it should be in the kittens' best interest. *Do not be too hasty to move a kitten.* The mother may be in the process of moving her litter to a safer area. Watch closely for several hours, but no more than a day, to see if the mother returns. If the mother has abandoned one or more very young (neonatal) kittens, their only chance to survive is bottle-feeding. You will have to provide round-the-clock care. This is an intensive process not unlike caring for newborn human babies.

### **WHAT IS TRAP-NEUTER-VACCINATE-RETURN (TNVR)?**

- Trap: Humanely trap all the cats in a colony (a group of cats living outdoors together)
- Neuter: Take cats in their traps to a veterinarian or clinic to be spayed or neutered
- Vaccinate: Vaccinate the cats for distemper and rabies
- Return: Return the cats to their original outdoor home

### **WHAT IS A MANAGED COLONY AND FERAL CAT CAREGIVER?**

A managed colony is a group of adult feral cats that have all been spayed or neutered and vaccinated. A caregiver provides food, water, shelter from inclement weather and appropriate medical care. The cats are healthier and no longer breeding. The caregiver regularly monitors the colony for new cats that are quickly sterilized. A caregiver takes on the responsibility for the health and well being of a colony of feral cats. The caregiver provides food, water, shelter, and is responsible for humanely trapping and taking the cats to a veterinarian for vaccination, sterilization and other medical care. The caregivers provide something else that is critical: They give the cats a voice by educating neighbors and people who work in or near the colony's territory.

### **WHAT IS A HUMANE TRAP?**

A humane trap is an animal trap designed to contain an animal without injuring or killing. It is basically a wire cage, with the door held open by means of a catch. Food is placed beyond a trip plate to lure an animal inside. When the animal steps on the trip plate, it releases the catch, which causes the door to drop down behind the animal, enclosing the animal inside. Humane traps are the only type of trap used for TNVR.

### **WHAT IS AN "EAR TIP"?**

We use the word "ear tip" to describe when a small portion of the tip of a feral cat's left ear is surgically removed during neuter surgery. This denotes that the cat has been spayed or neutered and vaccinated. Ear tipping is done while the cat is anesthetized and is not painful for the cat. Ear tipping is the most effective way to identify neutered feral cats from a distance, to make sure they are not trapped or undergo surgery a second time. Ear tipping provides immediate visual identification that alerts animal control that a cat is part of a managed colony. It also helps colony caregivers identify newcomers to the colony that have not been neutered or vaccinated.

### **I CAN'T TOUCH THE CATS SO HOW DO I GET THEM TO VET FOR SPAY/NEUTER?**

DO NOT TRY TO TOUCH THEM! And never attempt to catch a cat by throwing a towel or blanket over the cat. Never use tranquilizers on outdoor cats. The risk of injury (to you and the cat) is too great. As soon as possible, trap the cats using humane traps and have them spayed or neutered. Don't wait thinking the cats will get used to human presence and become tame enough to catch. They won't and while you wait, several litters of kittens will be born.

### **I TOOK MY FERAL CATS TO THE VET FOR STERILIZATION. HOW DO I KNOW THEY ARE RECOVERING PROPERLY?**

After surgery, cats need at least an overnight stay in the clinic or in a home where they can be regularly monitored. Do not reach into a trap that contains a cat. Keep the cats in their traps with clean newspaper underneath. Canned cat food, mixed with water, should be rolled into a ball and dropped into the trap. Cats can be released the day following surgery as long as they are alert, responsive, and are showing no signs of illness or surgical complications (bleeding, vomiting, diarrhea, difficulty breathing, or lethargy). Immediately call a veterinarian should any of these signs occur.

During colder seasons cats (especially females) may need to be held for a longer period of time.