

TNR for Feral Cats

Feral Cats

Feral cats are the wild offspring of abandoned or stray domestic cats. They have grown up with little or no human contact and are fearful of people. A group of feral cats living together is called a colony, and colonies can be found wherever a food source exists to support the colony.

There are over 60 million feral cats in the U.S. and hundreds in our local communities. Stray Cat Blues, Inc., houses between 15 and 20 feral cats at a time. We are unable to take in all the feral cats reported to us. For many of these cats, the only real hope they have is for caring individuals to get involved and personally take action.

TNR – Trap/Neuter/Return

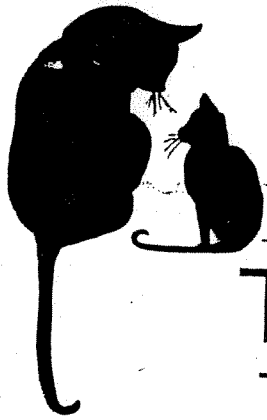
Not feeding feral cats and hoping they will go away is never an option. These cats have no where else to go and will only suffer. SCBI recommends non-lethal management of the feral cat population using a method called TNR (Trap/Neuter/Return). Feral cats are trapped in humane traps, taken to a veterinarian to be neutered and vaccinated for rabies, and then returned to the location where they were trapped and released. Someone commits to long term care of the cats and provides suitable shelter and daily food and fresh water for them.

Advantages of TNR

TNR allows feral cats to remain where they are while preventing future offspring. Most feral cats will not be happy living indoors or in confinement. They are too wild to make good companion animals. Caging them for long periods would be cruel and stressful. In addition, cats in a colony often have strong bonds with one another so keeping the colony intact may actually be kinder than relocating the cats where they will probably not be kept together. TNR is effective as well as humane. Removing the cats usually doesn't solve the problem, since new cats move in to fill the vacuum left when the cats are removed. Returning the cats ensures a stable colony which will not continue to grow.

Implementing TNR

1. Make arrangements with your veterinarian to have the cats neutered and vaccinated. Be sure to tell your vet the cats are feral. Dissolvable stitches which won't need to be removed must be used. Many vets ear-notch or ear-tip feral cats after surgery so they can easily be identified.
2. Borrow, rent or buy a humane trap. SCBI has traps available to loan. Also check with your veterinarian and the humane societies. If you borrow a trap from the SPCA, make sure you aren't required to return both the trap and the cat, who will most likely have to then be killed.
3. Plan to trap the night before surgery. Cats can only remain in the traps for 24 hours so make sure you know ahead of time what you're going to do with the cats once they've been trapped. They should be held overnight in a safe, quiet place and taken directly to the veterinarian while still in the traps. They should not have food 12 hours prior to surgery.
4. Keep the cats overnight after surgery if your vet does not, and check them periodically to make sure they are recovering from the surgery. In most cases cats can be released the day following surgery provided the weather is not too severe.
5. Be sure to return the cats to the same location where they were trapped. Releasing them in a different place would be cruel—the cats would be disoriented and would probably not survive.
6. Continue monitoring the cats daily after they have been released.
7. Build a suitable shelter for the cats. More than one shelter may be needed for a large colony. Shelters should be insulated and placed off the ground in a protected area. Line with straw



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THE ABC'S OF TNR: Trapping and sterilizing the ferals you feed

Most feral cat caretakers don't go looking for ferals, they come across them by accident. The first impulse is to help the cats by feeding them. This is indeed what Alley Cat Allies (ACA) advocates because food and water are necessary for survival. *Not* feeding them and hoping they will "go away" is not an option. We all know they can't go away and they may suffer. The only option and sound solution is to take action by providing food and sterilizing all members of the colony to prevent future births. A caretaker must ensure that a feral cat colony becomes a *managed* colony.

ACA promotes a comprehensive management plan including sterilization as well as provision of food and shelter. The single most important thing a caretaker can do for feral cats is to get them to a veterinarian for spaying and neutering. Ferals are dependent on us to maintain a healthy, stable colony. However, this is only possible if all members of the colony are sterilized. Besides the obvious advantage of population control, the cats will be healthier and better able to care for themselves when they are no longer forced to put all of their energy into breeding and caring for offspring.

Background/History

Nonlethal control is accepted by many well-respected institutions and organizations including the American Veterinary Medical Association, Cornell and Tufts University veterinary schools, and the Doris Day Animal League. England and Denmark started much of the work in this field in the early 1970s and where the organization Cat Action Trust established extensive spay/neuter services for caretakers. Other countries, including South Africa and Australia, have been using the trap-neuter-return (TNR) control method for many years.

In the U.S., TNR has been successfully implemented time and again by individuals in cooperation with sympathetic veterinarians. In fact, the more ambitious in our movement have developed highly evolved feral cat programs that cater to caretakers and to the idiosyncrasies of the feral cat. The San Diego Feral Cat Coalition has "trap depots" in several areas of the city for caretakers to pick up traps.

Volunteer vets at their monthly Sunday Spay Day perform approximately 100 sterilizations in just a few hours with the help of volunteer laypersons (9,000+ surgeries in six years). The citizens of Orange County, Florida, need only call their animal service agency to learn about the free feral cat spay/neuter services in the shelter clinic. And in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area many individuals make their traps available to others and several veterinarians offer low-cost spay/neuter services, including one coordinated by ACA takes place two Sundays a month just for ferals and strays! There are many other well-established programs in the U.S. and Canada.

Surprisingly, the information needed to implement TNR are not widely available in many communities. Caretakers describe frustrating and unsuccessful searches for guidance and assistance from local humane societies. Such caretakers feel isolated and alone in their quest to help the cats to whom they have become devoted.

While most communities do not have established resources available, we want to assure you that you *can* accomplish your goal to manage a colony of cats with the help we provide through our literature and guidance. Resolve that you *can* do this. Even though there are a few barriers to implementing a humane management plan, the feat is not impossible.

In this article we will walk step-by-step through the TNR procedure.

"Just Do It!"

Many perceived obstacles may keep the caretaker from trapping. Just coming to the decision to trap may be the most difficult to overcome. But, as Nike says, "Just Do It!"

The determination and persistence of a caretaker to trap and sterilize will be of immeasurable benefit to the cats. Realizing that the females will produce great numbers of kittens — many of whom die within weeks — should be sufficient to prompt caretakers into action.

Many caretakers are not familiar with the process of trapping cats and transporting them to veterinarians. While the TNR process is straightforward, a great deal of anxiety accompanies the first time. The whole idea of "trapping" conjures negative images and a fear that the cats will be hurt or traumatized, or that they will no longer trust the caretakers. Since ACA began in 1990, hundreds of thousands of ferals have been successfully trapped and vetted and their experience did not cause them to shun their caretakers. It *did* contribute greatly to their health and well-being. (See "Trapping Tips." The cat may experience some stress and thrash about when trapped, but will calm after a cover is placed over the trap.)

One caretaker, now quite experienced, knew she should trap and vet her ferals but could not overcome the possibility she might injure one through error or inexperience. She now confesses she wishes she had not waited three years to set her first trap. It was a hard lesson to learn. The male cat she was so fond of had engaged in several fights and suffered many serious wounds.

This caretaker now feels that trapping and sterilizing is the greatest gift she can give a feral. Unfortunately, there are not experienced trappers in every city to provide direct training. Often, an individual caretaker must simply resolve to take action.

TNR is the kindest act a dedicated caretaker can perform to assure the health and long life of the colony

Nonlethal control is not only humane, it is the most effective means to stop colony growth. The result is that a colony naturally diminishes over time. People are not aware that cats are so prolific. One caretaker called us after feeding a colony for one year. What began as three cats grew to 17 in that short time. Implementing a control plan means that an unmanaged colony (one that is experiencing continued births of litters and fighting for mates among males) becomes a managed colony (one that is *not* growing in size, is in good health, and whose members often live 10 years or more.)

Establish A Plan

The majority of feral cats can remain where they are; sterilizing them is the priority. Many people want to tame and place them in homes. However, this is highly unrealistic. The U.S. currently has a population of about 60 to 100 million feral cats and the shelters and animal control facilities are killing approximately 6 million domestic cats each year. Taming an adult feral cat takes time and energy away from the main objective of sterilizing and stabilizing the existing feral cat population. Most feral cats prefer living outdoors and would be unhappy in our homes. Most important, because there is an overpopulation of stray and feral cats, others will quickly fill the void left by the removal of whole colonies and will again breed up to capacity. Caretakers who want their cats to go to a sanctuary or the ideal barn home may not have that option. Waiting to relocate a colony will mean more kittens. Relocating feral cats is difficult, time-consuming, and dependent on following strict procedures for success. Therefore, relocation is your last resort.

Equipment

Obtaining a trap can be a hurdle. You may be able to borrow one from a humane society or animal facility. However, some

organizations do not always exist nearby and, in some jurisdictions, you may be required to return the trap AND cat, who will in all probability then be killed. Consequently, you may have to purchase a trap. A benefit of having your own trap is that there is no time constraint to return it within a few days.

Getting Help From Others

Working with other caretakers is beneficial. Sharing equipment, resources, and moral support makes accomplishing the task much easier and faster. Join ACA's Feral Friend Network.

Working With A Veterinarian

Another important step is finding a veterinarian who will work with you and with wild cats. ACA has a fact sheet to assist veterinarians in dealing with feral cats, including an explanation of ear-tipping for purposes of identification.

Many clinics will only take appointments but, with ferals, appointments cannot always be kept! Establish the protocol beforehand so you get the services the cats need: spay or neuter, ear-tip, full exam, ear-cleaning, three-year rabies vaccination, and deworming.

Determine the estimated cost of veterinary care for each cat. You can then estimate a budget for the entire colony. The sex ratio of a typical colony is 50-50, but some feral cat organizations have found that as many as 64% are female. Spay surgery is usually more expensive than neutering a male. If a veterinarian insists on procedures you do not wish to have, request that the veterinarian speak to ACA and we will advise on the best course of action. Some veterinarians will offer discounts on their services since you are providing a community service. To defray veterinary expenses, ask for financial help from neighbors and businesses where the colony resides. Many of them will be pleased that you are taking action from which they will benefit.

One unnecessary cost is testing for viruses. Feral cats are robust and healthy animals. Statistics kept by several feral cat clinics verify that the incidence of FeLV (feline leukemia) and FIV (feline immunodeficiency virus) is the same in feral cats as in domestic cats. That is, 3 to 5% for FeLV and 2 to 3% for FIV.

Therefore, many established and suc-

cessful programs for ferals have eliminated testing for these viruses because they occur so seldom and because of the exorbitant cost (which can be channeled instead to spay/neuter expenses). Remember, these viruses *cannot* be transmitted to humans. (See *Alley Cat Action* Vol. VIII, No. 1.) Establish a protocol ahead of time for euthanasia of very ill cats.

Return Cats to Their Colony

After all vet work is completed, holding the cat for a couple of days to recover is required. Cats who experienced difficult surgery need to be held for longer. They should be placed in a quiet room in their covered traps. Keeping the cat in the trap allows for safe handling at the clinic and easy transport back to their colony after the recovery period.

With a well-organized plan, feral cat colony management can be carried out with ease. Initially trapping may feel awkward and strange, but in time it becomes an acquired skill that you perform many times, perfecting your techniques with each experience.

You can then demonstrate trapping to others. When a colony has been sterilized and stabilized, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you have helped the ferals under your care. ♪

Traps can be obtained from:

ACES: 800-338-ACES

TOMAHAWK: 800-27A-TRAP

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Published by Alley Cat Allies, a nonprofit organization, promoting nonlethal feral cat population control through the trap/neuter/return method, placing sterilized feral cats back with caretakers in their supervised sites.

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