



The Pet Rescue Foundation

Helping Feral Cats

By Leslie Wilson

You've seen them--homeless, semi-tame, living in alleyways, parking lots, maybe even your own backyard. Feral cats.

Feral cats are not socialized to people. They range from cats who have never had human contact to those who were once pets. Often living in loose associations called "colonies," feral cats become well adapted to their territory and can live safely and contentedly in backyards, parking lots, university campuses, and a host of other urban, suburban, and rural habitats.

Yet we see these abandoned creatures and our hearts go out to them. Is there anything we can do to help them? Yes, there is!

How You Can Help Feral Cats

- **Feed.** Feeding feral cats is not only an easy way to help them, but regular feeding makes trapping easier (more about this later). It is best to feed the cats once a day at the same general time. Some people supply only dry cat food, while others mix in canned food as well. Fresh water should always be available. Place dishes under shrubs, behind bushes, or near walls because cats feel more comfortable eating in a sheltered, private area.
- **Lend A Hand.** If you have a friend, co-worker or neighbor who takes care of feral cats, offer to help. Feed the cats one day a week or "colony-sit" while the other caregiver is on vacation. Can you offer your garage or laundry room for cats to recover after spay/neuter surgery? Or accompany the person on a trapping expedition?
- **Foster.** When feral kittens are caught young enough (by eight to ten weeks of age) they can be tamed and adopted out as pets. You may find kittens if you have started caring for a colony, or a local feral cat group may need foster parents. Feral kittens need to be confined at first in large carriers or cages. Food, patience and affection will help socialize them to people. The process usually takes only two to four weeks.

Fostering newborn motherless kittens is also incredibly rewarding, though it can be tough to find people to care for these little gems. They need to be fed every few

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hours, but it is easy to learn, kids can help, and some people even bring the babies to work in a little basket or carrier.

See the **Resources** section for detailed information on socializing and caring for kittens.

- **Spay/Neuter.** Spay/neuter is probably the best way to help feral cats. It improves the cats' lives by reducing or eliminating mating, fighting, and wandering. And since the cats are no longer reproducing, the colony will gradually diminish in size. The practice of trapping cats for spay/neuter then returning them to their habitats is called TNR (trap/neuter/return). TNR is the most humane and effective way to reduce feral cat populations.

Since feral cats cannot be easily handled, you will need a humane trap. Check with your local humane society, feral cat group, veterinarian, or pet supply store. At the same time, ask them for suggestions on where to have the cat(s) spayed or neutered. If you live in California, Maddie's Fund is underwriting the California Veterinary Medical Association's free Feral Cat Altering Program.

- Next, plan to hold the cats for a day or two of post-surgery recovery before returning them to their habitat. Your garage, laundry room, or an extra bathroom is perfect holding areas. While it might seem like there's a lot to know, trapping cats for spay/neuter is easier than you think--and it will make a big difference for the cats. For detailed information on how to trap, post-surgery recovery tips and more, see the Resources section at the end of this article.

If you are unable to do hands-on work, there are other ways to help:

- **Donate.** Donate cat food, humane traps, money for spay/neuter, or volunteer time to your local feral cat group or directly to feral cat caregivers. Consider organizing a food drive for homeless cats through your workplace, church, school, or neighborhood group, or ask hardware and pet supply stores to donate humane traps.
- **Advocate.** While most people support caring for feral cats, conflict can sometimes arise--people may mistakenly believe that caregivers "establish" cat colonies or that it is wrong to care for feral cats. See "Common Misconceptions" below for responses to these concerns. Caregivers can also prevent conflict by keeping feeding areas clean and inconspicuous, and by altering the cats.

Some types of legislation, such as mandatory spay/neuter and cat licensing can also be harmful to feral cats and their caregivers. Such legislation can be difficult for caregivers to comply with within mandated timelines, especially if they are caring for a large number of cats. And enforcement is often selective and complaint-based,

leaving feral cat caregivers vulnerable to retaliation from neighbors or others. Worse, legislation may be worded so that the result of non-compliance is the impoundment and death of the animal.

If feral cats are under fire in your community, help defend them--testify at public hearings and write letters to local politicians, public officials, and newspapers. Remember, communities across the country are finding that TNR is a win-win way to help feral cats. It provides the most effective long-term method for reducing feral cat populations, in contrast to coercive legislation or unpopular and inhumane trap-and-kill campaigns. For more information on advocating for feral cats, contact the groups listed below.

- **Educate.** As you learn more, teach others to help feral cats--expand the safety net.

Common Misconceptions About Feral Cats

- Some people believe that feral cats live “short, miserable lives,” and that because of this, they should either be adopted or euthanized. But as most caregivers can attest, feral cats frequently live long, healthy lives. And is death really better than a less-than-perfect life? Many animals, such as raccoons, foxes, and field mice do not live extraordinarily long lives, yet we would never consider euthanizing them for their own good. In addition, while feral kittens can often be tamed and placed in homes, most feral cats cannot adapt to life in a human home. Instead, TNR humanely controls their populations while allowing them to live their lives side-by-side with the rest of us. Remember, it’s o.k. to be feral!
- Feral cat caregivers help these cats by feeding them, having them spayed or neutered, and returning the cats to their colonies. Caregivers do not “establish” colonies. In fact, the opposite is true--they are helping control the size of existing colonies. Altering and caring for the cats improves their lives and reduces their numbers over time.
- Studies have shown that TNR reduces colony size, while trapping the cats and taking them to a shelter (where they will most likely be killed) is ineffective and simply keeps the cycle going. Trap and kill simply opens up an ecological void that more cats--unneutered--will eventually fill, starting the breeding process all over again. TNR provides a lifesaving and permanent solution.

Resources

For information on helping feral cats, including tips on trapping, socializing kittens, advocacy, and more:

-- Feral Cat Coalition at www.feralcat.com

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-- Alley Cat Allies at www.alleycat.org

The following are two excellent books about feral cats:

-- *Maverick Cats*, by Ellen Perry Berkeley

-- *The Wild Life of Domestic Cats*, by Roger Tabor

About the author: Leslie Wilson was responsible for planning, developing and implementing the nation's first comprehensive feral cat assistance program in 1993 at The San Francisco SPCA. Leslie is currently a special projects consultant for several humane organizations in northern and southern California.