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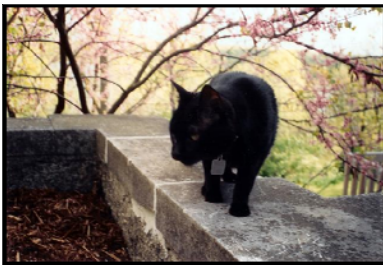
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MANAGING A FERAL CAT COLONY

An Outdoor Cat Handbook For Residential Property Owners



Managed TNR works best when:

- **The property owner is the caregiver** and recognizes that all of the cats coming on their land to eat are colony members.
- **The caregiver meal-feeds** (not free feeds) the cats to train them to come at the same time each day and be hungry when they show.
- **The caregiver is willing and able to fix all of the cats** — male, female, friendly and feral using a live trap.
- **The caregiver allows all of the adult cats to live out their lives on their land** providing them with daily food, water and dry shelter.
- **Kittens under 8 weeks old are removed from the colony before and socialized for indoor pet cat adoption.** (See Appendix C.)

Understanding Feral Colony Management

Overview

Estimates project the number of feral cats living outdoors is roughly equal to the number of pet cats living indoors nationwide. These cats colonize around a primary food supply — in urban areas, *the contents of (and the rodents attracted to) dumpsters at residential and commercial developments* — in suburban areas, *rodents and the food put out for them by residents* — and in rural areas, *rodents attracted to feed put out for farm animals.*

The colonies are created when unsterilized pet cats are abandoned outdoors and forced to fend for themselves. And, they are the root of cat overpopulation, producing over 80% of all kittens born each year — which nationally — results in the annual euthanasia of millions of homeless cats.

Colony Size

Colonies range in size from 4-40 cats depending on the size of their food supply. Urban colonies tend to be smaller but more densely-located, while rural colonies tend to be larger and more spread out.

Colony Behavior

Like most other wildlife, feral cats are nocturnal — most active between dusk and dawn. They fear people and so maintain a low daytime profile. The first cats seen are often just a portion of the total colony — mother cats with kittens impairing their mobility — or bolder cats attracted by food put out for other animals. If you feed these cats, the more timid colony members will gradually present themselves as well.

Territory Size

The size of each territory is well-defined by the cats — who instinctively protect it (and their food source) from other roaming strays. Females stay close to their food source while the males patrol the colony boundaries using “neutral” paths that separate the colonies. In areas dense with colonies, these paths are narrow and may be even be time-shared.

Managed TNR

Sound feral cat management recognizes these behaviors and takes advantage of them, transforming the very cats responsible for kitten overproduction to its only practical — and humane — solution. This practice, known as **TNR** (trap-neuter-return) works as follows:

- **Leave the adult cats where they live** — to keep other roaming cats away.
- **Provide the cats with daily meals** (not free-feed) — so you can identify all the members of the colony, and
- **Stop their reproduction** through total colony sterilization.

By managing cats — instead of simply feeding them — you improve their life quality and make them easier to care for and live with — no longer spraying, yowling and kitting. *This alone justifies the front-end work required to establish a managed cat colony.*

Locating Feeding Stations



Meal-feeding is key to cat management. It helps you to know how many cats are there and identify any newcomers.

If you have naturally-occurring stray and feral cats living on your land, the first step in managing them is to determine the best location for their feeding station. As a rule, keep it close to their existing feeding area, but consider the following factors:

- Make it accessible to all of the cats — friendly and feral — where they can safely and comfortably access it, where there is minimal human activity and where it's out of the public view.

- Make it accessible to you — where you can safely and conveniently access it even in the winter.
- Locate it near their shelter.

Note: On large properties there may be more than one colony and — if so — you'll need more than one feeding station (and shelter) to accommodate them. Set up your feeding station and — if some of the cats you know live there aren't eating — they may be part of a distinctly separate colony.

Establishing A Feeding Routine



Put out just enough food for the cats to eat in a 30-minute period. This trains the cats to come each day at the same time and prevents other animals from eating leftovers.

Feed cat food (wet or dry) and water — once or twice a day depending on your schedule and desire.

- Pick a time convenient for you — early morning, mid-day, late afternoon — it doesn't matter so long as it's in the daylight year-round. Food put out in the dark will draw other animals (including predators) and darkness hinders your ability to observe the colony to know how many cats there are.

- Be consistent — feed at the same time and at the same place every day. Find someone to fill in for you on days that you can't be there.
- Put out just enough food for the cats to eat in a 30-minute period and remove any uneaten food.
- Observe the cats eating — keeping far enough away so not to scare them off — and keep a record of who you see.

Preparing To Live-Trap For Spay/Neuter



When selecting cat food, any dry or canned AAFCO-approved food will do — buy the largest bags or cans available — and stock up when it's on sale at major stores..

Once you've established a feeding routine, live-trapping is pretty straight forward. The cats are already conditioned to come at the same time and be hungry when they do.

Your goal is to get the entire colony (cats over 12 weeks old) fixed quickly to prevent any new litters.

If you don't already own a trap, purchase one at a pet store, hardware store or online from a company like Tomahawk (Model 608). You can also rent traps from general

rental businesses and some veterinary clinics.

Be sure the traps are clean — wash them with hot soapy water and rinse well, disinfect with a diluted bleach spray (1 part bleach to 32 parts water).

Important: Make sure you have scheduled veterinary appointments before trapping any cats.

Live-Trapping Guidelines



Courtesy of Best Friends Animal Society

Trapping doesn't require special skills or experience. Just make sure you stay with it until all the cats — male and female — are fixed. Leaving any of them intact will undermine your efforts. It may seem daunting, but once you start the process, you'll find it easier than you may think.

There are many ways to live trap — here's one approach:

- **Acclimate the cats to the trap.** Place a trap in their feeding area 3-4 days before you actually plan to trap. If you're using multiple traps, place them so they're visually isolated from each other. Lock the trap door in the "open" position and line the bottom with newspaper just covering the trip plate (cats may be hesitant to walk on wire mesh). At meal time each day, put some (or all, depending on the number of cats) of the food in the live trap(s).
- **Begin live-trapping 2-3 days before your spay/neuter appointment.** At

their regular meal-time, bait the trap with a generous dollop of pungent food — wet cat food, sardines, oil-based tuna, canned mackerel, etc. Put the food on a small paper plate, plastic dish — anything that doesn't have sharp edges and can't break. Place the food as far back in the trap as possible.

- **Set the trip plate and lock the rear (sliding door).**
- **Cover all but the opening with an old towel, blanket or sheet** — this gives added camouflage and will help calm the frightened cat.
- **Wait quietly in an area where you can observe the trap without being seen.** *Do not leave the trap unattended. Other animals (or people) can be a danger to the cat — and the cat may be a danger to people who try to release the cat.*
- **Promptly take the cat to the clinic or a safe holding area.**



Caring For Trapped Cats Overnight

When you have to keep a cat overnight before taking her to the vet clinic, keep her as comfortable as possible:



- **Leave the cat in the live trap** still covered with a towel and put it in a protected area, such as your garage or basement.
- **Raise the trap off the floor on 2x4s** with newspaper underneath so they can eliminate with minimal soiling.
- **Check on the cat periodically** but don't stick your fingers in or allow children or pets nearby.
- **Withhold food for 12 hours before surgery.**



Spaying Pregnant and Nursing Mom Cats

Pregnant Females. Cats up to 4 weeks pregnant are routinely spayed — and many more are spayed beyond that point. As sad as it may seem preventing an unborn litter may save the lives of already-living cats *and* kittens — so we recommend spaying pregnant cats whenever the vet deems it a safe procedure for the mother.

Nursing Mothers. Many vets won't spay a nursing mother until the kittens are weaned and her milk dries up. We recommend speeding this process by bringing her kittens indoors at 4 weeks of age — as soon as they are able to eat food on their own. Then you can more easily socialize the kittens and find permanent indoor homes for them. (*See Appendix C*). Once the kittens are indoors you can promptly get Mom fixed. **Don't delay — as nursing cats are often already pregnant with their next litter.**

A good way to trap the mom is to use the kittens as "bait":

- Live trap the kittens and safely (*see Appendix A*) transfer to a cat carrier.
- Bait, set and cover a trap and place it in front of the carrier. The food and the kittens mewling should lure Mom into the trap.

Feeding Cats In Live Traps



Cats can stay in their trap for 2-3 days if you provide them with food, water and safe shelter.

If you start trapping 3 days before your spay/neuter appointment and trap quickly, you'll need to provide food and water. So — in addition to providing their overnight care — do the following twice a day (but remember to pull food 12 hours before surgery).

Be careful! The cat is wild and scared and will try to escape if given any chance — and may strike out at you at any moment without warning. When working with trapped cats be sure you wear leather gloves and protective clothing.

- **Put food in the trap.** Use the rear (sliding) door for access. Use a trap divider or a blunt stick to keep the cat at the other end of the trap. Open the door just enough (no more than an inch) to fish out the bait dish — using the stick — not your fingers. Replace it with a new dish with cat food on it.
- Put an empty bowl in the trap the same way you put a food dish in. Use a watering can to fill it from outside the trap.

Taking The Cats To The Vet Clinic

When working with trapped cats, always wear leather gloves and protective clothing. If the cat starts to break away, let her go — never try to restrain a trapped cat with your hands or body. Always keep the area clear of children and pets.

Follow these basic guidelines when taking your cats to their spay/neuter appointments:

- **Make sure you already have an appointment.** Most clinics can't and won't accommodate surgery patients without one — and many vets only do surgeries a few days each week.
- **Bring any related paper work** — vouchers, prior vet records (if any) so they can easily check you in.
- **Protect your car** by setting the trap on newspapers or washable tarps.
- **Deliver the cat at the time the clinic specifies — in the live trap** — one cat per trap. The staff can anesthetize right through the wire mesh without having to handle the cat until she's asleep. They'll return the cat to you in the live trap so you can safely release her outdoors.

Returning Cats After Surgery



After surgery, release the cat back to where you trapped her and continue their daily care.

If you can hold the cats for a day (males) or two days (females) it's preferable to do so. But if that's not possible, you can release them as soon as they are out of the effects of anesthesia — alert with a normal body temperature.

Hold them after surgery the same way you did before surgery — in the trap in a safe area free of children and pets with the cats covered to keep the cats calm.

When you're ready to return them, deliver

the trap to where the cat was caught and open the back (sliding) door. Usually the cat will bolt out in a flurry, so make sure you're at the other end of the trap.

If the cat doesn't leave, lock the door open and leave the trap on the ground, checking it periodically.

And don't worry if the cat disappears for awhile — she'll usually come back in a few days for food.

Providing Outdoor *Dry* Shelter

Prior to 1950, most cats lived only as outdoor cats — cold temperatures are no more a problem for them than they are for any other wildlife. Cats living outdoors year-round grow thick winter coats and naturally huddle together to share body warmth when it's frigid outdoors.

However cats need some form of dry shelter to protect them from wind, rain and snow. Without it — *if they get wet and can't dry off* — they may get frostbite or hyperthermia — and this can be life-threatening. The shelter may already exist

— the underside of a porch, a barn or shed, or doghouse — and may be what attracted the cats to your property. But it could be something you build especially for them. *Alley Cat Allies'* web site has plans for a six-cat shelter (see snow photo). Or it could be something you jury-rig such as a plastic box with an access hole in it anchored to the ground.

What's important is to be sure the cats have shelter from the elements — and in the winter months, that something is as important to their survival as food.



Monitoring The Colony

Once the cats are sterilized, all that remains is to continue to keep a close eye on them at feeding time to spot newcomers or ones you may not have originally seen. Get them sterilized quickly — within a few weeks of when they appear — to prevent new litters.

Over time, some or all may become friendly to you — you've become their "mom cat" by providing them with care. Don't confuse this trust in you as cat socialization and try to adopt them out.

They won't exhibit the same friendliness toward others. And they may not appreciate being confined indoors. Their outdoor territory is their home — and you've made it extra special for them by providing them with food, water and shelter.

You've put a lot of effort into creating a managed colony — don't throw it away by removing the cats or you will be soon faced with the same problem all over again with a new group of strays.



Use a meal-feeding routine to identify newcomers (if any) that join your group so you can quickly get them sterilized.

Transferring Care

If for any reason you are unable to continue care of your colony, make every possible effort to find someone nearby to take over. You may even find there already is someone else providing food — as these cats often have more than one caregiver. Leaving them where they are is typically your best option.

If you're not comfortable leaving them, you have two choices — and neither is optimal. One is to move them with you to continue their care, and the other is to find

someone with a farm or a large yard to take them. The problem is that cats typically don't relocate well — often running off to find their old home.

You can minimize this by confining the cats with food, water and litter for at least 3 weeks before letting them run free at their new home. And, when possible, move all or as many as you can to the same new home. The bonding between colony members is substantial.



Relocating cats with their litter-mates makes the transition to a new home more likely. Feral cats are more cat-focused than pet cats — dependent on each other for love and attention.

Appendix A—Safety Precautions For Handling Feral Cats



Outdoor Safety Tips For Pet Cats

Are your pet cats safe if you have feral cats living on your land? This is a concern many property owners share.

The reality is whenever pet cats go outdoors they are at risk — from getting lost, hit by cars, or potential enemies including stray dogs, cat-unfriendly people, and yes — other cats (feral *or* companion).

To keep your pet cats 100% safe, you must keep them indoors — or build a fenced-in play area for them in your yard. That being said, your pet cats can share the outdoors with feral cats if you use some consideration. To prevent male cat aggression, make sure everyone's neutered and meal-feed the feral cats — never leaving leftover food out — even in the daylight.

Make sure your pet cats are routinely treated with parasite medication — and keep them up to date on their rabies, distemper and feline leukemia vaccinations. And — most importantly — bring your pet cats indoors at night when predatory animals are most active.

When working with feral cats, keep in mind that they are extremely afraid of human contact. Even if they trust you as a “mom cat — and may even let you pet them — they may still struggle if you try to pick them up or handle them. Good safety practices should be followed whenever you confine them or violate their space:

- Always live-trap — never grab a cat to put in a carrier or cage.
- Wear protective clothing — leather gloves, long-sleeved shirts and jeans or other sturdy pants.
- Watch the cat's body language for signs of aggression (see below).
- Keep quiet — if you have to speak, use a normal voice level — whispering may be interpreted as hissing by the cat.
- Move slowly — and make yourself appear as small as possible — move sidewise or from behind to avoid eye contact

Despite your efforts, if you 're bitten or scratched, immediately wash the wound thoroughly and apply a topical antibiotic like Neosporin. If the wound results in swelling fever, fatigue, sore throat or headaches, see a doctor immediately as cat infections are extremely serious.

Signs of Cat Aggression

When handling feral cats — **if you see any of these signs — stop what you're doing and leave the cat alone to calm down.** Be cautious when a cat:

- Has a long drawn-out meow or is hissing or growling.
- Is rapidly swishing her tail — or is slowly and deliberately moving her tail.
- Has dilated (wide-open) pupils or is refusing to make eye contact.
- Is swatting or raising a paw to strike.
- Is refusing to smell your hand when you hold it slowly and carefully near her face.
- Has her ears laid back or flat against her head.
- Is ducking away when you try to pet her or backs up.
- Is readjusting her position in a jerky way so as to protect herself.
- Is staring at your hand as you pet her.

Can You Ever Safely Pet A Feral Cat?

Not right away — and certainly not one you don't have a relationship with. Some feral cats over time will develop a special bond with their caregiver. When this happens — you *may* be able to pet the cat when she is calm and relaxed.

- Talk softly to the cat and don't make any fast or jerky motions.
- Always let the cat set the pace — if you see her showing any signs of aggression, stop petting her immediately and try again later.
- Try stroking her back before attempting to scratch her chin or he head.

If you do gain her trust enough to pet her, never go into a n automatic petting mode — always watch your hand and their body language — as they may not tolerate more than a few strokes at a sitting — or something else in the environment — movements of another person, and unexpected noise — may freak them and you may get injured in the process.

Appendix B—Veterinary Considerations

Your best opportunity for veterinary care of feral cats is during their spay/neuter appointment. While they are under anesthesia, many procedures that couldn't be done otherwise, are easy. In addition to having the cats sterilized you may want to also vaccinate the cat for rabies and distemper, apply parasite medications, shave off any knots in their fur and — most importantly — have the vet ear-tip the cat to identify them as sterilized outdoor-only cats living in a managed colony.

Viral Testing Feral Cats

Although testing cats for Feline Leukemia (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) is important, there's no evidence that these viruses can be transferred to humans. Less than 2% of all healthy cats — living indoors or out — have the disease, and sterilization stops the behaviors most responsible for their transfer — biting, mating and birthing.

The tests are expensive and no major animal organization — including HSUS, American Humane and Alley Cat Allies — recommends testing feral cats for either virus.

If you decide to test your cats, do so only if you are prepared to deal with the complications resulting testing — including the relatively high probability of a false positive making one or more additional tests necessary.

For a comprehensive treatment of this subject, see the **2008 American Association of Feline Practitioners' feline retrovirus management guidelines**, accepted March 14, 2008 and published by the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* (2008), 10, 300-316 doi: 10.1016/j.jfms.2008.03.002.

Ongoing Veterinary Care For Feral Cats

The extent of veterinary care you can provide feral cats is limited by the reality that many won't tolerate being handled. In weighing what to do, consider both the stress factor on the cat and the financial burden on you, against the overall necessity for the well-being of the cat.

You may find that an obviously-ill feral cat is treatable so you can provide critical care for injuries, but one with parasites (worms, fleas) or chronic illness (kidney or thyroid disease) is not treatable because they won't allow you to medicate them in the same manner that you would your companion cats. If you work with your veterinarian, however, you may find there are ways to provide some level of treatment. For instance, there are dewormers you can add to food, and tasty pill pockets you can hide a pill inside of that the cat may like and eat on their own.

Live-trapping a feral cat for booster vaccinations is possible — but should also be tempered with the stress it will cause for both you and the cat. When you do vaccinate, ask the vet to use those that have the longest efficacy — three-year vaccines not one-year vaccines.



Why Ear-Tip?

Many people new to feral cat management question why feral cats must be ear-tipped. The practice started in Europe in the 1970's as an easy and permanent way to identify sterilized feral cats. Later it was popularized in this country by *Alley Cat Allies*. Most TNR programs follow their model.

Ear-tipping is simply the removal of the top 1/4" of the cat's left ear and is done under anesthesia while a cat is being sterilized. It not only aids colony caregivers in distinguishing cats already fixed from those who are not, but it also can save outdoor-living cats from being confused with lost pet cats.

If this simple procedure saves a cat from being live-trapped twice for sterilization — or worse from being taken to a shelter where feral cats are often euthanized on arrival — it's well worth it. No other form of identification is as safe and effective as ear-tipping.

Appendix C—Kitten Socialization



Kitten Development Timetable

Gestation	63 Days
Birth	Closed eyes and folded ears
5 Days	Loses umbilical cord
5-13 Days	Eyes open
14 Days	Teething begins
18 Days	Litter box training begins. Ears straighten Crawling begins
3 weeks	Litter box training complete Starts eating wet kitten food
4-5 weeks	Kitten stands Weaning begins Able to chew dry food Eyes become clear Ears stand upright
2-7 weeks	Critical socialization window (to humans)
6 weeks	Can de-worm and vaccinate
8 weeks	Can be sterilized safely
12 weeks	Can be separated from littermates
16 weeks	Sexually active

If you have kittens in your colony before group sterilization is complete, try to bring them indoors when they are 4 weeks old and able to walk and eat on their own. This way the mother can be spayed before she gets pregnant again and the kittens can be placed in good homes as companion cats. **If for any reason they don't socialize or adopt out, you can return them to their colony after getting them sterilized at 8-12 weeks of age.**

While the kittens are indoors, gradually expose them to all of the aspects of normal housecat living — children, other pets, visitors and noises like televisions, vacuums, dishwashers and doorbells. Take them for little “outings” into the different areas of your home, keeping them secure and protected in a large cat carrier. Also consider taking them (still in a carrier) on short drives to get used to car trips.

In their fact sheet, *Taming Feral Kittens*, Alley Cat Allies describes a 5-stage socialization process for kittens:

1. Cage Containment

A feral kitten is extremely frightened and may hiss and spit at humans. Begin with a cage in a small room, and for the first 2 days don't attempt handling. They must learn to feel safe first.

- Visit them frequently and talk to them but resist touching.
- Always move slowly.
- Leave a radio playing soft music in the room with them.
- Allow them to get used to human voices by leaving a television set on.

2. Periodic Handling

After 2 days, select the least-aggressive kitten, place a towel over her, and pick her up in the towel. If the kitten stays calm, pet gently on the head from behind. Never approach from the front — hands may frighten the kitten and she may bite.

If the kitten remains calm, grip her securely by the nape of the neck, put the towel on your lap and set the kitten on the towel. Stroke the kitten's body while speaking in soft, reassuring tones. Then release. Make this first physical contact brief.

Go through this process with each kitten. Give them a special treat after all have been handled and repeat this process as often as possible.

3. Containment in Small Room

Within a week the kittens should have made considerable progress — although each kitten will develop at a different rate. If any kitten is not taming, place her in a separate cage or room away from the others. This allows you to work with her more frequently and will increase her dependence on people. It also keeps her from slowing down the socialization of the other kittens.

4. Exposure to Others

If the kitten can be around a friendly adult cat this helps in the taming process. They're “copy cats” and will take their lead from the tame adult — coming over to be petted if they hear the adult cat purring while being petted. When the kittens no longer respond by biting, encourage friends and relatives to handle them as much as possible. If you don't do this, the kittens may just bond to you and not to others.

5. Placement in Adoptive Homes

The most suitable home for a socialized feral kitten is a calm adult environment — preferably two or more littermates placed together.

Why Manage Feral Cats?



At first glance the situation may look hopeless. Given the large number of feral cats — about equal to the number of pet cats in any given community — what can be done by sterilizing individual colonies — especially since managing the colonies requires providing them with daily food? Won't that just increase the food supply and create larger colonies? No. Adding a new feeding station does *not* encourage more cats to move in. The existing colony will simply rely less on rodents for their diet.

Each TNR'd colony represents one geographic segment — one plot of land — where the birth of more homeless kittens has stopped. It stands on its own — irrespective of what's happening in unman-

aged colonies around it — so long as the colony continues to be monitored and managed.

Linked together, these sterilized colonies will eventually end the community's reliance on healthy-but-homeless cat euthanasia by replacing it with a grass roots network of kitten-free zones.

And — for the colonies that are now managed — the bond between cat and caregiver strengthens improving the likelihood the cats can stay where they are. No more spraying, yowling and kitting. The cats can live healthier, longer lives in their natural environment — many continuing on for ten or more years.

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