

Feral Cats

Feral cats can be differentiated by varying degrees of socialization, based on their age, level of human contact, generational factors and personality traits. It is best for young kittens to nurse from their mother for the first six weeks, if possible. However, at an early age, they display more social personalities and can be successfully adopted into a domestic lifestyle.

Daily human contact also factors into how "wild" a feral cat will behave. Regular daily contact with human can make a cat friendlier, and in some situations, a caretaker bringing cats food once or twice a day can decrease and control the population of a feral cat colony.

Using a Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) policy, feral cats are gathered in a humane trap and brought to the clinic for treatment. Once sedated, feral cats will receive an evaluation, sterilization, rabies vaccination and an ear tip (at owner's request). After a few days of recovery time, cats who have received treatment are then returned to their territory, where caretakers provided them with regular water, food and shelter. Those that are higher risk, sick or had extended incisions may require additional time prior to re-release. All kittens and friendly feral cats can be removed from the colony and given up for adoption or placed in foster care.

Advantages of TNR include stabilizing the colony size and eliminating the chance of new kittens arriving. The colony protects their territory from intact and unvaccinated newcomers moving in, and the nuisance behavior of unaltered male cats, which includes fighting, yowling, spraying or marking territory and roaming in search of a mate, is substantially reduced. This TNR process prevents the tremendous suffering of kittens born from the breeding of unaltered feral cats, and is the only humane and effective method of phasing out colonies of abandoned domestic cats and their offspring.

Stray and feral cat overpopulation is a community-generated problem, and every community has the responsibility to work towards a solution. Feral cats and their offspring are the victims of abandonment, accidental loss and failure by owners to sterilize their pets. This segment of the population produces 80 percent of kittens born each year, and is the largest contributing source of cat overpopulation.

Colony Management Guidelines

A **caretaker** is a person who provides food, water and shelter for a colony of unowned, free-roaming cats.

A **colony** is any number of unowned, free-roaming cats that frequent an area seeking food or shelter.

Ongoing colony management, combined with TNR, will promote harmony between colony caretakers, neighbors, and property owners and allow for the colony to diminish naturally over time. It is critical that the following eight guidelines be followed to ensure that the colony is being properly managed. Failure to follow these guidelines puts the cats at risk, increasing the chance for intervention from animal control authorities to eliminate the nuisance.

How to Care for Your Colony:

1. All the cats in the colony, even those that visit sporadically, will be sterilized, ear tipped for identification, vaccinated for rabies, and returned to their familiar habitat. Be sure that any new cats observed in your colony are promptly sterilized.
2. Provide adequate food and water for the cats on a daily basis, year round, using techniques to minimize nuisance.
3. Provide adequate shelter for cats in the colony using techniques to minimize nuisance.
4. Ensure that any cats that are injured or ill receive prompt treatment. It is not humane to allow any animal to suffer a slow, painful death.
5. Maintain your records (notes, surgery, treatment and vaccination) for all colony cats. Microchips allow a permanent identification for each cat and can be used to match to vaccine records.
6. Make efforts to place tame colony cats with adoption groups.
7. If you can no longer provide for your colony, take measures to identify potential new caretakers so that care may continue.
8. Use humane techniques to discourage or exclude cats from areas where they are not welcome.

Step One: On-Going Monitoring and TNR

All the cats in the colony, even those that visit sporadically, will be sterilized, ear-tipped for identification, vaccinated, and returned to their familiar habitat. Make certain that any new cats observed in your colony are promptly sterilized.

Why? When cats are not sterilized, they will display offensive mating behaviors that can quickly become a nuisance to their neighbors.

What To Do:

- Contact The Spay Neuter Veterinary Clinic of the Sandhills and make an appointment for TNR as soon as any new or unowned cats arrive.
- Educate your neighbors about TNR. Let them know you are doing something proactive to address the free-roaming cats in the area by implementing a TNR program.
- Ensure that members of the surrounding community recognize and understand that an ear-tip represents a fully-vetted and sterilized colony cat.

Step Two: Food and Water

Cats must be provided with adequate food and water on a daily basis year-round.

Why? When cats do not have adequate food and water, they will seek it in unwelcome areas such as a neighbor's trash or dumpster in order to avoid starvation and dehydration.

What To Do:

- Cats should be fed in a designated, inconspicuous area of your property, away from people or high-traffic areas where they may create a nuisance or be injured.
- The feeding area should be kept neat and clean. Empty food cans and plates should be picked up promptly. Food that has gotten wet or spoiled, such as canned food that has been sitting out all day, should also be discarded due to increased chance of illness.

- Create a small, partially enclosed feeding site to make food and water bowls and the cats less visible, and prevent food from getting wet and spoiled during rain or snow.
- To avoid attracting wildlife, feed cats in the morning or daylight hours only. Remove leftover food.
- If the area where the cats are fed is objectionable for one of your neighbors, gradually move the station to a less objectionable area a few yards away. This can be done incrementally over the course of one or two weeks. The cats will follow the food.
- If you are leaving for a time, or cannot feel the cats, arrange to have someone else provide them with food and water on approximately the same schedule.

Step Three: Shelter

Cats must be provided with adequate shelter on your property.

Why? When cats do not have a warm and dry shelter, they may seek it in areas where they are not welcome, such as under a neighbor's deck, shed, or in a car motor.

What To Do:

- Cat shelters should be placed in an inconspicuous area on your property, away from people or high traffic areas.
- Shelters and feeding stations should be placed so that cats do not need to cross roads or neighbors' property to move back and forth from shelter to food and water.
- Shelters should be painted in neutral colors, or in some way to blend into the surroundings.
- Straw is the preferred bedding since it does not hold moisture. Do not use blankets, towels or other cloth bedding.
- Provide enough shelters to house all the cats in the colony.

Step Four: Medical Care

Make certain that any cats that are injured or ill receive prompt treatment.

Why? For humane reasons, all animals must receive treatment as quickly as possible when they are ill or injured. Ill and injured cats may be very disturbing to other compassionate citizens, who may call animal control authorities believing that the animal should be euthanized, rather than living with illness or injury. This can also reinforce the stereotype that cats living outdoors are sickly and diseased.

Indicators that the cat may be ill/injured include:

- Weight loss
- Not eating or drinking
- Lethargy
- Discharge from nose and eyes
- Hair loss
- Not putting weight on a leg
- Visible wound

Step Five: Maintain Medical Records

Maintain your records (notes, surgery, treatment and vaccination) for all colony cats.

Why? Rabies vaccination is legally required for all cats. If cats from your colony are caught by animal control you will need to show proof of vaccination.

What To Do:

- Maintaining good vet records allows you to show actual evidence that the feral cats are healthy and fully vaccinated.
- Records can be used as a tool to educate neighbors that are fearful that the feral cats will pass a disease to them or their pets.
- Microchips provide a permanent identification for each cat and allow you to better keep track of when they received a rabies vaccination or when they were sterilized.

Step Six: Adoption of Tame Cats

Make efforts to place tame colony cats with adoption groups. Often times, you will find friendly pet cats that have been abandoned or lost by their owner. These cats have joined a colony in an effort to survive.

Why? Fewer cats in the colony will reduce the incidence of nuisance complaints. Cats that have lived indoors most of their lives often have a harder time successfully adjusting to living outdoors. They are also more likely to fall victim to violence because they do not fear humans. We encourage all caretakers to make use of the resources at adoption organizations in an attempt to place tame cats and kittens.

Facts to consider when deciding to find a home for a stray cat:

Unowned, free-roaming cats come from diverse backgrounds. Because of this, it is nearly impossible to predict if a stray or feral cat can be successfully socialized to the degree that would make them suitable for adoption. Not only is it labor intensive, the outcomes are uncertain. Even a social cat may have been abandoned because it exhibited problems, and one that is poorly socialized will often lead to the cat being abandoned again or relinquished to a shelter. For this reason, if a cat is doing well in its current colony, we believe it is best to leave the cat there. We hope one day that there will be homes for all cats, but the current reality is that healthy, adoptable cats are euthanized daily due to a lack of homes.

Feral Cats: Truly feral cats are not candidates for adoption. They do not seek human companionship or interaction. It takes months to socialize a feral cat, and while they may bond to the person socializing, but may regress to a feral state when introduced to new people. TNR is the most humane option for feral cats.

Semi-Feral: Semi-feral cats may be more receptive to socialization. However, if the cat has been on the street for many years it may be as difficult to socialize as a total feral. These cats are also difficult to place. Quite often, bringing new people into its environment is overwhelming and can cause the cat to regress. If this happens, the cat is not a good candidate for adoption.

Domestic: These cats are the easiest to place in a home. They seek human interaction and touch. They do not regress when introduced to different people or environments.

Step Seven: Inability to Continue Providing Care

Why? It is inhumane to abandon a colony of cats that has grown dependent on you.

Left alone, the cats will starve to death or run the risk of becoming a nuisance as their basic survival needs are not being met and they may be impounded by animal control authorities. To identify a new caretaker, canvas your neighborhood. Work with your neighborhood association or other local feral cat groups.

Step Eight: Exclude Cats From Areas They Are Not Welcome

Use humane techniques to discourage or exclude cats from areas where they are not welcome.

Why? If you fail to address your neighbors' complaints about excluding cats from specific areas where they are not welcome, you increase the risk of intervention from animal control authorities.

All property owners have the right to not have cats on their property. Often times, they simply do not understand why the cats are present, or object to particular cat behavior. Sometimes, they fear the cats may carry disease. It is best to try and determine the specific reason for their objection, educate them, and try to mitigate the complaint using the techniques outlined here. Please do not trespass, argue with the neighbor, or inflame the situation.

Most problems fall into two categories:

- 1. Cats are entering an area in which they are not welcome to seek food, water or shelter.
- 2. Cats are entering an area in which they are not welcome to eliminate.

Addressing Elimination Issues:

- Provide a litter box area for your colony on your property to prevent the cats from using your neighbor's garden or flower bed. The No. 1 complaint about free-roaming cats is inappropriate elimination.
- A cat's natural instinct is to eliminate in soft, loose, soil-like mulch, sand or peat moss.
- Build a simple wood frame and fill it with sand or dirt in a quiet area away from the shelter and feeding areas.
- Provide the cats with covered outdoor litter boxes.

TIP: To remove urine stains and odors, clean areas where urine has been sprayed with white vinegar or Nature's Miracle (available in most pet stores). It will eliminate most urine stains and odors.

Excluding Cats from Specific Areas:

- Utilize the suggestions provided on the Nuisance Prevention Tips Sheet for Feral Cats to address specific nuisance complaints your neighbor may have.
- Purchase a Cat Stop and offer it to your neighbor in an effort to exclude a cat from an area where it is not welcome.
- Suggest that the area be secured, enclosed, or sealed, and offer to help. Cats often get under decks, crawl spaces, garages, sheds, etc. to seek shelter. These are also areas that can usually be readily sealed.
- If cats are seeking in an area in which they are not welcome, there is a problem with the number, type, or placement of shelters you have provided.

Additional Feral Cat Resources

- Alley Cat Allies - <https://www.alleycat.org/>
- Indy Feral - <http://facespayneuter.org/indyferal/>
- Neighborhood Cats - <https://www.neighborhoodcats.org/>