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Feral Cats FAQ



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The number of feral cats in the U.S. is estimated to be in the tens of millions. Sadly, many communities still opt to control populations using outdated methods, including lethal elimination or relocation. Not only are some of these methods horribly cruel, they are also highly ineffective. It's time to focus on feral cats in the fight to end animal cruelty.

The ASPCA endorses Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) as the only proven humane and effective method to manage feral cat colonies. The following information provides background on TNR, online and print resources, and what you can do to get involved in your community.

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What Is a Feral Cat?

A cat born and raised in the wild, or who has been abandoned or lost and turned to wild ways in order to survive, is considered a free—roaming or feral cat. While some feral cats tolerate a bit of human contact, most are too fearful and wild to be handled. Ferals often live in groups, called colonies, and take refuge wherever they can find food—rodents and other small animals and garbage. They will also try to seek out abandoned buildings or deserted cars—or even dig holes in the ground—to keep warm in winter months and cool during the summer heat.

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What's Life Like for a Feral Cat?

Simply put, it's not easy. Feral cats must endure weather extremes such as cold and snow, heat and rain. They also face starvation, infection and attacks by other animals. Unfortunately, almost half of the kittens born outdoors die from disease, exposure or parasites before their first year. Feral cats also face eradication by humans—poison, trapping, gassing and steel leg-hold traps are all ways humans, including some animal control and government agencies, try to kill off feral cat populations.

That said, feral cats who live in a managed colony—a colony with a dedicated caretaker who provides spay/neuter services, regular feedings and proper shelter—can live a quite content life.

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What Is the Average Lifespan of a Feral Cat?

If a feral cat survives kittenhood, his average lifespan is less than two years if living on his own. If a cat is lucky enough to be in a colony that has a caretaker, he may reach 10 years.

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Is There a Difference Between a Stray Cat and a Feral Cat?

Yes. A feral cat is primarily wild-raised or has adapted to feral life, while we define a stray cat as someone's pet who has become lost or has been abandoned. Stray cats are usually tame and comfortable around people. They will frequently rub against legs and exhibit behaviors such as purring and meowing. In contrast, feral cats are notably quiet and keep their distance. Stray cats will also often try to make a home near humans—in car garages, front

porches or backyards. Most are completely reliant on humans as a food source and are not yet able to cope with life on the streets.

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What Is Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)?

TNR is the method of humanely trapping feral cats, having them spayed or neutered and vaccinated against rabies, and then returning them to their colony to live out their lives. TNR also involves a colony caretaker who provides food and adequate shelter and monitors the cats' health. TNR has been shown to be the least costly, as well as the most efficient and humane way of stabilizing feral cat populations.

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How Does TNR Help Feral Cats?

Through TNR, feral cats can live out their lives without adding to the homeless cat population. "It is very important to have all feral cats spayed/neutered because it is the only 100-percent effective way to prevent unwanted kittens," says Aimee Christian, ASPCA Vice President of Spay/Neuter Operations. "Feral cats are prolific reproducers."

Furthermore, by stabilizing the population, cats will naturally have more space, shelter and food, and fewer risks of disease. After being spayed or neutered, cats living in colonies tend to gain weight and live healthier lives. Spayed cats are less likely to develop breast cancer and will not be at risk for ovarian or uterine cancer, while neutered males will not get testicular cancer. By neutering male cats, you also reduce the risk of injury and infection, since intact males have a natural instinct to fight with other cats. Spaying also means female cats do not go into heat. That means they attract fewer tom cats to the area, reducing fighting. If cats are sterilized and live in a colony that has a caretaker, they may live more than 10 years.

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How Does TNR Benefit the Community?

TNR helps the community by stabilizing the population of the feral colony and, over time, reducing it. At the same time, nuisance behaviors such as spraying, excessive noisemaking and fighting are largely eliminated, and no more kittens are born. Yet, the benefit of natural rodent control is continued. Jesse Oldham, ASPCA Senior Administrative Director of Community Outreach and the founder of Slope Street Cats, an organization dedicated to feral cat welfare, notes, "TNR also helps the community's animal welfare resources by reducing the number of kittens that would end up in their shelters—TNR creates more space for the cats and kittens who come to them from other avenues."

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What Is a Colony Caretaker?

A colony caretaker is an individual (or group of individuals) who manages one or more feral colonies in a community. The caretaker keeps an eye on the cats, providing food, water, shelter, spaying/neutering and emergency medical care. In most cases, organizations and vets know these people because of the community service they provide. Some shelters and rescue groups even give out free or low-cost spay/neuter coupons to colony caretakers.

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How Can I Become a Colony Caretaker?

[Alley Cat Allies](#) ^[2], founded in 1990, offers a wealth of information on TNR, feral cat care and advocacy. Here are some key pointers on becoming a colony caretaker:

- Offer your help to established colony caretakers. Ongoing needs include feeding, trapping, transportation to and from the veterinarian, temporary housing for cats after surgery, and fostering and socializing kittens for the purpose of finding them good homes.
- Contact local shelters or welfare groups to see if a TNR workshop is available in your area.
- Start with the cats in your own backyard—educate yourself about TNR and learn to trap cats and have them spayed or neutered.
- If you live in New York City, learn more about the **[ASPCA's Stationary Spay/Neuter Clinic](#)** ^[3] or call Neighborhood Cats at (212) 662 5761 or **[visit their website](#)** ^[4] to register for a TNR workshop.

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What is Ear-Tipping and Why Is It Important?

[Ear-tipping](#) ^[5] is a widely accepted means of marking a feral cat who has been spayed or neutered. It also often identifies them as being part of a colony with a caretaker. Ear-tipping is the humane surgical removal of the top quarter-inch of the left ear. The procedure is performed by a licensed veterinarian, typically during the spay/neuter surgery. Ear-tipping is completely safe and rarely requires special aftercare. Ear-tipping is especially important as it prevents an already spayed or neutered cat the stress of re-trapping and, more important, an unnecessary surgery.

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Does Eradication Work?

Eradication, the deliberate and systematic destruction of a feral cat colony, by whatever method, almost always leads to the “vacuum effect”—either new cats flock to the vacated area to exploit whatever food source attracted the original inhabitants, or survivors breed and their descendants are more cautious around threats. Simply put, eradication is only a temporary fix that sacrifices animals' lives unnecessarily, yet yields no positive or beneficial return.

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What Is Relocation and Why Doesn't It Work?

Many communities have rounded up colonies of feral cats either for euthanasia or to relocate them to another area. This never works. Feral cats are very connected with their territory. They are familiar with its food sources, places that offer—shelter, resident wildlife, other cats in the area and potential threats to their safety—all things that help them survive. “Relocation of feral cat colonies is difficult to orchestrate and not 100-percent successful

even if done correctly. It is also usually impossible to catch all of the cats, and it only takes one male and one female to begin reproducing the colony,” Oldham states. “Even when rounding up is diligently performed and all ferals are removed, new cats will soon move in and set up camp.”

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Is Relocation Ever an Option?

Relocation is something to consider only if keeping the cats where they are becomes a threat to their lives and all other options have been explored and have failed. Moving cats to another area is a great risk to their safety unless they are being moved to a protected area and procedures laid out by groups such as [Alley Cat Allies](#) ^[2] are followed. “Relocation is an extremely difficult process. People should choose relocation only if the cats' territory is going to be demolished, there is no adjacent space to shift them to, and if the cats' lives would be at extreme risk should they remain where they are,” says Oldham.

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How Do I Deal with Difficult Neighbors?

To help your cats be better neighbors to your neighbors, keep in mind that kindness and patience are key. Find out what about the cats is bothering your neighbors and work with them on those specific issues. For example, deterrents such as motion-activated sprinklers, garden rocks and citrus smells will help keep cats away from the people who do not want them digging in their gardens or roaming their property. “It is also important to nicely explain to them that TNR is the most humane and effective way of managing feral cat overpopulation issues. TNR offers a solution that helps both the cats and the human residents, providing first and foremost permanent population control since the cats will no longer be able to reproduce,” says Aimee Christian, ASPCA Vice President of Spay/Neuter Operations. “Let them know that it also drastically changes the cats' behavior—there will be less odor (since they will no longer spray), less roaming, less visibility, and no more yowling or fighting.”

If you need help speaking to your community about TNR, contact your humane society and do some research on effective talking points for promoting TNR. Here are some pointers to consider when dealing with difficult neighbors:

- Establish a friendly relationship with people living near a feral cat colony.
- Present information in a reasonable, professional manner and address individual complaints by listening patiently. Always maintain a constructive, problem-solving attitude.
- Explain diplomatically that the cats have lived at the site for a long time and that they have been or will be sterilized, which will cut back on annoying behaviors.
- Explain that if the present colony is removed, the problems will recur with new cats.

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Don't Feral Cats Kill Birds?

While feral cats do kill some birds, they prefer to kill rodents. Other issues, such as the decline of natural habitat and use of pesticides, have a greater negative impact on bird populations.

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How Can I Keep Feral Cats Out of My Yard?

Whether feral cats are roaming your yard, digging up your garden, rooting through your trash or making a home under your porch, there are several types of [harmless cat repellents](#) [6] available to help. From sprays and motion-activated sprinklers to ultrasonic animal repellents, these quick and easy solutions, coupled with TNR and ongoing management, can help you coexist with your neighborhood cats! Just make sure your product of choice is nontoxic to animals.

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Will Animal Shelters Adopt Out Feral Cats?

No, feral cats are not adoptable and shelters rarely will accept them. The fact is, most feral cats exhibit wild, shy or frightened behavior, and it's impossible to predict how or if they will ever acclimate to indoor life. Feral cats make up a large percentage of the four million to six million cats euthanized yearly by U.S. animal shelters. Adopting a feral is seldom the best course of action for either the cat or the prospective adopter.

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Can I Tame a Feral Cat?

We do not recommend it. While a feral cat might look exactly the same as a pet cat, they're actually very different. Feral cats survive by avoiding close human interaction. When properly cared for, feral cats are happier outdoors in their own territory—they have their own hierarchies and are able to exhibit their natural behaviors. There is very little success in adopting a truly feral cat. “When I first started doing TNR,” Oldham recalls, “I, like many first-time rescuers, tried to socialize a feral cat. He remained under my bed for over a year before I could even touch him. With so many adoptable domestic cats and kittens who are truly happy being indoors, socializing a feral cat should not be the goal.”

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Can I Tame a Semi-Feral Cat?

Some semi-feral cats are actually stray cats who don't exhibit quite the same shy behavior as the majority of feral cats. Many semi-ferals are stray cats who were lost or abandoned. Occasionally they were born feral but for no particular reason are less fearful of humans than is typical. Many semi-ferals lack the knowledge to survive on their own, and are often rejected by established colonies.

It is possible for some of these cats to be socialized, but it depends on their trust of humans. “Many people wonder how they can tell if a cat is feral or an afraid domestic—that's a hard judgment call,” Oldham states. “My advice in these situations is to trap and neuter the cat and see how he responds when you are holding him for recovery in a quiet space. If he vocalizes to you, affectionately rubs his cheeks on you, he's likely been socialized by people at some point in the past.”

It is very important to take caution, especially with cats who seem to straddle the fence between feral and friendly. Getting them to trust people again might be hard, and it's possible they might imprint on you only, making them extremely difficult to adopt out.

The [Urban Cat League](#) [7] is a great resource for information on socializing semi-feral cats.

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How Can I Help Feral Kittens?

It is important to trap feral kittens and, whenever possible, foster and socialize them until they are old enough to be adopted out. "Once born, they struggle to survive," Christian says. "Their mortality rate is very high because of all the challenges of life outside on the streets."

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How Do I Tame Feral Kittens?

The [Urban Cat League](#) [7] is a great resource for information on socializing feral kittens, if you have the time and energy to dedicate to the task. Here are some tips to help you along:

- Whenever possible, kittens should continue to nurse until four weeks old—this can be done in captivity.
- Do not let feral kittens run loose—they can hide in tiny spaces and are exceptionally difficult to find and catch.
- Confine the kittens in a dog crate, cat condo or cage with a small litter box, food, water and something snugly to cuddle in.
- Food is the key to socializing. Give the kittens a small amount of wet food by hand at least twice a day—eventually the kittens will associate your presence with food. For those who are more feral, start by offering baby food or wet food on a spoon through the cage.
- Younger and less feral kittens can be picked up right away. Make a kitty burrito by wrapping a kitten in a towel, allowing her head to stick out.
- Once the kittens no longer run away from you but instead come toward you seeking to be fed, held and petted, you can confine them to a small room.
- Be sure to expose the kitten to a variety of people.
- Do not forget about the mom—spaying her is essential as well.

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Why Can't the ASPCA Take in Feral Cats and Socialize Them?

Socializing feral cats involves an extreme amount of patience, time and energy, and there is no guarantee that the cat will become tame. Unfortunately, with the numerous friendly and adoptable animals the ASPCA already has, resources to socialize feral animals are scarce.

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What Do I Do If I Find a Stray Cat?

Stray cats will usually try to make contact with you, even if they are a bit fearful at first. If you find a stray cat, please take the following actions:

- Check with your neighbors to see if their cat is missing.
- Bring the cat to a shelter or veterinary clinic to be scanned for a microchip.
- Notify all local veterinary hospitals and shelters so they can post the information in their lost-and-found resources.
- Consider fostering the cat rather than bringing her to the shelter—most shelters only

hold strays for a few days, often euthanizing them after the mandatory holding period.

- Check classifieds for lost pets and run a "found" ad of your own. Make sure your description is brief so that callers will need to truly identify the cat.

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Do You Have Any Tips for Trapping a Cat?

Here are some basic tips to help with TNR rescue:

- When possible, trap in dry, temperate weather.
- Do not feed the cats for a full 36 hours before trapping, as they must be hungry to enter the trap.
- If you'll be trapping in an area where pet cats are roaming, please inform your neighbors.
- Human-grade tuna, mackerel, sardines and salmon work well as bait. Avoid canned cat food, stray cats are used to it. Place the food inside the trap, behind the trip plate, so the cat is sure to step on it when eating.
- Transport the trapped cat to your veterinarian for spaying or neutering immediately upon capture.
- To reduce anxiety, place a sheet or towel over the trap so the cat feels secure.
- Ask that the cat be ear-tipped—have the tip of one ear snipped during surgery—to help future rescuers identify him. This is a painless and risk-free procedure.

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I Don't Live in NYC and Can't Find Anyone to Help Me with TNR. What Do I Do?

The good news is, you will never be alone! There are very valuable resources available on the Web and via feral cat organizations that will help guide you through the process. Visit the [Alley Cat Allies online community](#) ^[8] to gather ideas and expertise. It's a good idea to reach out and connect with others, even if they aren't close by. Also, Neighborhood Cats offers an online workshop, "[How to Manage a Feral Cat Colony](#)" ^[9]. Call or visit your local shelter or veterinary clinic to see if the staff can put you in touch with someone who can help.

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I Am a Veterinarian Who Would Like To Offer Services for Feral Cats. What Can I Do?

The ASPCA has sterilized thousands of feral cats at our Mobile Spay/Neuter Clinics. We have also written a [protocol for the sterilization of feral cats](#) ^[10] based on the work we do every day, with the input of the community-based groups [Neighborhood Cats](#) ^[9] and [Slope Street Cats](#) ^[11]. Whether you are a rescuer, colony caretaker, veterinary technician, veterinarian or any other friend of ferals, [this guide](#) ^[10] will aid you in helping spay and neuter feral cats.

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I'm Not Comfortable Working Directly with Feral Cats. What Are Some Other Ways I Can Help?

There are many different ways to help out feral cats, including:

- Write letters to the editors of local papers about the cats in your community.
- Make contacts for TNR with local veterinarians and businesses.
- Lobby government officials about the benefits of TNR.
- Help raise funds for local or national TNR groups.

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