

Five FAQs (frequently asked questions) About **STRAY AND FERAL CATS**



1. **What is a feral cat?**

A feral cat is either a cat who has lived his whole life with little or no human contact and is not socialized, or a stray cat who was lost or abandoned and has lived away from human contact long enough to revert to a wild state. Feral cats avoid human contact and cannot be touched by strangers.

2. **Are stray cats and feral cats the same?**

No, stray and feral cats are not the same, and the terms "stray cat" and "feral cat" are not interchangeable. A stray cat is a domestic cat that was abandoned or strayed from home and became lost. Because a stray was once a companion animal, he can usually be re-socialized and adopted.

Adult feral cats usually cannot be tamed and are not suited to living indoors with people. They are most content living outside. Feral kittens up to about 8 weeks, however, can often be tamed and adopted. See Alley Cat Allies' resources on taming feral kittens at www.alleycat.org/resources_care.html.

3. **How can I tell if a cat is stray or feral?**

Observe the cat's appearance and behavior. A stray cat is likely to approach you, although usually not close enough for you to touch him. If you put food down, a stray cat will likely start to eat it right away. A stray cat is often vocal, sometimes talking insistently, and may look disheveled, as if she is unaccustomed to dealing with conditions on the street. A stray cat may be seen at all hours of the day.

A feral cat is silent, will not approach humans, and generally will be seen only from dusk to dawn, unless extraordinarily hungry and foraging for food. A feral cat has adapted to conditions and is likely to be well groomed. If you put food down for a feral cat, he will wait until you move away from the area before approaching the food.

4. **I would like to find good homes for the feral cats I have been feeding. Is this possible?**

Generally, no. Adult feral cats usually cannot be socialized and will not adjust to living indoors. A great deal of time and effort can go into attempting

to tame an adult feral cat, with no assurance of success. This time and effort is far better spent sterilizing feral cats to break the cycle of reproduction. See Alley Cat Allies' factsheet, "The ABCs of TNR" at www.alleycat.org/pdfs/abcs.pdf.

Stray cats and kittens up to eight or ten weeks of age can usually be socialized and placed in homes.

5. **I discovered some cats outside. Who can I call to come and get them?**

The first step is to determine if the cats are tame or wild. If the cats are tame, they may belong to people living in the neighborhood. Observe the cats to determine if this is so. Post "lost cat" flyers throughout the neighborhood. After a day or two, if you get no response and you decide they are lost or otherwise not owned, you can register the cats online at www.pets911.com in the Found Pet section. If you take the cats to a shelter, be certain it is a no-kill shelter.

If the cats are feral (wild), animal control or a municipal shelter is the only agency that may come and get them, and the cats will almost certainly be killed. Even no-kill shelters find feral cats impossible to adopt out because they are wild.

Fortunately, there is a solution. Feral cats live in colonies and congregate near food sources. Feral cat colonies can be managed with a nonlethal method called **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)**, in which cats are humanely (and painlessly) trapped, spayed or neutered, and returned to their colony site where volunteer caregivers provide them with food, water, and shelter.

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is the only chance feral cats have of living safe, healthy lives without reproducing. But TNR is a hands-on project requiring commitment from one or more volunteer caregivers, often with help from feral cat advocates living in the area.

For information on starting a TNR program in your neighborhood, refer to Alley Cat Allies' factsheets, videos, and other materials. ■

Five FAQs (frequently asked questions) About

SPAYING OR NEUTERING STRAY AND FERAL CATS



1. *I have been feeding cats for a while and they are reproducing. What should I do?*

As soon as possible, you must trap the cats using humane box traps and have them spayed or neutered. (Trapping feral cats sounds complicated; in reality, it's a simple and rewarding process, and it doesn't hurt the cats.) Contact local groups involved with feral cat issues to find a low- or no-cost spay/neuter clinic. Once the cats are spayed/neutered and vaccinated, return them to the place where they were trapped. (Kittens can often be tamed, sterilized, and adopted.) You and other volunteers must then provide ongoing food, shelter, and care to keep the feral cats healthy and safe.

For information about traps/trapping, **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)**, and feral cat management, see www.alleycat.org/resources_care.html.

2. *I can't touch the cats, so how can I get them to the vet for spay/neutering?*

Do not try to touch them! And never attempt to catch a cat by throwing a towel/blanket over just the cat. Never use tranquilizers on outdoor cats—the risk of injury (to you and to the cat) is too great. Trap the cats using humane (painless) box traps and have them spayed/neutered and vaccinated. Don't wait, thinking the cats will get used to human presence and become tame enough to catch. They won't, and while you wait, several litters of kittens will be born.

For specific information about traps and trapping, go to www.alleycat.org/pdf/humane.pdf and www.alleycat.org/pdf/trapguidelines.pdf

3. *There are several cats to be trapped, but I only have one trap. Will that do?*

Generally, no. And do not plan to trap a cat, then transfer him to a carrier so you can use the trap again right away—the danger of injury (to the cat and to you) or escape is simply too great. Look for

individuals/groups who loan out humane (painless) box traps. Ideally, you should have as many traps as there are cats. If not, aim to trap all the cats in two or three sessions. How many cats you can trap during each session also depends on how many your vet will sterilize at one time.

For more information about trapping feral cats, along with information on recommended traps, go to www.alleycat.org/pdf/selecion.pdf.

4. *Where can I find a veterinarian who will treat feral cats, preferably at a reduced rate?*

First ask your own vet, then ask other vets, rescue groups, and humane societies if they know a clinic or veterinarian who provides low- or no-cost spaying/neutering and will support your plan. If the vets you approach aren't familiar with **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)**, show them the video, *Trap-Neuter-Return: A Humane Approach to Feral Cat Control*, available at www.alleycat.org/videos.html. Full-fledged spay/neuter programs operate in several parts of the country. Find them at www.alleycat.org/orgs.html.

5. *Is there anything special my veterinarian should know about working with feral cats?*

Yes! If your vet is new to working with feral cats, be certain to provide him or her with:

- *Trap-Neuter-Return: A Humane Approach to Feral Cat Control*, a **training video** that demonstrates techniques and equipment veterinarians use to treat feral cats.
- *Feral Cat Identification Protocol: Eartipping*, a **factsheet** with specific details about the identification technique that can save ferals' lives.

Both are available at www.alleycat.org/videos.html. Review this material yourself and then discuss with your vet what has to be done. Establish a protocol to get the services you need now and in the future. ■

Alley Cat Allies (ACA) is a national, nonprofit organization based in Bethesda, MD. ACA promotes nonlethal population control for feral cats through advocacy; workshops and conferences; print, video, and web-based information; and, most of all, by being ready and able to help individuals, groups, agencies, and institutions work with feral cats.