

Guidelines for Safely Relocating Feral Cats

Alley Cat Rescue receives numerous calls from people across the country who want to move feral cats. Often someone's first instinct when they find a feral colony is to remove the cats, or to "find a home" for the cats. Many people do not realize that the cats are already living in their home — their outdoor home. The colony has probably lived there for some time, in some cases for a decade or more. (Refer to "TNR in a Nutshell" for solutions to common complaints about community cats.)

Many people would like to find a cat sanctuary for feral cats to live out their lives. However, few cat sanctuaries can accommodate ferals and unless the cats' lives are threatened, the present home of the feral cat colony is the optimal place for them.

Additionally, cats are social animals. Colony cats develop strong bonds with one another and become dependent on each other. When you relocate feral cats, you may be separating them from family members and causing them undue stress. Colony cats are also psychologically attached to their territory.



George Smith

The author, relocating cats to a farm home.

Only in certain cases — if a caretaker is unavailable to care for the colony, or if the cats simply cannot remain at their present location for safety reasons — does ACR believe relocation can be a viable option. In such cases, relocation has to be undertaken with great care. New homes are difficult to find and certain procedures have to be followed, otherwise the relocated cats may not remain on the new premises.

Despite these challenges, if proper procedures are followed, it is possible to successfully relocate feral cats. ACR has relocated hundreds of feral cats to new, safe homes, and you can too, by following the steps below.

Steps for a Successful Relocation

Once you have decided that relocation is the only option left for the colony, several steps should be followed:

Assess the Colony

If some or all cats need to be sterilized, this should be performed in conjunction with the relocation efforts. Keep in mind that all cats should be relocated in pairs. They have usually bonded with one another and the move will be less traumatic if they are not alone.

Find a New Outdoor Home

Farm homes or horse stables make the best places for relocating feral cats. Most farmers are willing to take cats to help control rodent populations and in most cases, cats and farm animals get along very well.

Make sure the new caretaker is interested

in providing a good home. A country home that is only occupied on weekends while the owners work in the city is not acceptable. The cats need daily food and water. People must agree to provide for the cats' basic needs, including veterinary care if necessary, and sign an adoption contract similar to one used for domestic cat placements.

Be wary of homes on busy country roads. City cats are used to slower city traffic and although there may be fewer cars on country roads, they tend to go much faster.

Be careful of dogs at the new home. Although it may not be a problem, the new caretakers should be willing to introduce the dogs to the new cats slowly and not allow the cats to be chased, or the cats will leave. In most cases, cats and dogs will peacefully coexist with little interaction.

Take precautions if cats, especially kittens have the potential of coming in contact with predator animals, like foxes, coyotes, and owls, and be particularly wary of coyotes. Erecting tall fencing or confining the cats to a barn during night-time hours will minimize the risk of confrontation.

In searching for an appropriate location, contact friends and relatives who live in rural areas and see if they have any neighbors who have land or outbuildings. Ask them to place notices in newspapers and flyers in local tractor and feed supply stores, or run newspaper ads yourself. In addition to word of mouth, hanging flyers, and placing newspaper ads, the Internet is a good source for finding new homes. Just make absolutely sure that the new home checks out before relocation; thoroughly do your research prior to trapping.

Although the above locations are most ideal, feral cats can also be relocated to a backyard, particularly one in a suburb; to another alleyway, especially if it is close to the original home; or in some instances, feral

cats can be relocated to an already-established colony. Extra care should be taken when introducing new cats; introduce them slowly and keep new cats confined for a few weeks. You may need to put a cat playpen outdoors to keep the cats confined where the colony sleeps and eats. Note there will be a transition period where the cats establish a "pecking order;" some mild fighting is normal.

Trapping and Transport

Refer to the chapter on "Steps for Successful and Safe Trapping" for proper trapping techniques. As mentioned previously, any cats who are not already sterilized will need to be vetted prior to relocation. Once the cats are trapped, either transport them to your veterinarian to be sterilized (and then relocated) or transport them to the new location.



Packing cats up for relocating to a sanctuary.

Whether transporting one cat or several, keep the traps covered with a sheet or large towel; this will help calm the cat. Make

sure both ends of the trap are secured with twist ties. Use old sheets to protect your vehicle's seats and floors. Check that there is good air circulation in the vehicle, especially on hot days, and travel the most direct route to the new location. You want to minimize the cat's time spent in a trap and in a vehicle. Do not place the cat in the trunk or any unsafe area of a car.

Confinement Period



Judy M. Zukoski

Cats can be relocated to barns or stables. A three-week confinement period is very important for acclimating a cat to her new home.

It is very important that cats be confined in their new home for the first three to four weeks. This is enough time to familiarize the cats to their new environment, so they will remain on the premises. Even though there are instances of cats remaining when they have escaped upon arrival, this is rare and most cats will take off, never to be seen again. Other than being dangerous for the cat, this can be traumatic for the rescuer

who has usually put a lot of time, energy, money, and care into the rescue. So prior to relocating any cats, ensure the new caretaker is aware of this vital step in the process.

The confinement period will give the cat time to get accustomed to new sights, sounds, and smells. She will learn that the new caretaker provides food, water, and a warm, safe place to sleep. Providing a secure environment for the cat will ensure she considers this her new home. You should warn the new caretaker that during the first couple days the cats may struggle to find a way out. Most cats settle down in the cage after a day or two when they realize that no harm will come to them.

A large cage or playpen should be used for confinement and within an area that is protected from the elements. Be skeptical if you are told that the new barn is completely cat-proof and that the cats will not escape. There are few barns that really are escape-proof. Always take cages/ playpens, litter boxes, and food/water dishes with you, just in case. The confinement area must have a litter box (which needs to be cleaned daily), a box to hide in, and clean bedding or straw. Set the confinement area near a place where the cats can hide once they are allowed out of the playpen. They will likely run and hide when first released.

If a cat does escape, set food and water out and sprinkle her used litter (for scent) around the barn. Cats often hide for a period of time but will stay in the area. Leave plenty of food and water to prevent them from leaving in search of food.

Instruct the new caretaker to feed the cats at the same time each day. This will allow them to get used to the location and time that they will receive food once they are roaming free.

During the confinement period, it is important for the new caretaker to make con-

tact with the cats by talking to them or by playing a radio softly. This will help them get used to human voices.

Take care not to confine the cats for longer than a month. Even friendly, domestic cats cannot tolerate a lengthy confinement period.

Follow-Up

Make sure to call or visit after the relocation. You will want to stay in touch to make sure the cats are doing well and also to keep a contact for future relocations.

If you do relocate a whole colony, make sure that the food sources at their original location disappear completely, or other

stray cats will move in to repopulate the area. Removing the food sources can be difficult, especially when garbage is thrown out in backyards and alleyways. Check from time to time to ensure that no new cats have moved into the vacated territory.

Conclusion

Relocation can be a safe and viable option for feral cats if undertaken properly and if these guidelines are followed. But remember the best option for the cats in a feral colony is for them to remain in their original home whenever possible. Sometimes this may mean finding caretakers or speaking out for the cats to stay at their present location.