

# Winterizing Feral Cat Colonies

In the winter months, providing shelter for feral cats is even more important than providing food (Calhoon and Haspel, 1989). Cold, wet weather can have adverse and potentially serious effects on cats. It is very important for feral cats to stay dry. If they become wet, they will need a shelter to dry off to prevent hypothermia or freezing. In most cases, however, feral cats are able to tolerate cold temperatures and make do just as any other wild animal. They search out warm, dry shelter and find any and all nearby food sources. Feral cats will also huddle together in order to conserve heat. When several cats huddle together in a small shelter, their combined body heat raises the temperature inside the shelter appreciably.



Waterloo Alley Cat Project

*Decorated winterized shelters allow cats to escape the cold in style.*

Providing shelter, along with feeding the cats, greatly reduces winter hardships and helps to keep the cats healthy.

You can buy a shelter from a pet supply

store, build your own shelter, or provide other types of protection against the elements. If feral cats rely on a shed or other building for shelter, it is recommended that a smaller portable shelter be placed inside.

## Shelter Materials

Material with excellent insulation qualities, such as Styrofoam or mylar, work best. The shelter's interior should have a minimal amount of air space, thus reducing the amount of heat the cat's body must generate to keep the space warm. Still, you do want to allow enough room for a few cats to huddle.

Covered litter boxes (some have doors) and plastic or rubber totes work perfect for shelters. Outdoor dog "igloos" from a pet supply store also work well, and many websites sell specially-designed cat shelters. (Refer to the "Helpful Resources" section for more information.)

Use Styrofoam to line the containers and place straw in the bottom for bedding.

## Additional Tips

Use straw (not hay) for bedding; it stays dry and can easily be changed. Do not use blankets or towels; they retain moisture.

Raise the shelter off the ground a few inches by placing it securely on bricks or on a pallet. It's more likely to retain moisture and rot if left on the ground. Plus, this prevents water from flowing into the openings when it's raining.

Clean the shelters each spring and autumn

by replacing the bedding with fresh straw. You may even want to sprinkle flea powder or other flea deterrent in the bottom of the shelter, before adding the bedding. Do not allow cats to lay directly in flea powder and always read product instructions prior to use.



Alley Cat Rescue

*A basic, winterized foam shelter is a welcome sight for feral cats in cold conditions.*

Microwavable heating pads and hot water bottles can be placed in shelters to keep cats warm. Most will stay warm for up to 12 hours, and can be especially helpful to protect against night time temperatures. Electric heating pads can be used for porch cats, and outdoor lights can be added to shelters for heat.

## How to Construct a Shelter

### Supplies You Will Need

- Sturdy cardboard box or plastic tote with lid (ideal size 24”L x 13”W x 15”H)
- Several thin pieces of Styrofoam (about 1/4” thick) or a small

Styrofoam cooler

- Straw for bedding
- Duct tape
- Utility knife
- Ruler or measuring tape
- Marker

### Instructions

1. With the box or tote sitting on the ground, top up, draw a circle with a 6” diameter in the center of one (or both) of the short sides of the box. Cut out the circle to create a door(s).
2. Duct tape the edges of the circle door for reinforcement and to protect the cat from being scratched by any rough edges.
3. Measure the Styrofoam pieces so they line the bottom and the walls of the box. Cut the pieces to size and use the duct tape to secure all pieces of Styrofoam to the inside of the box. You can also use a Styrofoam cooler that will fit inside of the box/tote. Cut openings in the Styrofoam to match the door(s) in the box.
4. If using a cardboard box, fold closed three of the top flaps (allowing one of the larger flaps to stand open), and duct tape the three flaps closed. One box top flap is left unsecured to allow for easy bedding changes. If using a plastic tote, simply remove the lid to change bedding.
5. For a cardboard box, run strips of duct tape lengthwise along the bottom of the box to help waterproof the bottom. This may be done to each side of the box for extra protection. Also, cover the entire box with a plastic tablecloth or tarp (secured by heavy rocks or bricks) to prevent water damage.

### Bedding

Bedding can make a shelter more comfortable and increase warmth, but it is not essential. It is better to have no bedding than bad bedding. Bad bedding is material that the cats lie on and cannot burrow in. For example, flat newspaper, blankets, and towels will draw out the cat's body heat when she lies on top of it.

Straw (again, not hay), shredded pieces of newspaper, and Styrofoam pieces all make good bedding.



*A foam cooler and straw add insulation to a weatherproof rubber tote shelter (top removed).*

Alley Cat Rescue

### Food and Water

Provide the cats with a feeding station — a simple structure with a roof and a floor that will keep food and cats dry.

Nutrition is especially important for outdoor cats during the winter because the cold can create additional stresses for their immune systems. They require a boost in calories and more lean proteins to account



*A covered shelter keeps cats and food dry.*

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for their increased activity in the cold. Feeding them a higher quality food is also beneficial.

Normally, healthy cats do not require a lot of water and can get most of their water needs from eating moist food; however, in the winter when canned food can freeze, dry food becomes a cat's staple. Therefore, providing fresh water is a necessity during cold weather. The best solution to keep water from freezing is to use a solar-powered or electrically-heated bowl. Water will evaporate relatively quickly, so the bowl needs to be filled regularly. You can also use microwavable heating pads/disks to place under water and food bowls to keep from water freezing.

The type of bowl you use in general can make a difference. Use one made of thick plastic, like a Tupperware container; it takes longer for water to freeze when in a plastic dish compared to a metal dish. Styrofoam containers lined with plastic also make great water bowls. The best bowls are deep, insulated, and have relatively small openings compared to their volume. Black or dark colored bowls will absorb solar radiation better. Position the bowl so it's protected from the wind and, if possible, exposed to the sun. Placing the bowl beneath a Styrofoam cooler with a hole large enough for the cat's head and shoulders will also help keep the water from freezing.