

Introduction to Feral Cats

What Exactly is a Feral Cat?

The word “feral” comes from the Latin *fera*, meaning wild animal. A feral cat is a cat who is born and raised in the wild, or one who has been abandoned or become lost and has reverted back to a “wild,” instinctual state in order to survive. A feral cat is commonly referred to as an “alley cat,” “street cat,” or “community cat.” While some feral cats tolerate different degrees of human contact, most are too fearful and wild to be handled. Some feral cats are rarely seen, coming out only at night to look for food. Feral cats often live in groups, or colonies, and reside wherever they can find food. They seek out abandoned buildings, deserted cars, and storm water drains for shelter.

Any domesticated animal, such as a pigeon, pig, horse, or dog, who lives away from human contact can revert to a wild state, becoming feral. In most cases, environmentalists refer to these animals as invasive or exotic species, thereby insinuating that they pose an adverse effect to their habitat. However, Frankie

Seymour sees them differently, as “introduced species that have returned to the wild and become naturalized” (Seymour, accessed 2014). This is a much healthier and more accurate view of describing these animals.



Roger Tabor

Feral cats exhibit a wide range of personalities. Some are so fearful of humans that they are seldom seen, while others will patiently pose for a picture!

In the case of feral cats, in our opinion, they should be referred to as “community cats.” After all, they belong to the neigh-

borhoods and the communities where they live. The individuals who Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) them are doing society a huge favor. The cats are now sterilized and vaccinated against disease. And in return, the cats offer our cities and suburbs a service by controlling rodent populations and preventing disease. The term “community cats” also encompasses a broader scope of describing individual cats, including stray, abandoned, free-roaming, and feral.

For the sake of clarity, the term “feral cats” will be used in this handbook. This is the more readily identifiable term in today’s world, though we hope “community cats” will one day become the widely accepted term for these cats without having any negative connotation.

Feral cats have lived in the U.S. for around 500 years. Some researchers believe cats came over on the Mayflower, which is probable, since explorers usually took cats with them on their ships to control rodent stowaways (Driscoll et al., 2009). Roger Tabor in his book, “Cats: The Rise of the Cat,” says that there were probably cats on the ships of Columbus in 1492, as it is known “from a letter written in 1495 ... that they were taken on his second voyage in 1493-5” (Tabor, 1991). And there are theories that cats came over to the U.S. even before the Mayflower. The Maine Coon cat closely resembles the Norwegian Forest Cat. They both evolved in much the same climate, which has led some to the conclusion that the cats responsible for developing the Maine Coon were brought over by the Vikings (Simon and Simon, accessed 2014).

One of the biggest myths promoted by anti-cat folks is that feral cat caretakers are responsible for dumping cats, and that by managing feral colonies, caretakers are encouraging folks to dump cats. The caretakers of these colonies did not put the cats out there. Uneducated and uncaring individuals are responsible for the outdoor cat population.

Cats end up on the streets because (1) they are kicked out; (2) they are let out because of financial constraints and the fear of taking them to a shelter where they will be killed; or (3) they become lost. The majority of the cats who end up on the streets are unsterilized. It’s the colony caretakers who are stopping the breeding cycle and humanely managing the cats. When a new cat shows up at a colony, the caretaker ensures she is sterilized and vaccinated. Unfortunately, people are always going to dump animals; that’s why organizations like ours work to educate the public about homeless animals to minimize this problem. We also work to provide helpful resources in solving some of the most common behavioral issues facing cats, so that more cats stay in their homes and are not discarded.

Feral kittens are the offspring of a feral mother cat or they can be born to a domestic mother cat who became lost or was abandoned, or one who chooses to have her litter away from humans. In order for kittens to become friendly and completely domesticated, they should be handled from a very early age, ideally from two weeks old. Feral mother cats

teach their young to be wary of humans and to run and hide if they feel threatened.



Louise Holton

Feral kittens.

Young kittens who have not been handled by humans will spit and hiss. They will be wary of humans and flee when approached. A stray domestic cat who has had to survive on her own for a while will initially be wary of humans. However, she will regain her confidence fairly soon after re-establishing contact. There are varying degrees of wariness and shyness among both feral cats and other cats who have been abandoned to fend for themselves. It requires a certain amount of experience working with stray and feral cats to be able to properly judge just *how* feral a cat may be, or if the cat is even feral at all — maybe she is just a frightened house cat. Sadly, many in animal control refer to these cats as fractious animals. Many domestic cats are killed in shelters merely for acting fearful

and defensive in a frightening situation, because they are assumed to be feral.

Defining and predicting feral cat behavior can be somewhat murky territory. If a domesticated cat becomes lost and has to fend for herself for awhile, she could temporarily revert to some instinctively wild behavior. Some older feral cats can become fairly tame in time, yet other feral cats, even when trapped as young as four months of age, may remain feral forever. Some feral cats bond with their original caretaker, but may never bond with a new person.

During my many years of working with feral cats, I have experienced a wide range of situations with hundreds of fe-

Personal Account from Louise Holton

In Prince George's County, Maryland, a yellow eight-month-old house cat was picked up by animal control officers, along with a few stray cats, at an apartment complex. The cat, Hunter, had been neutered and vaccinated just two weeks earlier, and had apparently escaped from the apartment when someone accidentally left a door ajar. The cat was examined by two experienced veterinary technicians and an animal control officer, and was deemed "feral." He was destroyed that same day. When the family went to claim their cat, they were told that he was destroyed because he "was attacking, spitting and hissing, and trying to bite the officer through his gloves." The agency said they hold most cats for three to five days but often destroy "fractious" stray cats sooner.

ral cats. I've seen them in a wide variety of circumstances — in my home, at the veterinary clinic, in city alleys, and at Alley Cat Rescue headquarters with our own adopted feral office cats. The only conclusion one can reach from these combined experiences is that no two feral cats are alike and one can never predict how *any* feral cat will react to human contact.

The domestic cat is one of the most adaptable mammals on Earth and, as I have said, can become wild easily. When a house cat is lost or abandoned, she will try to find a food source and shelter. She may find a home with humans — 30 percent of Americans obtain their cat as a stray who arrived on their doorsteps — or she may find some old boxes behind a convenience store where other cats have formed a colony, and join this group. Thirty to 60 percent of lost cats, or cats who wander away from home, will eventually come to live in a feral colony (Berkeley, 2001). If she is not sterilized, she will soon become pregnant. Usually around half of her kittens will become ill with treatable illnesses, such as upper respiratory infections; however, most will die. She will teach her remaining kittens to be wild, teaching them survival behaviors inherited from her wild ancestors.

Most house cats do suffer and often cannot survive when they find themselves on their own. However, some survive quite well, which is why there is such a large population of feral cats all around the world. There is generally an enormous amount of discarded food waste in cities

and suburbs, where colonies usually form. Feral cats are opportunistic feeders, scavenging on whatever food is available. They will eat from garbage cans or beg for handouts. Cats are also hunters, preying on rodents, reptiles, insects, and birds. Cats, like other predators, prey on young, old, and ill animals. Cats learn very quickly the locations of potential food sources and which households, restaurants, and hotels throw food in dumpsters.

British biologist Peter Neville has studied cats and feral cat colonies for decades. He explains them this way:

There is perhaps no such thing as a feral cat, a domestic cat reverted to the wild. Instead all cats — feral, stray, and pet — can be viewed as being the same species as their African wildcat ancestor, and the pet cat is simply exploiting an attractive opportunity. The 'normal' lifestyle is living around and with man, but not necessarily to the height of luxury that we offer him as a pet. Then the success of the cat 'living rough' and away from the direct care of man is that much easier to comprehend. (Neville, 1992)

Despite cats being able to survive in the wild, many of those who work in humane organizations are not willing to admit this. It seems to many that, in order to discourage individuals from abandoning house cats to the streets to fend for themselves, they refuse to admit that any cat, even a feral cat, can survive on her own. This is where the myths and mis-

information begin and where theories about what constitutes the proper way to protect feral cats becomes muddied. Yet, in defense of those who feel that all cats are helpless on their own, these people have usually witnessed a tremendous amount of suffering and neglect among the animals they have dedicated themselves to protecting. Many cats have been abused, relinquished to shelters for euthanasia when they become inconvenient, and some are treated appallingly by humans. But for every person who treats an animal badly, there are many more who care properly for animals, treating their companion animals as part of the family. And there are many who care for and feed feral cats, to whom they have no obligation, except that their compassion dictates that they must.

Those who advocate that no cat can survive on her own are met with contradiction when colonies of feral cats are seen surviving quite well. When cats have been trapped and sterilized, provided with shelter, food, and water, cats actually thrive. It may seem contradictory to advise people that it is cruel to abandon cats to fend for themselves while saying that many cats can survive quite well on their own. However, we have a moral and ethical responsibility to care for the animals that we have domesticated, whether it be by taking them into our homes or by making their life in our alleyways a little easier. *We do not condone abandoning cats to survive on their own.* However, for those who already live on the streets, we believe it is in the best interest of the

cats (and of humans) to sterilize and vaccinate them. These animals deserve the basic medical treatment that our companion pet cats receive.

Where are Feral Cats Mainly Found?

College Campuses

Some students bring unsterilized cats to school and abandon them at the end of the year. Cafeteria dumpsters ensure that a constant supply of leftover food is available. Attracted by this food source, lost or abandoned cats enter from the surrounding residential areas and join the colonies.

Many colleges have students and staff who implement TNR programs on campus. Some of these are: Operation Catnip at the University of Florida, U.C. Davis' Feline Medicine Club, Feline Friends Network at Stanford University, and UT Campus Cat Coalition at the University of Texas, as well as programs at California Polytechnic State University and George Mason University in Virginia.

Military Bases

Transient military personnel abandon domestic cats when transferred to other bases. Many of the cats are not sterilized and, with their offspring, begin forming colonies. Military personnel often assist with TNR programs on bases and try to find homes for adoptable cats; however, many military installations insist feral cats must be removed.

Fast-Food Places, Restaurants, Convenience Stores, Rest Stops

Eating establishments produce a constant source of leftover food in dumpsters that attracts rodents and feral cats. Colonies soon form around this reliable food source.

Densely Populated Urban Areas

Some negligent caretakers allow domestic, unaltered cats to wander. Garbage left in alleys provides an available food source for cats, and they also prey on rodents who are attracted to the leftover scraps; this encourages the formation of colonies. Feral cats find shelter in abandoned houses and buildings. Porch cats are common in cities and surrounding suburbs, as stray and feral cats find shelter under porches and food sources in yards and dumpsters.

Hospitals

In the United Kingdom, hospital grounds represent areas where successful colonies of managed, sterilized cats live. Hospital personnel have found that caring for feral cats is therapeutic for long-term patients, providing a great deal of enjoyment. Such programs have been particularly successful for patients in mental institutions (Remfry, 1996).

One such study considered the feral cat colony at the Gillis W. Long Hansen's Disease Center in Carville, Louisiana. Veterinarians from the Louisiana State



Louise Holton

Feral porch cat, Joey.

University School of Veterinary Medicine first initiated a nonlethal control-scheme, trap-and-remove. They found this method created a vacuum, where new cats entered the colony, introduced new diseases, and exacerbated behavioral problems (Zaunbrecher and Smith, 1993).

A TNR program was then implemented at the Center. The authors found that here, as in England, feeding feral cats can have long-term positive benefits for cats and patients. The overall health of the cats at the Center was found to be improved after TNR, and the size of the colony had stabilized. The authors also found there were fewer behavior-related complaints about the colony; that staff and patients at the Center were eager to participate, as evidenced by their volunteering to perform the TNR; and that the caretakers formed a lasting bond with the cats, eventually treating them as companion animals (Zaunbrecher and Smith, 1993).

Farms

Many farmers allow feral cats to live in barns to control rodent populations. Sometimes these cats may be underfed in the mistaken belief that this will make them better “mousers.” This is a false belief, as hungry cats will move away to areas where better food sources exist. Poorly fed cats are also susceptible to disease. All too often, farmers do not sterilize the animals, causing further

overpopulation problems. However, farms can offer an excellent opportunity for relocating sterilized feral cats from cities and urban areas. The new caretakers must agree to confine the cats for a three week period to allow acclimation to their area and food should be provided on a daily basis, with basic medical care given when necessary. For detailed relocation instructions, please refer to “Guidelines for Safely Relocating Feral Cats.”



Judy Zukoski

Relocated barn cat.