



ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION

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Adopting Adult Feral Cats

More than 30% of individuals acquire their cat(s) by finding the cat outdoors (APPA, 2017). Cats who live outdoors either used to live indoors or are truly feral and were born outside. It is important to understand that socializing a truly feral cat is usually more difficult than socializing a stray cat (one who previously lived indoors).

Alley Cat Rescue does not recommend trying to adopt every feral cat who lives in your colony. Although you may be upset at the idea of them not having a home, remember the outdoors is their home. Many feral cats will be miserable living inside as a companion animal. We usually recommend adopting a feral cat only in situations where the cat sustained an injury and requires constant care and medication or you are fostering a pregnant or nursing feral cat who seems like she can be socialized.

Supplies

If it is necessary to confine a feral cat indoors, you will need a large cage and a cat den for her to hide in to feel safe. It is highly recommended that you keep the cage in a spare bedroom or other room that has limited foot traffic. Line the cage with newspaper, provide plenty of fresh, clean blankets, and cover the top of the cage with a folded sheet.

Building confidence and trust

Building confidence and trust with a feral cat is the most important part of the relationship and requires a lot of patience and persistence. At first a feral cat will likely be terrified of you. A bond will not form overnight; it may take months or years for a feral cat to trust humans. It is important not to rush or push a feral cat into trusting you. Sudden movements and forced contact can scare the cat and reinforce her wariness of humans. Building a relationship must be done at her pace. And always keep in mind that you may never gain a feral cat's trust enough to where you can pet her, let alone bring her into your house.

Working with a feral cat outdoors

It is most common for an individual to socialize a feral cat by working with her while she is in her outdoor home. Providing a reliable food source and shelter will help build a trustful relationship. It is also important to establish a permanent feeding area and a set schedule; most animals find security in routine. Do not leave excess food available, especially overnight, to prevent other animals like raccoons, skunks, and opossums from hanging around.

Once a regular feeding schedule has been established and the cat seems to realize this is her new home, you can start to socialize with her by sitting nearby while she is eating. Sit as close to her as she will allow without running away. At first you may need to be quiet, not making any noise, and just be in her presence. Eventually you can start to talk to her in a soft, soothing voice, and make your way closer to her. Allow her to smell your hands and become familiar with your scent. Some feral cats will permit petting while they are eating, for it provides a happy distraction; again, just use caution when trying to make physical contact. It may take several weeks or months to reach the point in your relationship where she will seek out your affection and allow physical contact.

Moving her indoors

After you have made physical contact with her, you can begin to coax her into your house. It is much easier to help a feral cat become accustomed to being indoors when you have an enclosed porch area, walk-out basement, or other room that is closed off from the rest of the house, where you can safely leave a door cracked open to the outside. At first, she will need to know that she can escape if she feels frightened. It is recommended that once she becomes comfortable living in her new area, that you close the door during the night to increase her safety.

Once she has become comfortable with living on the porch or in the basement, you can decide if you want to introduce her to the rest of the house or if you want to simply call this space her home. There are quite a few additional items to consider when deciding whether to introduce a feral cat to living in a house. You will need to take into account your house's dynamics (other animals, small children, how busy and loud), and it will depend on the cat, if she will want to live fully indoors. Many caretakers have "porch cats" or walk-out "basement cats" who are content living on their porches and in their basements with no desire to live in the house.

If you do decide to try to introduce her to the rest of the house, you can use the same steps of transition as before. Allow the door adjacent to the porch or basement to remain open at first, so she can escape back outside where she is most comfortable. It is helpful to keep bedrooms and other spare rooms closed to help minimize the amount of new space she has to explore and the amount of hiding places available.

Working with a feral cat indoors

For a feral cat who is confined to a cage indoors, the routine of providing fresh food and water, scooping the litter box, and changing the newspaper and bedding will help aid in gaining the cat's trust. Allow her to smell your hands, either through the bars of the cage or inside the cage, so she becomes familiar with your scent. To ease any stress or tension, you can leave a radio or television playing softly or play with her using wand toys. As she becomes more comfortable with you playing and petting her, you can slowly allow her to venture out of the cage. To prevent her from hiding and reverting back to her wary nature, keep her confined to that room.

Once she has made introductions with her other housemates and they seem to get along for the most part (some initial fighting is to be expected until everyone has reached an understanding), you can slowly introduce her to the rest of the house. Allow her to explore the remaining rooms for short periods of time, while supervised of course, and confine her back to her room so she can feel safe. Continue with periods of exploration and periods of confinement until you and her feel comfortable with her having free-range of the entire house.

Things to consider

Never forget that a cat's wild nature is always there, under the surface, and can kick in at any time. Even a feral cat who has been socialized and welcomes human contact will still retain some of her wild instincts. When she feels scared or threatened, she may go into attack mode as her survival instincts take over, so you must always keep this in mind. If you are not especially careful and do not take into account the wild nature of the cat, you could become injured.

When first introducing a feral cat to a room in the house, she may try to climb the curtains or the blinds, so it is advised that you remove these at first, until she settles down. Cats do feel safer when they are elevated off the ground, so it can be helpful to add a cat tree in front of a window so she can look out. Just be sure that if you have drop ceilings (the type where the tiles can be lifted up), cat trees and other furniture are not elevated so high that she is able to get into the ceiling.

Most feral cats will use a litter box right away. They have a natural instinct to relieve themselves in material that is easy for them to dig in, such as soil, sand, or mulch. At first, use a material that is similar to what she has been used to outdoors. Play sand works well. (Do not use construction sand, which may contain harmful additives.) You can then slowly transition to a standard cat litter, but make sure not to use one that is scented. Some litters have special cat attractants in them to help entice the cat to use it, so those may be helpful.

If you have a dog(s) in the house, it can be helpful to provide an area of the house that is just for the cat. Creating a dog-free zone can really aid in her feeling comfortable living indoors, especially if your dog is very active and/or highly interested in the cat.

Trips to the veterinary clinic can be a challenge. For most cats, it is not that easy to get them into a carrier, especially when they learn a carrier means a trip to the vet; but for a feral cat, a carrier could mean this is going to be her last day on earth. Therefore, it is helpful to acclimate a feral cat to a carrier before needing to actually use one. Place an opened carrier in the cat's living area with a blanket inside, as an inviting place to sleep. Put treats in the carrier to help entice her inside and practice simply shutting the door while she is in there. Be careful not to scare or traumatize her, but slowly help her get used to the idea of being in there without any threat of danger.

The last thing to remember is that not all feral cats are able to be socialized. Every cat responds differently to humans and you should always keep the cat's best interest as a top priority. In the case where you are unable to successfully socialize a feral cat, whether she is outdoors or indoors, you must make the decision as to where it is best for her to continue living. Do not keep a feral cat in your house if she has been hiding under the bed for a year and you never see her. Even though she may be eating and drinking, what kind of life is it for a cat to live under a bed for her entire life? If she is outdoors and there is no immediate danger to her (no one is threatening to trap or kill her and she does not live next to a busy highway), then allowing her to remain living in her outdoor home is her best option.

Reference

“The 2017-2018 APPA National Pet Owners Survey Debut.” Retrieved from http://americanpetproducts.org/Uploads/MemServices/GPE2017_NPOS_Seminar.pdf.