



ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION

P.O. BOX 96499 WASHINGTON DC 20007 • 301 277 5595 • ACR@SAVEACAT.ORG

What Is A Feral Cat?

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.

The domestic cat is one of the most adaptable mammals on Earth and can become wild easily. When a house cat is lost or abandoned, she will try to find a food source and shelter. Thirty to 60 percent of lost cats, or cats who wander away from home, will eventually come to live in a feral colony. If she is not sterilized, she will soon become pregnant and teach her kittens to be wild – teaching them survival behaviors.

Where are Feral Cats Typically Found?

Feral cats seek out dry shelter near a reliable food source, such as abandoned buildings, deserted cars, and storm water drains. Feral cat colonies are typically located near high populations of people, which also produce a reliable food source; think establishments with dumpsters. Here are the most common places to find feral cat colonies:

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.

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.

Hospitals

Like any of the above locations, dumpsters at hospitals provide a reliable food source for feral cats who come from nearby residential areas. 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 health institutions (Remfry, 1996).

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.

Farms

Many farmers allow feral cats to live in barns to control rodent populations. However, all too often, farmers do not sterilize the animals, causing further overpopulation problems. In addition, sometimes these cats may be underfed with the mistaken belief that this will make them better “mousers;” hungry cats will simply move away to areas where better food sources exist. On the other hand, farms can offer an excellent opportunity for relocating sterilized feral cats from cities and urban areas, as long as the new caretaker agrees to confine the cats for a three-week period to allow assimilation to their area and food should be provided on a daily basis, with basic medical care given when necessary.

Common Misconceptions about Feral Cats

Feral Cats will Suffer if Not Taken to a Shelter

Veterinary experts cite growing evidence that these cats not only survive on their own, but that feral cats brought to TNR clinics are generally healthy. Less than one percent of cats taken to TNR clinics require euthanasia for disease, trauma, or other incurable conditions (Wallace and Levy, 2006).

In another study, veterinarians looked at the health of feral cats by measuring the body condition of cats prior to being TNR'd. When trapped initially, the cats were reported to be lean but not emaciated. Veterinarians also measured the falciform fat pad, or the deposit of fat along each side of the abdomen, and found each cat to have a small amount of fat present; meaning the cats were eating enough to be able to store fat and maintain a fairly stable weight (Scott et. al, 2002).

Conversely, euthanasia of healthy cats in shelters is the leading cause of death in cats. Over 1.4 million cats enter U.S. shelters each year, and tragically, 7 in 10 will be killed. Almost 100% of feral cats entering shelters are killed.

Feral Cats Live Short Lives

A study performed on a Florida college campus over the course of 11 years reported that more than 80% of the cats had been residents for more than six years; which is comparable to the mean lifespan of 7.1 years for household cats (Levy et al., 2003). In 2012, Alley Cat Rescue surveyed rescue organizations across the United States that provide TNR services to their communities, and out of the 120 groups that responded, 25% reported the average age of colony cats to be around 6 to 8 years old. Another 35% said the feral cats they

assist are between 9 and 12 years old, with more than 14% reporting feral cats in their communities to be 13+ years old. ([Alley Cat Rescue, 2012](#)).

Feral Cats Suffer from Disease

As for the occurrence of viral diseases, such as feline leukemia (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), large epidemiologic studies “indicate FeLV and FIV are present in approximately 4% of feral cats, which is not substantially different from the infection rate reported for pet cats” (Levy and Crawford, 2004). Furthermore, models of the transmission of the two diseases among feral cat populations “indicate that neither virus impacts overall colony size,” meaning these viruses are not quickly killing infected cats, but rather cats are capable of living years with either disease (Levy and Crawford, 2004).

Feral Cats are Responsible for Declining Bird Populations

Felis catus, the domestic and feral cat, is a predator and carnivore. Cats are also considered scavengers; meaning they will eat whatever food is available, including human handouts, garbage, and carrion (dead animals). To date, the diet of cats has been studied on four continents, with 31 studies conducted on remote oceanic islands (Fitzgerald and Turner, 2000). And although these studies have helped identify the most common prey cats feed on (rodents) and the many contributing factors as to why they feed on certain prey (availability), few studies have examined the *impact* of cat predation on such prey populations. It’s also important to note that predators do not *destroy* prey populations; it is not part of the natural balance of life.

The 2013 “State of the Birds” report says **the primary cause of declining bird populations is due to habitat loss, agricultural expansion, climate change, and pollution** (North American Bird Conservation Initiative, 2013). The survival of migrating birds highly depends on the planet’s forests. Without available tracts of forestland, countless bird populations lose their nesting sites and food sources. Songbirds use these forests to fly back and forth with the changing seasons, returning every year to the same areas to lay their eggs and raise their young; however, more and more of these birds find themselves returning to sites where forestland has been bulldozed, leaving them with little to no available resources for survival. The Council on Hemispheric Affairs says, “experts estimate that each minute, 11 football fields of forest are cleared (COHA, 2009).

What You Can Do to Help Feral Cats

- Implement a [Trap-Neuter-Return \(TNR\) program](#) for free-roaming cats in your community.
- Advocate for TNR programs in your community by sending polite and educational letters to city council members, accompanied by a petition with collected signatures. You might even want to include our handbook, [Alley Cat Rescue’s Guide to Managing Community Cats](#).
- Address neighborhood concerns and complaints by educating them on the importance and effectiveness of TNR. Offer to setup sprinklers and other harmless deterrents to keep cats out of gardens; and build outdoor litter boxes and scoop daily.
- Encourage your veterinarian to treat feral cats and offer TNR services.
- Respond to negative press by submitting editorial letters presenting the facts on TNR and cat predation.
- Contact wildlife and bird conservation groups and encourage them to adopt nonlethal forms of animal management, including TNR for community cats.
- Volunteer, foster, and donate to your local cat organizations.
- Support colony caretakers by building shelters and/or feeding stations and donating food.
- Adopt an alley cat.

References

Alley Cat Rescue. Feral Cat Survey. N.p., 2012. Web. 4 Oct. 2014.

Council on Hemispheric Affairs. "Shooting Itself in the Foot, Brazil Spreads Concrete through the Rainforest." N.p., Nov. 2009. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.

Fitzgerald, B. Mike and Dennis C. Turner. "Hunting Behaviour of Domestic Cats and Their Impact on Prey Populations." In *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of Its Behaviour*, edited by Dennis C. Turner and Patrick Bateson, 152-75. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Levy, Julie K., David W. Gale, and Leslie A. Gale. "Evaluation of the Effect of a Long-Term Trap-Neuter-Return and Adoption Program on a Free-Roaming Cat Population." *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 222.1 (2003): 42-46. Print.

Levy, Julie K., and P. Cynda Crawford. "Humane Strategies for Controlling Feral Cat Populations." *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 225.9 (2004): 1354-60. *Avmajournals.amva.org (Atypon)*. Web. 18 Aug. 2014.

North American Bird Conservation Initiative. *The State of the Birds 2013 Report on Private Lands*. Washington, D.C.:U.S. Department of the Interior, 2013 Print.

Scott, Karen C., Julie K. Levy, P. Cynda Crawford. "Characteristics of Free-Roaming Cats Evaluated in a Trap-Neuter- Return Program." *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 221.8 (2002) 1136-38.Print.

Wallace, Jennifer L. and Julie K. Levy. "Population Characteristics of Feral Cats Admitted to Severn Trap-Neuter-Return Programs in the United States." *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* 8.4 (2006): 279-84. NCBI *PubMed*. Web. 29 Sept. 2014.