

Winterizing Feral Cat Colonies

In the winter months, providing shelter for feral cats is even more important than providing food (Calhoun 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. Providing shelter, along with feeding the cats, greatly reduces any winter hardships and helps to keep the cats healthy.

Domestic cats, if left outside, probably suffer more from cold weather conditions than feral cats, who develop a winter coat in the fall. Feral cats will also huddle together in order to conserve heat. When several cats huddle together in a small shelter, their combined body heat easily raises the temperature inside the shelter.

Providing shelter is a crucial aspect of colony management. 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



Waterloo Alley Cat Project

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

cats rely on a shed or other building for shelter, it is recommended that a smaller portable shelter be placed in the shed. As long as the cats have a dry, warm place to protect them from the elements, feral colonies can thrive during the winter.

Shelter Materials

Two key elements are needed in any good feral cat shelter. First is the material used. Material with excellent insulation qualities, such as Styrofoam or mylar, work

best. Styrofoam traps the cat's body heat, turning her into a little radiator. Second is the size of the shelter; you don't want a shelter to be too big. 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, especially if you are caring for a large colony.



Alley Cat Rescue

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

Covered litter boxes (some have doors) and plastic or rubber totes work perfect for shelters. But you can also use a strong cardboard box or crate. Outdoor dog "igloos" from a pet supply store also work well (just remember to keep size in mind), 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. For litter boxes that have vents in the roof for air flow and when using cardboard boxes, it's important to place a

tarp or plastic table cloth over the shelter to prevent water damage. The plastic barrier can be secured using bricks or other heavy objects.

Additional Tips

Ideally the shelter should have two small openings, which will allow quick escape if necessary. Make sure the openings are protected from the wind.

Use straw for bedding; it stays dry and can easily be changed. Do not use hay; it retains moisture and it is food for farmed animals. 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 wooden 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 or newspaper. 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.

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 tem-

peratures. 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
- Duct tape
- Utility knife
- Ruler or measuring tape
- Marker

Instructions

1. With the box or tote sitting on the ground, top up, draw a 6” circle 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 table cloth or tarp (secured by heavy rocks or bricks) to prevent water damage.



Alley Cat Rescue

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

Food and Water

Small bowls of dry or canned food can be placed inside the shelter. The cats' own heat will slow the freezing of the canned food and can even defrost it. NEVER place water inside the shelter; it can easily spill and cause the cat(s) to get wet. Or better yet, consider providing the cats a feeding station



A covered shelter keeps cats and food dry.

— a simple structure with a roof and floor that will keep food and cats dry.

Nutrition is especially important for outdoor cats during the winter because the cold and difficult weather conditions create additional stresses for their immune systems. Feeding them a higher quality food, if you can manage the additional expense, 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 an electrically-heated bowl. (These are used for “porch cats” and not ideal for large colonies.) Water will evaporate relatively quickly, so the bowl needs to be filled regularly. The bowl also can be used for wet food, though it can quickly dry the food out. You can also use microwavable heating pads/disks to place under water and food bowls to keep from 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.