

Guidelines for Safely Relocating Feral Cats

Alley Cat Rescue receives numerous calls from people across the country who want to move feral cats. Often the first thought when someone finds a feral colony is to remove the cats, or to “find a home” for the cats. Many people do not realize that the cats are living in their home — their outdoor home. The colony has probably lived there for some time, in some cases for a decade or more. (Refer to “TNR in a Nutshell” for solutions to common complaints about community cats.)

Unless the cats’ lives are threatened or the building they live in is to be demolished, the present home of the feral cat colony is the optimal place for them. As we said, they have been living there for some time, and most likely a food source already exists.

Many people would like to find a cat sanctuary for feral cats to live out their lives. However, few cat sanctuaries exist that can accommodate ferals, and most ferals will not be happy living in such an environment. They are wild animals and prefer to live without confinement.

Feral cats are social animals. Many biologists have completely overlooked

this and consider lions to be the only social felines. However, colony cats develop strong bonds with one another and become dependent on each other. When you relocate feral cats, you may be separating them from family members and consequently causing them undue stress.



George Smith

The author, relocating cats to a farm home.

Only in certain cases — if a caretaker is unavailable to care for the colony, or if the cats simply cannot remain at their present location for safety reasons — does ACR believe relocation can be a viable option. But this has to be undertaken with great care and used as a last resort. Relocating a colony of feral cats is time-consuming. New homes are difficult to find and certain procedures have to be

followed, otherwise the relocated cats may not remain on the new premises. If proper procedures are not followed, the cats can become disoriented and lost. In an attempt to find their way home, they might travel hundreds of miles, putting themselves in danger.

Despite these challenges, if proper procedures are followed, it is possible to successfully relocate feral cats. ACR has relocated hundreds of feral cats to new, safe homes, and you can too, by following the steps below.



Alley Cat Rescue

Packing cats up for relocating to a sanctuary.

Steps for a Successful Relocation

Once you have decided that relocation is the only option left for the colony, several steps should be followed:

Assess the Colony

Determine how many cats are in the colony so you know how many homes you will need. Also, determine if any of the cats need to be sterilized. If some or all cats need to be sterilized, this should be performed in conjunction with the relocation efforts. Keep in mind that all cats should be relocated in pairs. They have usually bonded with one another and the move will be less traumatic if they are not alone. Adjusting to their new home will be easier if they have the security of a familiar companion.

Find a New Outdoor Home

Farm homes or horse stables make the best places for relocating feral cats. Most farmers are willing to take two to four cats to help control rodent populations. Rarely can you relocate eight or more to one site, so you will want to look for several homes if relocating a large colony. And there is no reason to worry about horses getting along with cats; in most cases, cats and horses get along very well. A cat may seem surprised at the size of the horse at first, but after a while both cat and horse seem to enjoy each other's company.

Make sure the new caretaker is interested in providing a good home. When they hear you need a farm home, some people think that all you need is the place and not supervision or food. A country home that is only occupied on weekends while the owners work in the city is not accept-

able. The cats need daily food and water. People must agree to provide basic needs, including veterinary care if necessary and sign an adoption contract similar to one used for domestic cat placements.

Be wary of homes on busy country roads. One may presume that these roads are less dangerous because they are usually not as busy as city roads. However, city cats are used to slower city traffic and although there may be fewer cars on country roads, they tend to go much faster. Most city cats are not used to this. ACR has had reports of cats being killed on a rural road soon after the relocation process, so this is also something to keep in mind when looking for outdoor homes.

Be careful of dogs at the new home. Although it may not be a problem, the new caretakers should be willing to introduce the dogs to the new cats slowly and not allow the cats to be chased, or they will leave. The new caretaker should also be mindful of other animals such as raccoons, opossums, and skunks. In most cases, cats and these animals will peacefully coexist with little interaction. However, do take more care if cats and especially kittens have the potential of coming in contact with predator animals, like foxes, coyotes, and owls. Erecting tall fencing or confining the cats to a barn during night-time hours will minimize the risk of confrontation.

In searching for an appropriate location, contact friends and relatives who live in rural areas and see if they have any sug-

gestions, or if they have any neighbors who have land or outbuildings. Ask them to place notices in newspapers and flyers in local tractor and feed supply stores, or run newspaper ads yourself. Besides word of mouth, hanging flyers and placing newspaper ads, the Internet is a good source for finding new homes. Just make absolutely sure that the new home checks out before relocation; thoroughly do your research prior to trapping.

Although the above locations are most ideal, feral cats can also be relocated to a backyard, particularly one in a suburb, to another alleyway, especially if it is close to the original home, or in some instances, feral cats can be relocated to an already established colony. Extra care should be taken when introducing new cats; introduce them slowly and keep new cats confined for a few weeks. You may need to put a cat playpen outdoors to keep the cats confined. Note there will be a transition period where the cats establish a "pecking order;" some mild fighting is normal.

Trapping and Transport

Refer to the chapter on "Steps for Successful and Safe Trapping" for proper trapping techniques. As mentioned previously, any cats who are not already sterilized will need to be vetted prior to relocation. Once the cats are trapped, either transport them to your veterinarian to be sterilized (and then relocated) or transport them to the new location.

Whether transporting one cat in a trap or several, keep the traps covered with a sheet or large towel; this will help calm the cat. Make sure both ends of the trap are secured with twist ties. Use old sheets to protect your vehicle's seats and floors. Check that there is good air circulation in the vehicle, especially on hot days, and travel the most direct route to the new location. You want to minimize the cat's time spent in a trap and in a vehicle. Do not place the cat in the trunk of a car or any unsafe area.

Confinement Period



Judy M. Zukoski

Cats can be relocated to barns or stables. A three-week confinement period is very important for acclimating a cat to her new home.

It is very important that cats be confined in their new home for the first three to four weeks. This is enough time to

familiarize the cats to their new environment, so they will remain on the premises. Even though there are instances of cats remaining when they have escaped upon arrival, this is rare and most cats will take off, never to be seen again. Other than being dangerous for the cat, this can be traumatic for the rescuer who has usually put a lot of time, energy, money, and care into the rescue. So prior to relocating any cats, ensure the new caretaker is aware of this vital step in the process.

Some people may see confinement of a wild cat as cruel, but a short confinement period is a very necessary part of any relocation. This will give the cat time to get accustomed to new sights, sounds, and smells. She will learn that the new caretaker provides food, water, and a warm, safe place to sleep. Providing a secure environment for the cat will ensure she considers this her new home. You should warn the new caretaker that during the first couple days the cats may struggle to find a way out. Most cats settle down in the cage after a day or two when they realize that no harm will come to them.

A large cage or playpen should be used for confinement. Be skeptical if you are told that the new barn is completely cat-proof and that the cats will not escape. There are few barns that really are escape-proof. Always take cages/playpens, litter boxes, and food/water dishes with you, just in case. Make sure the confinement area is located near a place where the cats can hide once they are allowed out of the playpen. They will likely run and hide when first released.

Take care not to confine the cats for longer than a month. Doing so is unnecessary and can be harmful to the cats and to the relocation process. When confined for so long, the cats may run away after release, due to the fear of being confined again. There is definitely a period of time when animals have had enough of close confinement. Even friendly, domestic cats cannot tolerate a lengthy confinement period.

If a cat does escape, set food and water out and sprinkle her used litter (for scent) around the barn. Cats often hide for a period of time but will stay in the area. Leave plenty of food and water to prevent them from leaving in search of food.

During the confinement period, it is also important for the new caretaker to make contact with the cats by talking to them or by playing a radio softly. This will help them get used to human voices. It is noted that people who make the effort to communicate with the cats are also those who have the most successful relocations.

Follow-Up

Make sure to call or visit after the relocation. You will want to stay in touch to make sure the cats are doing well and also to keep a contact for future relocations.

Conclusion

Relocation can be a safe and viable option for feral cats if undertaken properly and if these guidelines are followed. But remember the best option for the cats in a feral colony is for them to remain in their original home. Sometimes this may mean finding caretakers or speaking out for the cats to stay at their present location.

If you do remove a whole colony, make sure that the food sources disappear completely, or other stray cats will move in to repopulate the area. Removing the food sources can be difficult to achieve, especially when garbage is thrown out in backyards and alleyways. Check from time to time to ensure that no new cats have moved into the vacated territory.