

Trap, Neuter, Return, and Monitor Programs for Feral Cats: Doing It Right

There are millions of feral cats in the United States. Feral cat population control is a difficult and emotional issue and has been a topic of heated debate for many years. PETA has in the past trapped, neutered, returned, and monitored feral cats (and still does, in favorable situations) but not without hesitation and serious concerns. Our experiences include countless incidents in which cats suffered and died horrible deaths because they were forced to fend for themselves outdoors, whether “managed” or not, and have led us to question whether these programs are truly in the cats’ best interests.

Homeless cats do not die of old age. Highly contagious diseases are common, as are infected puncture wounds, broken bones, urinary tract infections, brain damage, internal injuries, attacks by other animals or cruel humans, automobile accidents, and terrible living conditions like freezing or stifling temperatures, scrounging for food, and being considered a “nuisance,” through no fault of their own. Moreover, free-roaming cats also terrorize and kill countless birds and other wildlife who are not equipped to deal with such predators.

Having witnessed firsthand the gruesome things that can happen to feral cats and to the animals they prey on, PETA cannot in good conscience oppose euthanasia as a humane alternative to dealing with cat overpopulation.

Each situation is different, but it is never acceptable—no matter how noble the intentions—to feed cats without providing them with medical care, vaccinations, and spaying or neutering. Doing so would serve only to endanger the cats and perpetuate the overpopulation crisis and its tragic consequences: the needless deaths of millions of animals every year.

If you’ve determined that you have the time and resources to manage a feral cat colony, and the cats are in a safe place, i.e., they are isolated from roads, people, and other animals and located in an area where they do not have access to wildlife and where the weather is temperate, please be sure to follow the following minimum guidelines. Also, please see PETA's "How You Can Help Them" brochure.

Guidelines for Managing a Feral Cat Colony

The responsibilities of a feral cat colony caretaker include ensuring that *all* cats in the colony are humanely captured, sterilized, vaccinated against rabies, provided with a sanitary feeding station with fresh water and food, given access to shelter, treated for illnesses and injuries, and accepted by neighbors and landlords. A properly managed feral cat colony is healthy and stable, i.e., *no new kittens are born*.

Health

Find a veterinarian with whom you can establish a good rapport and who can be somewhat flexible—feral cats don’t always keep their appointments! Consider the costs of what will be needed for each new cat: spaying/neutering, ear-tipping, a full exam, ear-cleaning, a three-year rabies vaccination, deworming, and long-lasting flea control. Estimate your budget depending on

the number of cats in the colony. Be sure that you can cover these expenses, in addition to unexpected costs for taking care of injuries or illnesses.

If you notice a cat whose behavior or eating habits has changed, who has dull eyes, a dull coat, or discharge from his or her nose or eyes, or who is lethargic—all possible indicators of bad health—retrap the cat and take him or her to your vet. It may help to work out a plan in advance with your vet to provide you with antibiotics for minor health problems.

Stay organized! Maintain veterinary records on each cat. This is where ear-tipping becomes vital: While the cat is anesthetized for sterilization, the vet should remove a quarter inch off the top of the cat's left ear. This will help you identify the cats who have been sterilized and vaccinated against rabies. Microchipping is also a safe and effective way of tracking the cat back to you in the event that he or she is lost.

Food and Water

Find a dry sheltered spot to feed the cats, or build them a covered feeding station (this can simply be a canopy made out of a large domed trashcan lid held up by four wooden posts). Locate the feeding station away from sleeping and eliminating areas. Feed roughly 5.5 oz. of canned cat food and 2 oz. of dry food per cat each day. If the food is gone in 15 minutes, you might need to increase rations. If there's food remaining after an hour, put out less. To keep bugs at bay, grease the outside of food bowls with cooking oil. Remove uneaten food and clean the feeding station every day to prevent attracting other wildlife or irritating human neighbors. If it's not possible to attend to the feeding station every day, buy automatic feeders.

Clean water should be available at all times and kept a short distance away from the feeding station. Cats sometimes refuse to drink if it is too close to their food. In cold weather, place water bowls in the sun to keep them from freezing.

Shelter

If the colony isn't already occupying an abandoned building, shack, or other structure, they will need a sheltered place where they can escape the elements. Build them a simple shelter or put an ad in the paper for used doghouses, which can be easily modified by making the entryway cat-size and adding insulation. Shelters must be waterproof, windproof (in colder climates), and elevated off the ground. Use straw or hardwood shavings for bedding (softwood shavings are toxic)—do not use blankets or carpeting, which retain moisture. Change the bedding twice each year, and spray or dust the shelter surface with a non-toxic flea control product (see PETA's factsheet "Flea Control: Safe Solutions").

Be a Good Neighbor

Inform local residents about your activities. Attend town meetings, write to your local paper, and/or go door to door. Make yourself available and accessible if questions, problems, illnesses, or injuries arise. Discourage cats from using neighbors' gardens and sandboxes by making your own giant litterbox with sand in a simple covered, wooden frame. Place the sandbox away from busy areas, the cats' feeding station, and sleeping spots. Clean the sandbox daily.

Resources

Alley Cat Rescue (ACR)
301-699-3946

Spay USA
1-800-248-SPAY

Tomahawk Live Trap Co.
1-800-272-8727