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Trapping and Sterilizing the Feral Cats You Feed

The ABCs of TNR

Few people set out to become feral cat caregivers. Most often they come across feral cats by accident and follow their instinct to help. The first impulse is to feed the cats. Alley Cat Allies (ACA) advocates feeding because food and water are necessary for survival. Not feeding the cats and hoping they will “go away” is not realistic. They can’t go away, and they may starve, but they will continue to reproduce.

However you became involved with feral cats, your best course of action is to start feeding and, as soon as possible, begin a *Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)* program to trap, vet, and sterilize all members of the colony. *Getting feral cats to a veterinarian for spaying or neutering and a general health evaluation is the single most important thing a caregiver can do for them.* This is how a caregiver turns a feral cat colony into a managed colony, whose members can live safe, healthy, sterile lives without the dangers and hardship of constant breeding.

Background

TNR evolved from nonlethal control programs practiced for decades in the United Kingdom, other parts of Europe, and Africa. In the United States, TNR is practiced by thousands of individuals and hundreds of groups, with the help of sympathetic veterinarians. TNR is endorsed by numerous institutions and organizations, including the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Best Friends Animal Society, Cat Fancier’s Association, Cornell and Tufts Universities’ Schools of Veterinary Medicine, Doris Day Animal League, the Humane Society of the United States, San Francisco SPCA, and SPAY/USA.

In a growing number of communities, TNR programs are receiving official sanction and funding. The ACA factsheet “Where Does TNR Work?” lists dozens of publicly, privately, and jointly funded programs in the United States, but it cannot include them all because individuals like you start new TNR pro-

grams every day. The information needed to implement TNR may not be available to you locally, but it is easily found on the internet at www.alleycat.org or obtained by mail from Alley Cat Allies. You can rapidly learn how to manage one or more colonies of feral cats using ACA’s newsletters, factsheets, videos, and website. ACA may be able to refer you to a Feral Friend, a volunteer in your area who can help you get started. With guidance, you can overcome almost any obstacle to implementing a humane management plan.

Before You Begin

A strong determination to trap and sterilize is often a caregiver’s greatest asset because, although the TNR process is straightforward, it can be intimidating the first time. The idea of “trapping” conjures images of cats being hurt or traumatized, and no longer trusting the caregivers. This does not happen.

Since ACA was founded in 1990, hundreds of thousands of feral cats have been humanely trapped, vetted, and returned to their familiar surroundings where, after a brief adjustment, they resumed their daily routine and good relationship with their caregivers. But their lives were vastly improved by this intervention.

Before you trap and sterilize the colony or colonies you care for, take time to learn exactly what TNR entails. The most basic steps are in the name:

- 1] Trap** means to humanely trap every feral cat in the colony or colonies you care for.
- 2] Neuter** means to take the cats in their traps to a veterinarian or veterinary clinic that works with feral cats to be spayed or neutered, evaluated, vaccinated, and treated as needed.

3] Return means to care for the cats through recovery from surgery, then take them back to their established homes.

The unnamed fourth step in TNR is to provide the cats with long-term care and feeding; in other words, to continue what you are already doing.

There are other factors that you will hear about or encounter while practicing TNR. Familiarizing yourself with these issues now will put you way ahead of most beginning caregivers.

Safety

Feral cats, like all wild animals, will strike out when frightened and unable to run away (as they are in a trap). You must learn correct safety procedures such as always labeling traps and never sticking your hand into a trap. Make sure that everyone else involved learns them as well.

People who regularly work with wild animals may get pre-exposure rabies vaccinations. If you follow established safety precautions, you will never get close enough for a feral cat to bite you; therefore you would not need a pre-exposure rabies vaccination. You should, however, be aware that the vaccination is available and decide for yourself if you should get it.

An excellent source of trapping and safety information is Alley Cat Allies factsheet “Humane Trapping Instructions for Feral Cats.” (See Resources section.)

Stress Reduction

Learn how tension, loud noises, extremes of heat and cold, and exposure can affect the entire TNR process. Maintaining a calm, comfortable environment for the cats will reduce their stress and speed their recovery from trapping and surgery. Careful planning and a realistic timetable will enhance the process for trappers as well. The ACA factsheet “Dos and Don’ts of Stress Reduction (for Cats and for Trappers)” offers practical pointers to increase your trapping success.

Taming Feral Cats

You may hear from people who want to tame feral cats and place them in homes. This is not realistic. There are tens of millions of feral cats in North America. Shelters and animal control facilities kill more cats than any other species each year. Although many kittens and stray adult cats can be socialized and adopted into homes, it is impossible to home the feral cat population as a whole. Attempts to tame adult feral cats divert time and energy from the most important objective: sterilizing the feral cat population to end overpopulation.

Relocation

The great majority of feral cat colonies should be returned after sterilization to their established locations, where you found them. The alternative, relocation, is a difficult, time-consuming, and problematic procedure. It is not necessary or recommended except under extreme circumstances. Alley Cat Allies’ factsheet “Relocation: Guidelines for Safe Relocation of Feral Cats” explains why relocation is rarely the step to take and also explains what is involved in safely relocating feral cats. Do not attempt a relocation without reading this information.

Getting Started

To begin implementing TNR, determine what cats you want to sterilize and line up the resources to do it. The steps are:

- 1]** Count how many cats are in the colony or colonies you plan to TNR. Start keeping records on the cats *now*. (See factsheet “Feral Cat Colony Tracking System”).
- 2]** Locate and learn how to use the equipment needed to humanely trap.
- 3]** Establish a relationship with a veterinarian or a veterinary clinic that will work with feral cats.
- 4]** Ask friends, neighbors, or other cat advocates to help. Determine how you (and others) will care for the cats before and after surgery, and on an ongoing basis.
- 5]** Review Alley Cat Allies’ “Humane Trapping Instructions” factsheet for specific steps for safe and successful trapping. See the Resources section for other available guides and factsheets.
- 6]** Trap, neuter, and return the cats.

Trapping Equipment

The list of equipment either needed or recommended for trapping is lengthy, but be assured, you already have most of it at home: e.g., thick gloves, antibacterial hand wipes, and several cans of tuna or wet cat food.

The most important equipment, however, you probably don’t have at home: one or more humane box traps. Ideally, you would have one trap for each cat, although this is not always feasible.

Traps are available from several sources. There may be a Feral Friend in your area who lends traps and even assists in trapping. Some large TNR programs have established “trap depots,” where you can borrow traps.

You may be able to borrow traps from a humane society or animal facility, but if you do this, you could be required to return the trap AND the cat, who will most likely be killed. *Always determine a humane society or animal facility's policy toward feral cats before borrowing their traps.*

If you cannot borrow traps, you will have to purchase one or more. One benefit of owning your own trap(s) is greater flexibility in planning your trapping schedule. Humane box traps can be used for many years, so you can trap well into the future or lend your equipment to other caregivers who are just starting out. (See Resources section: "Selection of Traps and Equipment.")

Working with a Veterinarian

It is essential to find a veterinarian or a veterinary clinic that is familiar with or willing to learn how to treat feral cats. *This must be done before trapping begins.*

Start with your own veterinarian by explaining what you want to accomplish for the cats and for the benefit of your community. If your vet does not want to treat feral cats, contact every veterinarian and veterinary clinic in your area. Ask other people who want to help the cats if they know of a cooperative clinic. You can find a list of feral cat organizations in your area at www.alleycat.org/orgs.html.

Explain TNR to each veterinarian you contact, emphasizing that sterilization is essential to the process. If a veterinarian is interested but has no experience with feral cats, provide him or her with one or both of ACA's training videos (see Resources section) and suggest the information about treating feral cats available at www.alleycat.org/resources.vets.html.

When you find a veterinarian or veterinary clinic willing to treat feral cats, establish a protocol to ensure that everyone involved understands what to expect and that you get all the services the cats need.

- Most clinics see patients by appointment. With feral cats, appointments cannot always be kept. The clinic must be flexible.
- Find out how many cats the clinic can accommodate on a single day. This information will guide your trapping activity.
- Establish a protocol ahead of time for euthanasia of very ill cats, aborting pregnant females, and testing for FIV/FelV. If a veterinarian insists on procedures you do not want, refer him or her to information on feral cats at www.alleycat.org.
- Each cat will require a spay or neuter procedure (using anesthesia that can be administered while the cat is in the trap) and eartipping, and such other general

or specific treatment as each cat requires: e.g., ear cleaning, vaccination, and flea treatment.

- Figure out the cost of veterinary care for a male and a female cat, so that you can estimate a budget for the whole colony. Spay surgery is more expensive than neutering. The gender ratio of a typical colony is 60 females to 40 males.
- Some veterinarians will offer discounts because you are providing a community service. If they do not offer, *always ask.*
- If the cost of sterilizing the colony is too great, ask for financial help from neighbors and businesses where the colony resides. They may be happy to contribute because you are taking action from which they will benefit.
- Arrange a warm, quiet environment in which the cats, in their traps, can recover from surgery. Your only involvement at that point will be to monitor their recovery and prepare to return them. (See Resources section: "Surgery Recovery Instructions.")
- Cats cannot regulate body temperature under anesthesia, so see that they do not get cold. This is especially important for kittens.

Get Help from Others

Working with other caregivers and sharing equipment, resources, and moral support make the work go easier and faster. Recruit anyone you know who wants to help the cats—friends, neighbors, or a Feral Friend. Plan to trap as many cats as possible at one time. Feral cats are smart—if you trap repeatedly in the same location, they soon become trap wary. But always keep in mind, *the number of cats you can trap at one time is determined by how many cats your veterinary clinic can sterilize in one day.*

In Conclusion

With a well-organized plan, a TNR program can be implemented with ease. If trapping initially feels awkward, be assured that it will soon become a skill you perform readily, perfecting your technique with each experience. By then you will be ready to demonstrate trapping to others. Every time you assist in sterilizing a colony, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you have helped more feral cats live safe, healthy lives without reproducing. ■

RESOURCES

Available at www.alleycat.org/resources.html or by mail from Alley Cat Allies.

VIDEOS:

- *Trap-Neuter-Return: A Humane Approach to Feral Cat Control*. This comprehensive TNR training video is educational and engaging, containing valuable guidelines for novices and pros alike. \$13 VHS
- *The Humane Solution: Reducing Feral Cat Populations with Trap-Neuter-Return*. A powerful public policy tool that outlines the benefits of TNR and demonstrates why it is by far the best method for controlling feral cat populations. \$13 VHS
- *THE SET: Trap-Neuter-Return & The Humane Solution*. Buy both videos as a set and save \$6. \$20 VHS or DVD
- *On the Road to Ending Feral Cat Overpopulation in Oregon*. This Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon video follows a feral cat being trapped, going through each station at the clinic, and being released afterward. Includes clinic process and procedures. Send a check to: FCCO, PO Box 82734, Portland OR 97282. \$15 VHS

BOOKS:

- *TNR: Past, Present, and Future: A History of the Trap-Neuter-Return Movement* by Ellen Perry Berkeley. Ellen Perry Berkeley's eagerly awaited history of TNR! \$16
- *The Stray Cat Handbook* by Tamara Kreuz. How to care for stray and feral cats. Essential information on fostering, socializing, and finding homes for cats. \$10
- *The Guide to Handraising Kittens* by Susan Easterly. Clear instructions and helpful photographs make this an absolute "must-have" for anyone fostering young kittens. \$8
- *Maverick Cats* by Ellen Perry Berkeley. Expanded and updated in 2001, this classic has additional chapters on Ellen's personal experiences and on research done around the world on the behavior of feral cats. \$15

FACTSHEETS:

- "Humane Trapping Instructions for Feral Cats"
- "Feral Cat Colony Tracking System"
- "Surgery Recovery Instructions"
- "Selection of Traps and Equipment"
- "Dos and Don'ts of Stress Reduction (for Cats and Trappers)"

INTERNET:

- www.alleycat.org/orgs.html ("Feral Cat and Spay/Neuter Organizations")
- www.bestfriends.org/nmhp/resources.html (No More Homeless Pets "Library of Resources")
- www.pets911.com (collaborative animal rescue network)
- www.neighborhoodcats.org ("NYC's Feral Cat Resource")
- www.animal-traps.com (Tru-Catch traps)
- www.livetraps.com (Tomahawk traps)

CAMPUS CATS:

Alley Cat Allies maintains a listserv to assist feral cat caregivers working on school campuses. To join, send a request to alleycat@alleycat.org. Also look for listserves hosted by feral cat groups in your area.