

Feral Cats: Frequently Asked Questions

This information is courtesy of [The Humane Society of the United States](#).

Why are there feral cats? Where do they come from?

Feral cats are the offspring of lost or abandoned pet cats or other feral cats who are not spayed or neutered. Females can reproduce two to three times a year, and their kittens, if they survive, will become feral without early contact with people. Cats can become pregnant as early as 5 months of age, and the number of cats rapidly increases without intervention by caring people.

Where do feral cats live?

Feral cats typically live in a colony—a group of related cats. The colony occupies and defends a specific territory where food (a restaurant dumpster, a person who feeds them) and shelter (beneath a porch, in an abandoned building) are available. Since feral cats typically fear strangers, it is likely that people may not realize that feral cats are living nearby because the cats are rarely seen.

How do feral cats survive—find food, stay warm, etc.?

Many don't survive. If they do survive, their lives aren't easy without human caretakers. Females may become pregnant as young as 5 months of age and may have two to three litters a year. Being pregnant so young and so often, and having and nursing kittens, is even more stressful on female cats who are struggling to survive. More than half of the kittens are likely to die without human intervention. Males who roam and fight to find mates and defend their territories may be injured and transmit diseases to one another through bite wounds. Feral cats may find food in a restaurant dumpster or someone may feed them. They may find shelter from the elements beneath a porch or in an abandoned building. But often they are without a reliable source of food and adequate shelter.

Trap-Neuter-Return is a non-lethal strategy to reduce the number of feral cats and improve the quality of life for cats, birds, wildlife, and people.

What is Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)?

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is a strategy for improving the lives of feral cats and reducing their numbers. At a minimum, feral cats who are TNRed are spayed or neutered so they can no longer reproduce, vaccinated against rabies, and surgically ear-tipped on one ear (ear-tipping is the universally-recognized sign of a cat who has been TNRed). Dedicated caretakers feed and provide shelter for TNRed cats, monitor the TNRed cats for sickness and remove new cats for TNR if feral or possible adoption if tame.

Do people take care of feral cats? What do they do?

Many people see a roaming cat and start feeding the cat even though many communities have feeding bans meant to discourage feeding. Ideally, the person quickly does more to help the cat:

- If the cat is tame, the person should take steps to find the cat's owner. If unsuccessful, the person should take steps to find a permanent home for the cat.
- If the cat is feral, unapproachable and wary after several days of feeding, the person should find out if there are any groups in their community that are currently doing TNR and consult one of the many resources to learn about Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR).

Once a cat or colony of cats has been TNRed, a dedicated caretaker provides food, water and shelter, monitors the cats for sickness and removes new feral cats for TNR or new tame cats for possible adoption. TNR is a strategy that many dedicated caretakers pay for out of their own pockets to help improve the lives of feral cats and reduce their numbers. Without TNR and a dedicated caretaker, the population of the colony would continue to increase.

Why can't animal shelters rescue feral cats?

Animal shelters already care for and try to find homes for thousands of lost, injured, abandoned and relinquished pet cats. Whether the shelter is an independent non-profit organization or is an animal care and control agency funded by the municipality, many do not have the resources to do TNR.

Animal shelters that receive complaint calls or calls of concern from the public may attempt to humanely trap and remove feral cats. Or, they may provide information and loan traps to citizens interested in humanely trapping feral cats.

If there is a local group helping feral cats, the shelter may refer callers to that group.

Feral cats brought to the shelter, especially those who cannot be identified as members of a known TNRed colony, are likely to be put down right away or after a mandatory holding period. It is difficult to accurately identify a feral cat without a holding period, yet safely caring for a feral cat in a typical shelter cage, is very stressful for a feral cat. In addition, if space is limited at the shelter, an adoptable cat may be put down to make room to hold a feral cat.

Would it be better if feral cats were euthanized?

Some people feel sorry for feral cats because of their difficult and dangerous life. Others are annoyed by the cats' behaviors and want the cats removed. But many people don't feel that the cats should be euthanized. Even if there were enough people and money to remove and euthanize feral cats, other feral cats would move into the vacant territory to take advantage of the food source and shelter now made available. It's an endless cycle.

The alternative is Trap-Neuter-Return. When feral cats are TNRed, their health improves because they no longer have kittens and fight over mates, and nuisance behaviors are greatly reduced or eliminated. The colony's dedicated caretaker provides food, water and shelter, watches over the health of the cats and removes any newcomers for TNR (if feral) or adoption (if tame).

TNR improves the quality of life for existing colonies, prevents the birth of more cats, and reduces the number of cats over time. Additionally, many groups that provide resources for TNR have calculated that the costs associated with TNR are considerably less than those associated with removal, shelter care, and euthanasia of feral cats.

What are problems associated with unneutered/unspayed feral cats?

A colony of unneutered/unspayed feral cats can produce a number of problems, including:

- a growing population of cats
- frequent and loud noise from fighting and mating behavior
- strong foul odors from unneutered male cats spraying to mark their territory
- flea infestations

- visible suffering from dying kittens and injured adults.

In addition, the shelters in a community with a large, unneutered feral cat population may experience:

- higher intake rates of cats into shelters due to the rescue of feral kittens and the capture of feral adults
- higher euthanasia rates for all cats due to the unadoptability of feral adults and the necessity to euthanize adoptable animals due to limited cage space
- higher animal control costs due to trapping efforts and/or costs associated with caring for and euthanizing feral cats
- a constant rate of nuisance complaints about feral cats.

Why doesn't simply removing feral cats from an area work to reduce their numbers and nuisance behavior?

There are many reasons why feral cat problems are rarely solved by efforts to trap and remove them. Feral cats live at a certain location because it offers food and shelter. If a colony is removed, some feral cats from surrounding colonies may move in to take advantage of the newly available resources. The cycle of reproduction and nuisance behavior begins all over again.

If all the cats in a colony are not trapped, then the ones left behind tend to have more kittens. In addition, more kittens will survive because there are fewer cats competing for the available food. The population will continue to increase until the level that can be supported by the available food and shelter is reached.

Other factors which usually make removing feral cats ineffective include:

- the lack of cooperation of the cats' caretakers—the only people who really know the cats' numbers and patterns and who can control whether or not they're hungry enough to enter a baited trap
 - the unwillingness of volunteers to trap cats who face an uncertain fate upon capture
 - the lack of animal control resources available to accomplish this task
 - the difficulty of catching all the cats in a colony
 - the ongoing abandonment of unaltered pet cats who can also repopulate a vacated territory
- Trap and remove will only result in a temporary reduction in the numbers of feral cats in a given area.

Why don't feeding bans work to eliminate feral cats?

The logic behind bans against feeding feral cats is that if there is no food available, the cats will go away. This is not true.

Feral cats are territorial animals who can survive for weeks without food and will not easily or quickly leave their territory to search for new food sources. Instead, they tend to move closer into human habitations as they grow hungrier and more desperate. Their malnourished condition will make them more susceptible to parasitic infestations, such as fleas, which they will spread into work places, garages, homes, etc., within their territory.

The cats will also continue to reproduce despite the effort to "starve them out," resulting in the visible deaths of many kittens. As a result, feeding bans, if enforced, tend to make the situation much worse instead of improving it.

A second reason why feeding bans are rarely effective is that they are nearly impossible to enforce. Repeated experience has shown that people who care about the cats' welfare will go to great lengths, risking their homes, jobs and even their liberty, to feed starving animals. Someone determined to feed the cats will usually succeed without being detected, no matter the threatened penalties. In addition, there may be more than one feeder and other sources of food, including dumpsters, garbage cans, and other animals.

How does TNR solve common complaints associated with feral cats?

- When feral cats are trapped, neutered and returned to their territory, they no longer reproduce
- The cessation of sexual activity eliminates the noise associated with mating behavior and dramatically reduces fighting and the noise it causes
- Neutered feral cats also roam much less and become less visible and less prone to injury from cars
- Foul odors are greatly reduced as well because neutered male cats no longer produce testosterone which, when they are unaltered, mixes with their urine and causes the strong, pungent smell of their spraying
- When the colony is then monitored by a caretaker who removes and/or TNRs any newly arrived cats, the population stabilizes and gradually declines over time.

What can I do to help feral cats?

Helping feral cats can be very rewarding. There are many options for you to be involved; please see our website for more information. First, you may want to look for an existing feral cat group or individuals who are practicing TNR in your area to help you learn the ropes.

If there one or more feral cats in your area that does not have a caretaker, you can become their caretaker. Feral cat caretakers practice Trap-Neuter-Return, feed, provide shelter, monitor the cats for any problems, trap new cats who arrive. If the new cats are feral, they are TNRed; if they are kittens young enough to be socialized or tame lost or abandoned pet cats, they are evaluated for adoption.