

Cats in the Neighborhood FAQ

This document answers frequently asked questions about community cats.



Why are there cats in our neighborhood?

When you notice cats outdoors, they are either neighbors' pets, lost or abandoned pets, or feral cats (often called community cats). Feral cats are the "wild" offspring of domestic cats. Kittens that grow up outdoors without human contact are naturally fearful and inclined to stay away from people.

Feral cats are the result of owner abandonment and failure to spay and neuter pets. Colonies of cats can be found behind shopping malls or businesses; in alleys, parks, and abandoned buildings; in urban as well as rural areas; across the country and around the world.

Won't the feral cats just go away if people stop feeding them?

While you might expect it to work that way, feeding the cats (and getting them neutered) actually keeps the situation in check. If caregivers are prevented from feeding them, the cats are instead forced to forage and scavenge for food, possibly in nearby trash bins and on neighboring property.

Feeding locations can be established away from public areas to help reduce encounters between cats and people.

Couldn't we just have these cats trapped and removed?

Removing the cats is not really the solution it might appear to be. In reality, when cats are removed, new cats and other animals migrate into the area to fill the void. This is known as the vacuum effect.

Removal of cats is also a very expensive strategy, especially considering that it provides only short-term results. Removed cats are housed and killed at taxpayer expense, costing on average over \$100 per animal.

Fortunately, there is an effective, long-term solution: Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR). With TNR the cat population is controlled and the resident cats maintain their turf, preventing other animals from migrating into the area. TNR is typically done by volunteers, at no cost to taxpayers.

Surveys conducted in San Francisco and Chicago suburbs found that whenever a neighborhood TNR program was implemented, the number of cats in the area decreased. Conversely, locations that employ lethal methods continued to struggle with cat population growth.

Do the cats pose a risk to public health?

A study conducted by Stanford University's Department of Environmental Health and Safety found virtually no risk to human health or safety from feral cats. Research at the University of Florida has found that feral cats and owned cats share similar health status, confirming that the cats do not pose a risk to public health or to other cats.

People sometimes worry about rabies, but this is unjustified. Cats are not natural carriers for rabies. There has not been a single human death from rabies attributed to transmission from a cat in the United States in over three decades. Also, as part of a TNR program, cats are

vaccinated against rabies and then provide an immune barrier between humans and wildlife in the community.

In relation to toxoplasmosis, the *British Medical Journal* states that: "contact with cats, kittens, cats' feces, or cats who hunt for food was not a risk factor for infection. . . No significant associations were detected between infection and presence of cats. . ." The study concludes that eating undercooked meat is the primary risk factor in contracting toxoplasmosis.

Are feral cats vicious?

Feral cats are naturally wary of people and will not approach humans they do not know. Feral cats will not attack anyone unless they are cornered.

It's always a good practice to avoid touching or cornering any animal you are not familiar with. Parents and caregivers should teach children to not approach or touch unknown animals.

Wouldn't the cats be better off brought to an animal shelter?

Feral cats who are taken to animal control are often killed, though a growing number of animal services departments are practicing return-to-field, where cats brought in are returned to the community.

Since feral cats are not friendly toward humans, they are not candidates for adoption. Feral cats are at home outdoors, and TNR is truly the most humane and effective way to deal with them.

Don't the cats live short, miserable lives?

Generally, feral cats are healthy animals, experiencing no more or worse medical issues than housecats. Spaying /neutering, a key part of a TNR program, further improves cat health by reducing wandering, mating, and fighting. It is not uncommon for feral cats to live ten or more years, a lifespan comparable to many pet cats.

While feral and abandoned cats may face hardships, we don't believe that death is better than a less-than-perfect life. Many animals, such as raccoons, foxes, and field mice, face similar hazards and do not live extraordinarily long lives, yet we would never consider "euthanizing" them "for their own good."

Don't the cats kill many birds?

Studies have shown that the bulk of the feral cat diet consists of insects, plants, and scavenged food. In terms of their hunting ability, cats are rodent specialists, widely recognized to have low success at bird predation.

The World Watch Institute lists habitat loss, pollution, pesticides, and drought as the primary factors affecting bird populations today. Other significant factors include collisions with windows, cell phone towers, and automobiles. Cats do not make the list.

If you feed birds, use hanging or pole feeders, rather than feeding them on the ground. Place the feeders away from shrubbery that may provide cover for predator animals.

What is TNR?

Trap-Neuter-Return, or TNR, humanely controls and effectively reduces outdoor cat populations. Each cat is trapped in a humane trap and taken to a veterinarian. The cats are tranquilized, examined for general good health, vaccinated for rabies, and neutered. After a

brief recuperation they are returned to their home turf, where they are fed and monitored daily by volunteers.

But how can anyone afford to get these cats spayed or neutered?

There are low-cost and sometimes even free spay/neuter services for community cats in most communities. Reach out to your local humane society, SPCA or community cats organization for more information on local resources.

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