

## Fixing the Feral Cat Problem, One Feline at a Time

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The cats wandered the farm, sticking mainly to the barn, where they kept the rodents from feasting on the feed. When Jeff Snow and his wife moved in, they started feeding the colony of 10, which seemed fairly healthy and happy.

Within a few seasons, the cat population more than doubled. The first season added five to six kittens, the second another nine. The Snows, both animal people—Mrs. Snow does potbellied pig rescue—realized they had a rapidly expanding problem on their hands.

"We will feed every single cat we get, so either we're feeding 20, or we're feeding 100," Mr. Snow said, adding dryly. "We prefer to feed 20."

For help, he turned to the [Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon](#). The solution: a trap, neuter and release program, in which cats are caught, fixed, and returned to their homes to live out their lives without further reproduction. The coalition loaned him the traps and set him up with a veterinarian. But other than that, Mr. Snow, like so many feral colony caretakers out there, was on his own.

And that's typical. People have been dealing with feral cats by themselves for decades. "Before we got started in Oregon, that was the only option people had," said Karen Kraus, executive director of the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon.

Feral cat organizations don't typically swoop in and collect the cats. More often, they simply try to provide expert instruction, traps and low-cost sterilization clinics. The actual trapping and releasing is left to the individual with the feral cat problem.

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Fortunately, it's not as difficult as it might initially sound.

### Getting started

If you have even one feral cat, you may want to get it fixed before the kittens start appearing. A fertile cat, according to the Humane Society of the United States, can produce three litters a year. Litters generally have four to six kittens, and those kittens swiftly start reproducing as well.

But before you leap into the fray, you have to do a little investigative work. First of all, are you sure the cat you're targeting is feral? Ask your neighbors or your officemates if you're in a work situation. "Find out, because otherwise you might be making a commitment to a cat that already has a home," Ms. Kraus said.

If you have a lactating mother cat, you have two options: You can locate and make sure you can seize or trap the kittens, or you can wait until she's not lactating and do your trapping then. Take kittens into consideration before you start trapping.

Next, look into your veterinary options. Most veterinarians won't work with feral cats, and those who do are often willing to handle only a few at a time. You need to find a veterinarian who understands the problem, knows how to deal with feral cats, and is flexible enough to work with you if the number of cats you bring in differs from the number you said you would. Trapping, after all, is not an exact science, and you may not catch everyone at once. Never trap first and look for a veterinarian later.

And never fail to tell the veterinarian that you're bringing in a feral cat. Occasionally someone will pick up a feral cat they've grown friendly with, place it in a cage, and take it to the veterinarian, expecting it to be tame with the staff as well, said Donna Wilcox, executive director of [Alley Cat Allies](#), a national clearinghouse for feral cat information.

When the veterinarian opens the cage, the cat "shoots out, goes berserk, goes up into the ceiling and is stuck in the ceiling for a week," Ms. Wilcox said. "We've had this happen I-don't-know-how-many times." Recently, one escaped feral cat hid in the veterinarian's basement for a month.

And then there's the worst case scenario: the feral cat bites a veterinarian or veterinary technician, and has to be either quarantined for rabies, or killed for a rabies test. Be sure to warn the staff that the cat is feral so they know to take precautions.

Feral cat organizations and local shelters can help you hook up with a veterinarian who handles ferals. [SPAY/USA](#) and [Pets 911](#) also provide referrals for low-cost spay and neuter services.

## Food for the ferals

Once you have your veterinarian lined up, and you're sure your cats are feral, you're ready to begin. If you haven't been feeding the cats already, you'll want to start now. Feeding is important: the cats need it to survive. Some will make it a few months to a year without being fed, living off what they can find. But that's not very long, and you probably aren't putting all this work into the project just to have the cats starve to death. The brand of cat food doesn't matter, Ms. Kraus said. People just feed them whatever dry food they can afford.

Feed the cats in the same place, at about the same time, every day. Doing so makes for effective trapping a little further down the road. Select an out-of-the-way place that doesn't get a lot of human traffic.

Don't leave the food out for longer than an hour. Cat food is a treat for wildlife like raccoons and possums, and you and your neighbors will be much happier if they aren't prowling the area looking for a hand-out. Also, one of the common complaints about feral cat caretakers is the messiness of the enterprise, so picking the food up after an hour is good public relations.

## Time to trap

Now it's time for the heavy work. You can try to borrow traps from a feral organization or local shelter, rent traps, or just buy some of your own. Among the popular choices for feral cat organizations are traps by Animal Care Equipment and Services (ACES), Hav-A-Heart, and Tomahawk.

If you only have one or two cats to deal with, you're probably safe borrowing or renting a trap. If you have an entire colony, you may be best off buying some so you have them on hand for extended use, Ms. Wilcox said.

Ms. Kraus recommends familiarizing your ferals with the traps before you start the actual capturing. To do that, tie them open and put them out in the feeding area. When you feed the cats at the designated time, tap or bang on the traps so they make noise, accustoming the cats to their sound. "It's something new in their environment, and you don't want them to be scared of it," she said. Start placing the food near the traps, in the mouth of the traps, and then inside the traps so the cats get used to going in and out.

You can cover the traps partially, but not fully, during this period. You want the cats to explore and investigate them. When trapping time comes, cover the traps to both trick and calm the cats.

Another method, if your cats are unwilling to go near the traps, is to place a box over the food, said Wilma Perez-Leon, trapping assistance coordinator for the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon. On the day you intend to capture the cats, just put the trap in the box. You can also line the floor of the box with paper, which you can then fold up and place in the trap, so the smell is familiar.

Cats aren't the only ones who have to learn about the traps; inform your neighbors as well about your intentions. Often well-meaning neighbors, suspecting you of taking the cats in for euthanasia, will sneak into the yard and set the traps off, Ms. Wilcox said.

Right before you start trapping, withhold food (though not water) for 24 hours. The cats will be more likely to step into the traps if they're hungry. Bait the traps with just a little bit of something smelly and attractive, like mackerel or tuna in oil. You only want to put a small amount of food in the cage, since these cats will shortly be going in for surgery.

Cover the traps on three sides, so they look like little tunnels—cats are more likely to go into something that looks like a hiding spot, not a cage.

Now, step back and monitor the situation. Never leave the traps unattended. You could catch something you don't want—a skunk or a raccoon—or the cats could be harassed by passing humans or wildlife. And because the cats will be so terrified by this new development, you'll want to cover them up and get them someplace safe and quiet immediately.

Your goal is to capture as many cats as you can at once. Cats who have seen their colony-mates get caught can become harder to catch the next time around, so set as many traps as you can.

Once you've trapped all you seem likely to get for the day, cover the traps with a towel and transport them to their next location. If your veterinary appointment is set up for that day, you can load them into the car and drive them in immediately.

If it's for the next day, take the cats to a quiet, warm, dry location—perhaps an insulated garage or laundry room. The location needs to be warm—the cats usually cluster together for body heat, and won't be able to do that in their individual cages. You can keep the cats safely in their cages for 12 hours, but no more than that. Leave the covers on the cages to keep the cats calm. Don't let the cats out of their cages, or try to transfer them to carriers, unless you're very experienced. You don't want a terrified feral cat running around your house.

## The surgery

Recommended services for feral cats include, in addition to the spaying and neutering, a general health check, examination of the ears for mites, an eye exam, treatment for fleas if necessary, distemper and rabies shots, and an antibiotic shot for the females getting spayed. The majority of feral cats are quite healthy. Testing for feline leukemia virus or feline immunodeficiency virus is recommended by some groups but rejected by others, since the disease occurs fairly infrequently.

The cost of the service varies depending on financial support for spay-neuter programs and the preferences of the veterinarian. Some places will spay and neuter for as little as \$35, others \$100.

While the cats are in veterinary hands, make sure to get their ears tipped. Ear tipping is thus far the only accurate way to identify a sterilized feral, Ms. Wilcox said. You have to catch the cat before you can find a microchip or tattoo and ear notching doesn't work because the cats already have so many notches from fighting. When you return the cats to their home, the tipped ears will identify the cats as your sterilized group, and make it easy to detect any newcomers to the colony.

Sterilized kittens usually can be tamed and placed in homes. Obviously pregnant mothers are a bigger problem. You can have the spay done anyway, in which case the kittens are aborted, or try to wait out the pregnancy, which may not work out under the stress of being in captivity.

## Releasing the cats back into the environment

Once the surgeries are finished, the caged cats are yours again. Take them home to the same warm, dry location and monitor them for about 24 hours (48 hours for females who were pregnant.) Watch for warning signs like continued bleeding, vomiting, extended grogginess after 48 hours, difficulty breathing and failure to wake.

Continue covering the cages to cut down on the stress for the cats. When the cats are alert and active, and the anesthesia has worn off, they're ready for release.

You can make the cats comfortable in the meantime by elevating the cages off the floor, so the cats can defecate without problems. A little newspaper stuffed in the cage will provide material for the cat to sleep and defecate upon, Ms. Perez-Leon said.

You'll want to provide the cats with some food and water, but you don't want to accidentally release them. The easiest thing to do is to take a saucer of water and a plate of canned food and place the cage on top of them, Ms. Perez-Leon said. The cat can reach the water through the bottom of the cage, and the soft food will sink through the bars. If you can warm up the food just slightly, it may be more appealing to the frightened animal, who otherwise might decline to eat.

When the cats are ready for release, take them to their feeding area and let them go. Their reactions upon release will vary. Some start looking around for the food, others race off into hiding. Don't be surprised if you don't see some of them for awhile—it's normal for the cats to stay away for a few days following their trapping and release. Keep feeding—perhaps putting down some extra palatable food at first to reassure the cats that everything is all right.

## The hold-outs

Some cats are more difficult to catch than others, and the only real answer is to just keep trying, and in the meantime make sure all the other cats around them are sterilized. Alley Cat Allies offers techniques for stubborn cats, including the construction of a drop trap.

Some can't stop getting caught—they don't seem to mind the traps, and wander inside for the food. For those cats, you may want to make the trap a little less attractive by scraping it gently across the ground or turning it over gently before you let them out, Ms. Perez-Leon said.

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Occasionally a new cat will join a colony, but new cats are usually strays, not ferals. See if you can catch the cat and, if it's just a stray, identify its home or find it a new one.

Mr. Snow borrowed 13 traps for his cat situation. A few days before he and his wife started trapping, they stopped feeding. On the day of the capture, they put a large plate of food in the center of the utility room, their feeding area, to get as many cats inside as they could. They hid the cages under blankets, to make them look like holes instead of traps.

Then they shut the door. The startled cats ran for shelter into whatever small spaces they could find, and the traps started going off.

In the first round of trapping, in just a few hours, he and his wife caught 23 of the 25 ferals on their property. Only one was sick and had to be euthanized; all the others were successfully sterilized and returned.

Their reaction to the traumatic procedure was nil. They went back to roaming the barn, seemingly undisturbed by the surgery or their temporary confinement.

Two males escaped trapping, only to cause a problem next year when someone dumped a female cat on the property. So far, one of the males has been caught, and they're working on getting the second male, the females and her three kittens.

But all in all, the project was a success. And unlike euthanasia, the presence of a healthy, non-reproducing colony, because of its territorial behavior, will keep new colonies of ferals from moving in, spay-neuter groups argue.

Ms. Kraus urges other individuals to conduct their own trap-neuter-release programs. "If it ever crosses your mind—'What should I do?'—get involved," she said. "If everyone said it's not my problem; it's not my cat,' they would just stay out there and suffer.

"There's no magic answer. There's no feral cat sanctuary, and if there was, it would be full in a day. There isn't an easy answer, other than roll up your sleeves and get involved."

## For more information:

[Allying Yourself With an Alley Cat](#)

[From Feral to Family Pet](#)

[To Test or Not to Test?](#)