

Help for Homeless Cats

If an unknown cat suddenly appears, how can you tell if this cat is feral or lost? Our experts share ways to keep cats from becoming homeless.

By Nancy Peterson

Buddy, an un-neutered five-month-old kitten, was found wandering in the parking lot of a small shopping center. Daisy, a year-old spayed female, was left behind when her owners moved. Stu, an un-neutered six-month-old, was discovered unconscious on the side of the road by a group of boys on their way to school. Monty, an old, neutered, decrepit cat, was hiding under a car when a Good Samaritan brought him to a veterinary hospital.

I know the stories of all four cats well, because I ended up adopting each of them and turning these former outdoor cats into felines who quickly embraced life indoors.

Many people believe that "once an outdoor cat, always an outdoor cat." Not so, according to Alice Moon-Fanelli, PhD, Certified-Applied Animal Behaviorist and Clinical Assistant Professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

OUTSIDE CATS CAN ADAPT INSIDE

"Even cats who have previously lived outside can adapt very well to living indoors," says Dr. Moon-Fanelli. "A few may prefer to still have some outdoor time, but they can usually be convinced that it's in their best interest to remain indoors."

Like me, I'm sure you've encountered and taken in cats and wondered how they became homeless. It's likely that they were abandoned or accidentally lost. Whether they lost their homes recently and are socialized, or have lacked human contact for one or more generations and lack socialization skills, they need our help.



This cautious cat peeking from behind a tire may be a frightened feline who somehow got outside and is desperate to find his home. Or, this cat can be feral, and leery of people.

If an unknown cat suddenly appears, the first step calls for determining if the cat belongs to someone, a stray (owned and lost, previously owned and abandoned, a neighborhood cat being fed by several people but truly cared for by none), or a feral. An owned cat may be friendly and healthy, but be careful approaching any unknown cat. Ask your neighbors or the mail carrier if they know where the cat lives. Post signs indicating you have found the cat, provide a description and your phone number.

A stray cat may approach you, but be skittish and avoid contact. When you put food down, he will likely eat it immediately. He is often vocal, disheveled, and appears at all hours. Don't misjudge this cat's situation. It's possible that a desperate owner is searching for her lost cat.

Local ordinances may require you to report a lost cat to animal care and control in order for that owner to find her cat. You can also post signs in the neighborhood, place a free ad in your local newspaper, call veterinary offices, and create a found pet profile on the Internet. Two good Web sites for this are www.pets911.com and www.petfinder.com.

BOOK A VETERINARY APPOINTMENT

If you can't find the owner and decide to adopt this cat, book an appointment with your veterinarian for this cat to receive a complete physical examination before you introduce her to your other cats.

If you are unable to keep the found cat, you can try to find a responsible home. The Humane Society of the United States offers handy resource guides on their Web

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site (www.hsus.org). Please search the phrases, “feral cat caretaker course,” “cat behavior tip sheets,” “pet-friendly rental housing,” “allergies,” “toxoplasmosis,” “bringing an outside cat in,” and “guidelines for finding a responsible home for a pet.” In addition, you can visit the Web sites for several organizations. Please go to page 24 for this list.

FERAL CAT CHARACTERISTICS

A feral cat tends to be silent, generally not seen during daytime, and unlikely to approach unless extremely hungry. He will only approach food after you’ve moved away from the area. If he has adapted to an outdoor life, he may appear well-groomed. A cat is probably feral if he remains unapproachable after several days of feeding. For everyone’s safety, find an experienced feral cat caretaker or group to assist you.

In her book, *Community Approaches to Feral Cats*, Margaret Slater, DVM, PhD, defines a feral cat as “any cat who is too poorly socialized to be handled (and therefore must be trapped or sedated for examination) and who cannot be placed into a typical pet home.” The number of feral cats in the United States is unknown, but estimates range from 10 to 70 million. Most feral cats live in small groups, known as colonies, near the homes or businesses of people who feed them.

TNR stands for “Trap, Neuter, and Return” and its proponents consider it the most effective way to reduce the numbers of feral cats and at the same time address wildlife, public health, and environmental issues attributed to feral cats. The most basic form of TNR involves low-cost or subsidized sterilization of feral cats, ear-tipping, and a rabies vaccination.

Ear-tipping involves the removal of the tip of the ear (usually the left) and identifies a cat who has been trapped, neutered and returned. Dedicated caretakers provide ongo-



PHOTO BY WEENS HULTO

These cats belong to a feral colony that receives daily food provided by caretakers from a feral cat organization. These cats are happier living in managed colonies than indoors.

ing care (food, water, shelter, and medical attention to the cats) as well as trap any newcomers for evaluation.

Taming unsocialized feral adults so they can live as pets can be a time-consuming endeavor with no guarantees. Many feral cat groups and caretakers feel that ferals are much happier living in managed colonies with their feline families. They also feel that efforts to sterilize ferals, as opposed to socializing them, will help the greatest number of cats — those alive and those whose births are prevented.

WHAT EVERY CAT NEEDS

Here is how to keep cats from becoming homeless and help stray cats. After all, today’s homeless cat may become tomorrow’s feral cat — and he could be yours. Owned cats with outdoor access or indoor cats who accidentally become lost can only be reunited with their owners if they have visible identification and/or a microchip. If your cat goes missing, it’s critical to start your search immediately.

Almost 40 percent of suburban or urban cat owners (and a much larger proportion of rural owners) allow

their cats to roam some of the time. Unfortunately, those cats can become lost and fall victim to automobiles, predators, disease, and other hazards. Keeping cats indoors or allowing them supervised outdoor access (with a harness and leash, or special fencing) promotes their safety. Providing playtime promotes physical and mental health and strengthens the bond between you and your cat.

Although sterilization rates of pet cats in some parts of the country are high (82 to 91 percent), many cats have litters prior to sterilization, because:

- ◆ The owner could not afford to sterilize the cat
- ◆ The owner thought the cat was too young to get pregnant
- ◆ The owner didn’t get around to sterilizing the cat
- ◆ An indoor cat got out of the house
- ◆ The cat was still nursing kittens

Sterilizing cats before they produce one litter greatly reduces the numbers of homeless cats. Subsidized sterilization is vital for feral cat caretakers (who often foot the bill to TNR many cats) and those



This cat lives in a managed feral cat colony. The tip of his left ear has been surgically removed as a sign that he has been trapped, neutered, and returned to his colony.

owners who can't afford the cost of surgery. However, none of these strategies will be truly effective if emigration from the owned cat population continues.

BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

Contact your local animal shelters, both municipal and non-profit, and find out if they sterilize animals before adoption. Early age steriliza-

tion is safe for cats who are eight weeks old or two pounds. There is no guarantee that adopters will follow through on sterilization contracts that require a pet be sterilized within a certain time period after adoption.

In addition, shelters often lack the time and personnel to enforce such contracts. If your shelter is a municipal agency funded through taxpayers' dollars, let your city officials know that allocating more funds to the shelter is necessary to allow cats

to be spayed or neutered and microchipped before they are ready to be adopted.

Even if you never encounter a homeless cat on the street, there are many at your animal shelter waiting for new homes. If you're thinking of adding a cat to your family, consider adopting two bonded adults. You can also help shelter cats by volunteering as a cat socializer or fosterer.

"Find ways to increase the value of cats in the minds of the public, to change people's behaviors so that it is no longer acceptable to leave cats behind or allow them outside without identification or sterilization and to provide the public with the knowledge and impetus to help cats who appear to be homeless," says Dr. Slater.

She continues, "We must also provide communities with the knowledge and resources to help residents who are trying to do the right thing with their owned cats as well as homeless or feral cats."

When I moved to Maryland, I paid three friends to fly so that Buddy, Daisy, Stu, and Monty could be placed in cat carriers tucked under our seats in the cabin. These cats all lived to be senior cats. Today, I live with my sister and two littermates, Zubi and Luna. These two cats were kittens when they were rescued three years ago by the Feline Foundation of Greater Washington. 🐾

CAT STATISTICS

The source of cats and kittens living in the United States, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association's 2005-2006 National Pet Owners Survey, indicates the following percentages:

- ◆ Friend/Relative 43%
- ◆ Stray 34%
- ◆ Shelter 15%
- ◆ Kitten of own cat 15%



Get involved by requesting your city officials allocate more funds to local animal shelters so that more cats can be spayed and neutered to reduce the number of homeless cats.