

An Overview of Caring for Free-Roaming Cats



Celebrating Animals | Confronting Cruelty

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Looking at the Big Picture

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) estimates that 3 to 4 million cats – feral, stray and owned - enter animal shelters every year and at least half of them are euthanized. This may occur for many reasons, including age, illness, injury, temperament, lack of space, scarcity of homes, and owner request.

Free-roaming cats, both feral and stray, are the most significant source of cat overpopulation. They produce approximately eighty percent of the kittens born each year. [Feral and stray cats are often confused, but there are significant differences between the two groups.](#) Stray cats are tame pets who are lost or abandoned. They are accustomed to contact with people and may be reunited with their families or adopted into new homes. Feral cats are the offspring of lost or abandoned pet cats or other feral cats who are not spayed or neutered. They are not accustomed to contact with people and are typically too fearful and too wild to be handled. Feral cats who have spent their entire lives outdoors can sometimes adapt to indoor life, but attempts to tame adult feral cats can divert time and energy from the most important objective: reducing the free-roaming cat population.

Reducing the number of feral cats and managing their care is the goal of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR). The basics of TNR involve trapping the cats in a colony, having them spayed or neutered, vaccinating them against rabies, identifying them with an ear tip, and returning them to their original territory where a caretaker provides regular food and shelter and monitors the colony for newcomers and any problems. Ear tipping is a procedure where a quarter inch off the tip of the left ear is removed in a straight line cut (performed while the cat is anesthetized during spay or neuter surgery). It is the only reliable method known for identifying a spayed or neutered feral cat. The TNR process also allows for friendly cats and kittens to be identified and sent to adoption and foster programs, causing an immediate reduction in the number of free-roaming cats in the area.

Life is especially hard for feral cats who are not managed through TNR. They are constantly searching for food in dumpsters and garbage cans and may be hunting birds and other wildlife with or without success. They may also be fed by kind-hearted people who don't spay and neuter the cats. These people mean well, but they don't realize that the cats should be spayed and neutered as soon as possible. Others who are interested in getting the cats sterilized can't [find veterinarians](#) to work with feral cats, they can't find [low-cost options](#) for spaying and neutering, or they can't afford the cost to spay and neuter.

Un-spayed free-roaming cats can become pregnant as early as 5 months of age and typically only have one live litter per year with an average litter size of 3-4 kittens. Up to seventy-five percent of the kittens may die – from poor nutrition, disease, parasites, or predation - before they reach adulthood. Those who survive will become feral without socialization to people at a young age. Un-neutered male cats will roam in search of food and will fight for mates. They may be hit by cars,

killed by wildlife, poisoned, etc. Without spaying and neutering large numbers of free-roaming cats, their numbers rapidly increase.

Feral cats typically live in a colony—a group of related cats. The colony occupies a specific territory where food (a restaurant dumpster, a person who feeds them) and shelter (beneath a porch, in an abandoned building) are available.

Understanding Problems Associated with Free-Roaming Cats

Left unaddressed, free-roaming cats can create significant challenges to the animal welfare system and to the community at large. Shelters usually put down feral cats because they are not adoptable as pets. If a shelter doesn't have the resources to socialize feral kittens and has no community partner to do so, the kittens will likely be put down as well.

The shelters in a community with a large, un-neutered free-roaming cat population may experience: higher intake rates of cats due to the rescue of kittens and the capture of adults; higher euthanasia rates for all cats due to the non-adoption of feral adults; the necessity to put down adoptable animals because feral cats are occupying limited cage space; an increased financial strain associated with caring for and putting down feral cats; and a constant rate of nuisance complaints about free-roaming cats.

From a human quality of life standpoint, people are bothered by free-roaming cats for many reasons, including: the loud noise from cats fighting and mating; the pungent odor of unneutered males spraying urine to mark their territory; the disturbing presence of sick and dying cats and kittens; predation on birds and other wildlife; the unwanted intrusion of the cats on private and public property; and concern about the role of cats in transmitting diseases to people and other animals.

When free-roaming cats are not managed and/or there is concern for their safety, people often want the cats to be taken away. In most cases, once the cats are spayed and neutered and the neighborhood is educated about TNR, hostile situations quickly calm down. In addition, feral cats are intimately tied to their own territory where they were born and have lived their entire lives. Relocating them, even if done properly, should only be considered as a last resort when there is no possibility of allowing them to stay.

Some animal shelters and rescue groups adopt and relocate feral cats as barn cats. Just the presence and odor of the cats in a barn or stable may be enough to discourage the presence of rodents and keep animal food supplies safe.

In addition to relocating feral cats to barns and stables, the other reason to consider relocation would be if the cats are in imminent danger, for example, the empty building they are living in is scheduled for demolition. Relocation should be a last resort because even when it is done properly, many of the cats will disappear after they are released, in search of their old territory.

At a minimum, relocation involves trapping, spaying and neutering, vaccinating against rabies, ear tipping, and confining the cats in the new territory, with adequate food and shelter for two to three weeks to get them used to their new territory and caretaker. The new territory needs 1) a reliable new caretaker who will strictly follow the 2-3 weeks confinement necessary for relocation and fully accept responsibility for the cats' long-term care, (2) a structure of some sort (barn, shed, garage) that provides shelter and protection from the elements during the initial confinement and that also provides access to the new territory once the cats are released, and (3) an area safely away from construction or heavy traffic. New territories and caretakers are not easy to find. Relocating pairs or small groups of bonded cats may lead to greater success than relocating single cats.

Resolving Issues with Neighbors

Not everyone wants cats in their yards and gardens. Learn as much as you can about TNR so that you can knowledgably talk to neighbors about its advantages, including the facts that noise, odor, and endless litters of kittens are ended by sterilization. Your neighbor's complaints may be solved by providing [deterrents](#) to discourage cats from their garden or simply by moving feeding bowls.

If you suspect or know that your neighbor does not want cats on his/her property, work together to figure out solutions to keep the peace. Outdoor cats, especially if they aren't spayed and neutered, can be a nuisance. As a rule of thumb, don't plead for the kitties. Stick to the facts about what TNR is and how it reduces the number of free-roaming cats. If the cats are walking on your neighbor's car, offer to buy a car cover. In addition to the deterrents that you can offer your neighbor, you may be able to reduce the cats' roaming by providing them with shelter and a bathroom area (not near where you feed them) on your property. One option is to fill a covered sand box with woodstove pellets. They're inexpensive and you can see what needs to be removed: feces and sawdust (the pellets change to sawdust when mixed with urine or other liquids). Just make sure the pellets you get don't have any toxic additives.

There are many ways to discourage cats from claiming others' yards or gardens as their own through the use of deterrents. In addition, you may want to consider building or purchasing a "cat fence" or similar [enclosure](#) for your property. Make the enclosure escape-proof and make toxic plants, garden chemicals, and other dangerous objects inaccessible.

It may not be possible to satisfy a neighbor. It may be legal for him to set out traps to catch cats on his own property. However, it is not legal to dump cats somewhere. That is considered abandonment. It is legal, and sometimes required, that people take a cat they've trapped to the shelter. If a cat who you're caring for goes missing, contact your animal care and control agency right away to inquire if any ear tipped cats have been brought to the shelter. Some shelters hold ear tipped cats to give caretakers the chance to reclaim them. However, cats without ear tips may or may not be held. Become familiar with your state's laws regarding animal holding periods, trapping, abandonment and other areas that relate to cats.

Sometimes it isn't possible to return feral cats to their territory because they are in imminent danger, e.g. the vacant building they've been living in is being demolished, or they pose a risk to vulnerable wildlife. However, it may be possible to gradually move their feeding location and shelter nearby without transporting them somewhere else. Relocating a large number of feral cats should be a last option because it's not easy to find a suitable location, such as a barn or stable. It's also important to understand what will happen in the old territory when the cats are removed. If there is still sufficient food and shelter, unsterilized cats will move in, have kittens, and before you know it, there will be lots of cats again. In addition, relocation is hard work and requires the cats to be confined in their new territory for two to three weeks until they become familiar with their new caretaker and learn that their food source has changed. Without confinement, they're likely to immediately run off in search of their old territory. Even with a two to three week confinement, some may still run away after their release. They may or may not come back.

If there is no local, experienced group, organization, or agency to help you and relocation is your only option, be sure you know how to do it. If the cats are being relocated to a barn or stable where they are welcome, the new caretaker will need cages for confinement and instructions on acclimating the cats to their new home. New caretakers must be willing to provide food, water, shelter, and medical care if the cats become ill. For an in-depth overview of TNR, including relocation, read "The Neighborhood Cats' TNR Handbook: A Guide to Trap-Neuter-Return for the Feral Cat Caretaker" listed in the Resources at a Glance section.

Evaluating Solutions

Trap and Remove

There are many reasons why free-roaming cat problems are rarely solved by efforts to trap and remove the cats. Cats live at a certain location because it offers food and shelter. It is highly unlikely that all food sources can be eliminated. Therefore, if cats are removed, other cats from surrounding colonies, or newly abandoned or stray cats may move in to take advantage of the available food and shelter. The cycle of reproduction and nuisance behavior begins all over again.

In addition, if most of the cats in a colony are not trapped, then the ones left behind will continue to have kittens, and 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 reasons why trap and remove will only result in a temporary reduction in the numbers of free-roaming cats in a given area 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 trap free-roaming cats; the difficulty of catching all the cats in a colony; and the ongoing abandonment of non-sterilized pet cats who can also repopulate a vacated territory.

[Animal shelters may attempt to humanely trap and remove](#) free-roaming cats in response to complaint calls or calls of concern from the public. However, animal shelters already care for and try to find homes for thousands of lost, injured, abandoned, and relinquished pet cats and many shelters do not have the resources to help feral cats. Feral cats trapped by citizens and brought to the shelter, and feral cats trapped by animal care and control in response to nuisance complaints, are likely to be put down right away or after a mandatory holding period, especially those who cannot be identified as members of a known managed colony. It is difficult to accurately identify a [feral cat or a frightened](#) pet cat without a holding period, and safely caring for a feral cat in a typical shelter cage is very stressful for both the cat and shelter staff. In addition, if space is limited at the shelter, an adoptable cat may be put down to make room to hold a feral cat.

Some [shelters may provide](#) low-cost spay/neuter, vaccination, and ear tipping for feral cats and [socialize feral kittens in the shelter](#). Some shelters may provide information and loan traps to citizens interested in trapping feral cats for spaying and neutering. If there is a local group helping feral cats, the shelter may refer callers to that group. Shelters can also work with local TNR groups to provide an adoption outlet for friendly strays and socialized kittens that have been removed from the colonies during trapping.

Sanctuaries are often suggested as places where feral cats can live out their lives. Properly designed and maintained sanctuaries can provide a high quality of care for feral cats and most seem to adapt. However, not everyone has the knowledge, facilities, time, and money to provide a high level of care. In addition, sanctuaries are quickly filled and overcrowding can lead to contagious disease problems. Moreover, poorly run and designed sanctuaries raise questions about the quality of life for cats residing there.

Feeding Bans

The logic behind feeding bans is that if no one feeds free-roaming cats, the cats will go away. This rarely works because there may be more than one feeder, feeders will resist, enforcement is difficult and unpopular with caring citizens, and there are other sources of food, including dumpsters, garbage cans, and wildlife.

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 to homes and businesses as they grow hungrier and more desperate. In addition, the cats will continue to reproduce despite the effort to "starve them out," resulting in the visible deaths of many kittens.

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. As a result, feeding bans, if enforced, tend to make the situation much worse instead of better.

Helping Free-Roaming Cats

Many people who see a free-roaming cat put out food to help the poor animal. If you're feeding cats, you will hopefully do more – and do it quickly.

If the cat is tame, take steps to find his owner. Report the cat to the agency in your community that does animal care and control because a desperate owner may be searching for her cat, and it's likely that she'll contact that agency. If the owner isn't found or doesn't want the cat back, you can keep the cat or take steps to [find a permanent home](#) for the cat.

If the cat is feral, unapproachable and wary after several days of feeding, it is critical to get her/him spayed or neutered to stop reproduction and improve the quality of life for cats, birds and other wildlife, and people. Many organizations, agencies, and clinics offer low-cost and/or free spay/neuter for feral cats. Remember, cats can reproduce quickly. Don't wait until the two cats you've been feeding become so many mouths that you're overwhelmed. Check for [organizations and agencies in your area that advocate TNR](#). It's possible that you will not be able to find help in which case you should read [Neighborhood Cats' TNR Handbook](#) and/or take The HSUS's self-paced [online caretaker course](#) before you trap feral cats.

At a minimum, feral cats who are TNRed are spayed or neutered so they can no longer reproduce, vaccinated against rabies, surgically ear tipped on one ear (ear tipping is the universally recognized sign of a cat who has been TNRed), and returned to his or her territory, unless there is imminent danger (e.g., the building the cat lives in is being demolished). A dedicated caretaker, in addition to providing food, water and shelter, watches over the health of the cats and removes any new cats who appear ideally for adoption (if tame) or TNR (if feral).

TNR improves the quality of life for existing colonies, prevents the birth of more cats, reduces the number of cats over time, and reduces or eliminates nuisance behaviors associated with cats who aren't sterilized. Additionally, many groups that provide resources for TNR have calculated that the costs associated with TNR are considerably less than those associated with removing, holding, and putting down feral cats in shelters.

Many dedicated feral cat caretakers pay 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.

Helping feral cats can be very rewarding. There are many ways for you to be involved, but it's a good idea to start by learning as much as you can about feral cats and TNR.

Common Questions:

Can I get financial assistance to care for my feral cats?

Check our [list of organizations helping feral cats](#). Some indicate that they provide food. Even if an organization doesn't indicate that it helps caretakers with food, it never hurts to ask.

Your local humane society may have surplus food or know of other agencies in your community that provide food. Pet supply stores and supermarkets may be willing to donate dented cans and torn packages or out-of-date products. Work on a food drive with a local youth group or service organization or hold your own. Place an ad in your newspaper with the details of the drive.

If you're on your own, ask that friends, family, and co-workers celebrate your birthday or other holidays by giving you money or gift cards to pet supply stores instead of regular gifts. If you can put aside some money each month, it may help you if an unexpected expense occurs. Also, find out if your veterinarian will set up a payment plan.

Can feral cats be tamed and adopted?

Although the number of cats put down has steadily declined since the 1970s, even socialized lap cats often face slim chances for adoption because there are just too many of them. Feral cats and their offspring who end up at shelters, add more lives to an already crowded lottery for too few homes.

Feral kittens younger than 8 weeks of age, and sometimes older, can be socialized. However, because they have not had extensive contact with humans at an early age, adult feral cats can seldom be adopted as pets. They will almost always view contact with people as frightening, and will avoid it. Cats who have spent their entire lives outdoors can *sometimes* adapt to indoor life, but it is usually a very slow, stressful process. In addition, attempts to tame adult feral cats divert time and energy from the most important objective of TNR: sterilizing the feral cat population.

How do I estimate the number of feral cats in my community?

Based on studies of households that admit feeding cats they do not own (includes both friendly strays and pet cats) Dr. Julie Levy, feral cat expert, uses the following calculation to estimate the number of feral cats in a community: the human population divided by 6. This does not count cats who are not fed by someone. It also over counts cats who are fed by more than one person.

Currently, PetSmart Charities divides the human population by 15 to predict a target number of sterilizations for their targeted spay/neuter grants. Population estimates in colder climates are showing that dividing by 15 may predict too large of a population due to harsh winters and predation.

Are there sanctuaries for feral cats?

Properly designed and maintained sanctuaries can provide a high quality of care for feral cats and most seem to adapt. However, not everyone has the knowledge, facilities, time, and money to provide a high level of care and to prevent overcrowding and contagious disease problems. Moreover, sanctuaries are quickly filled and those that are poorly run and designed raise questions about the quality of life for the cats living there.

Overcoming Common Obstacles

Helping free-roaming cats can be very challenging. In some municipalities, there are laws which hinder TNR, such as outdoor feeding bans or limits on the number of animals a resident can “own,” with “ownership” defined as feeding. Doing TNR on a wide scale in places where laws or lack of laws make it very difficult may require [changing laws](#).

You probably will be safe if you’re trapping on property you own. However, if the cats you’ve been feeding are not on your property, it makes sense to obtain the approval of the owner of any property to which you’ll need access in order to care for the cats. It will be much easier than if you trespass and try not to be spotted. Feeding and care, too, is simpler and more reliable when you have the property owner’s support as opposed to hoping no one in authority cracks down on you or starts throwing away the food. Releasing cats back onto property where the residents know what you’re doing and approve of TNR is much safer for the cats than putting them back into an uncertain situation and hoping for the best.

Colonies that are located on government-owned or managed property and areas where rare, threatened, and endangered wildlife live require special consideration. Collaborating with other interest groups to reach a common goal – protecting cats and protecting wildlife – will be more productive than continuing the [“cats versus birds” debate](#).

If you are fortunate and have a [feral cat group](#) or knowledgeable individual in your community, they may have traps that you can borrow. Animal shelters, humane societies, and rescue groups may also have traps that you can borrow. If all else fails, you may be able to purchase traps at feed or garden stores and online.

Ideally you want to have more traps than cats so you can trap most cats in the colony in a few days. It's much easier to catch a couple of cats with ten traps strategically located, than with only two. NOTE: If there is no organization to help you, ONLY START TRAPPING once you’ve learned about safely trapping feral cats and have lined up a veterinarian who is willing to work with feral cats. It’s important to understand [how to approach veterinarians](#) because they may not know how to work with or may not want to work with feral cats.

There are several reasons why veterinarians may not work with feral cats. Some veterinarians haven’t been involved with TNR and don’t understand it or support it, while others may be limited by the practice at which they work. There are also veterinarians who aren’t familiar with spaying or neutering young kittens. And still others may have had bad experiences with other feral cat

caretakers. You can increase your chances of finding a veterinarian to work with you by appreciating their point of view. A well-written [letter](#) to veterinarians in your community may gain you a few allies. It's critical that [veterinarians learn how to work with feral cats](#) before you bring them one. If you need to find a veterinarian, start with your own.

Even if you're not involved with your own feral cats, you can still help them. Volunteers are the life line of many groups, organizations, and agencies that help feral cats. You may consider hands-on help, including: trapping other caretakers' cats; transporting cats to and from the veterinarian; providing a recovery space; assisting at a spay/neuter event; and [fostering](#) and socializing kittens. Expertise in marketing, fundraising, volunteer programs, website development, and writing are just some of the many other ways you can help. Check with the group, organization, or agency to see how your skills can make a difference. Monetary donations are always helpful and many organizations have a "wish list" that indicates what things they really need.

Mobilizing Support

If the colony you want to trap is a neighborhood colony and is not on your property, start by gathering information. Walk around and talk with anyone who might have knowledge of the cats. This is a method particularly suited to densely populated areas where people are easily encountered going about their day – anyone who might be acquainted with the cats. How do they feel about the cats? Do they know who feeds them? If so, when, where and how often? How many cats are there? How did the situation start? Has anyone done anything in terms of rescue or removal? The more you learn, the better your plan of action will be.

If you come across someone friendly, try to get their contact information or give them yours – you never know when you might need their help, even if it involves finding out whether they've seen a particular cat. Stay alert for volunteers who might help feed or trap, or others who will donate food or money. It's always better if you have others to share the work of caretaking. That way you don't become overburdened and the cats have a stronger support network.

During this "get acquainted" phase, have literature on hand, such as a [one page flyer](#) that describes TNR's benefits ("no more kittens, noise, odor; continued rodent control") and your plan to organize a project, plus your contact info. You can also include information about low-cost sterilization programs for owned cats. Hand it out and post it throughout the area. Refer people to informative websites so they can learn more on their own. If you can, make up business cards. Dress neatly and businesslike – the more professional you appear, the better received your message will be. In many cities, there are neighborhood organizations such as community boards or block, town or village associations. They tend to meet regularly and be open to the public. Go to one of the meetings, calling up ahead of time to get the cats on the agenda. Then make a brief presentation, ask for help and bring a [signup brochure for volunteers](#) which lists possible tasks, such as trapping, providing holding space (like a garage), feeding, or providing information about the cats' whereabouts.

You can also hold your own “cat meeting.” Post [flyers](#) around the area announcing a meeting at a local coffee shop. Invite “everyone concerned about the free-roaming cats in our neighborhood.” You want residents to come who might help you as well as residents who don’t like the cats. The chance to hear them out and educate them on TNR could result in an unexpected ally, or at least a more tolerant attitude. Have a [sign-up sheet](#) for people who would like to support your efforts. Leading community organizations such as churches or civic groups can be approached for support, as well as the offices of local government officials (assuming all is well with your local laws and policies).

Try to make appointments with co-op boards, landlords, building and [workplace managers](#) – anyone whose permission you need or who has the ability to make your work easier or more difficult. Don’t plead for the kitties, just present the facts. Be especially prepared at these types of meetings to talk about how TNR will improve the current situation and why other methods won’t work.

One technique for mobilizing community support is to [write a letter](#) describing your TNR plan and get a copy to everyone in the neighborhood; you can either mail it or slip it under doors. **CAUTION:** do NOT place anything inside mailboxes as this is a federal violation!

Undoubtedly, you will think of more ways to reach out and educate. Always remember that TNR is not only about working with the cats. Feral cats are a community issue and require a community solution. Don’t bite off more than you can handle. Start small, gain success and build on it.

Trapping Cats: Who and When

Mother Cats

If you’re thinking of trapping a mother cat and are fortunate to have [local assistance](#), follow their protocols. If you’re on your own, you’ll have many things to consider, including the trapping of kittens. Cats with nursing kittens can be spayed by veterinarians familiar with working on them. If the nursing mom is a regular in your small backyard colony and you’re certain she’ll be back and it won’t be too hard to re-capture her, then you might decide to let her go until the kittens are at least 6 weeks of age.

If you trap a mother cat but didn’t know she was nursing and don’t know how old the kittens are, you could let her go knowing you may never catch her again and she may go on to have more litters. If you know that the kittens are more than a few weeks old, you could have the cat spayed as soon as possible and then release her the day after surgery if she appears alert and there are no signs of post-surgical complications. While this may be sooner than a cat would normally be released, the risk is justified by giving her kittens a better chance to survive. Contrary to popular belief, a spayed female can still nurse.

If you know that a female cat is nursing young kittens, it's best to delay trapping her until the kittens start showing up at the food bowl and the whole family can be trapped at the same time. Be sure to read about [trapping kittens safely](#) in the Neighborhood Cats TNR Handbook. However, if the nursing female goes into your trap, let her go if you know the kittens are alive and less than a few weeks old. Do this immediately so she does not develop too much fear of the trap.

Winter Trapping

People may be concerned about trapping during winter because the females have their stomachs shaved for surgery. However, winter trapping has its advantages. There are far fewer pregnancies and so difficulties with young kittens and nursing mothers can be largely avoided. Plus you can get a step ahead of the spring kitten season. Before any winter trapping is done, be sure that the cats will have adequate shelter when they are returned to their territory.

Sterilizing feral cats before they have even one litter will reduce the number of animals and their offspring – currently and potentially – living on the streets, being cared for in shelters, and being put down by animal shelters and veterinarians. Pediatric spay and neuter has been performed in animal shelters for more than 25 years on kittens as young as 2 months of age or who weigh a minimum of 2 pounds. Studies of pediatric spay and neuter have shown that there are no behavioral differences, changes in growth, or any risk of future medical problems when compared to traditional spay and neuter at six to eight months of age.

Common Questions:

[Is there a contraceptive for feral cats?](#)

The Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs is a non-profit organization, supported by The HSUS and others, that is working hard to find non-surgical sterilants for cats and dogs. Check [ACCD's website](#) for the latest information.

[What if there is no feral cat caretaker or person to foster feral kittens?](#)

The HSUS believes that in an ideal world, TNRed colonies would have caretakers. Unfortunately, there are many colonies that do not have caretakers. Of the three to four million cats cared for yearly in animal shelters, approximately half of them are put down. Thus, putting down feral cats who can be TNRed because they don't have a caretaker is not a life-saving strategy. Also in an ideal world, kittens young enough to be socialized (learn to like people) would be removed from the colony and evaluated for adoption. However, it may not even be possible to find homes for socialized feral kittens when the resources of groups, organizations, and agencies are limited and millions of already-tame kittens need homes. In addition, the resources put into socialization and adoption may be better used by spaying and neutering as many feral cats as possible to prevent the birth of more kittens.

Testing for FeLV and FIV

The rate of FeLV (Feline Leukemia Virus) and FIV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus) in feral cats is about the same as that of owned cats. Some private veterinarians only test for these viruses if the caretaker requests it while others insist on testing and putting down all cats who test positive, even if they are currently healthy. Some TNR programs test all cats, some only test sick cats, and others only test adoptable cats. Although cost is certainly important, other factors should be considered as well.

There are several reasons [why groups do not routinely test healthy colony cats](#). The first is logistics: an accurate diagnosis requires two tests at least one month apart to rule out false positives and false negatives. In addition, a cat who initially tests positive for feline leukemia has about a 30 percent chance of later testing negative due to his immune response to the initial infection. Moreover, what do you do with a feral cat awaiting his second test – cage him for a month or let him go and try to trap him again? Returning the cat to the colony makes sense since, given the close living situation of feral cats in colonies, most cats in the colony have probably already been exposed to diseases carried by the members.

FeLV is shed in very high quantities in saliva and nasal secretions, but also in urine, feces, and milk from infected cats. Cat-to-cat transfer of the virus may occur from a bite wound, during mutual grooming, shared dishes, or from an infected mother cat to her kittens, either before they are born or while they are nursing. Spaying and neutering feral cats will eliminate reproduction and the spread of FeLV from moms to kittens. Spaying and neutering will also decrease aggression and the spread of FeLV through bite wounds. Even with FeLV most of cats are asymptomatic.

If an infected cat exhibits symptoms of the disease such as poor coat, weakness, and weight loss, the caretaker should make every effort to trap again. In this situation an FeLV/FIV test would help distinguish whether the cat is suffering a bad upper respiratory infection that a week or two of antibiotics would treat, or end-stage feline leukemia. Depending on the illness and your ability, you may decide to treat. However, if the cat's quality of life is poor, euthanasia should be considered.

FIV is not very contagious and generally requires deep bites to be transmitted. Most transmission is associated with mating behaviors (males fighting with other males or males biting females while mating). Once the cats are spayed and neutered, transmission is much less likely. Most cats with FIV don't have symptoms. If symptoms such as non-healing wounds and increased susceptibility to other diseases appear, the caretaker should try to trap again and take the cat to the veterinarian for a diagnosis, as discussed in the previous paragraph.

Sheltering and Feeding

[Keeping feral cats healthy](#) begins with TNR, but doesn't stop there. Feral cats will surely appreciate a [warm, dry shelter](#) during cold or inclement weather. You may find inexpensive or free materials by asking building supply stores or contractors if they have scrap lumber. A fun activity is to have a shelter building party. You can also ask friends, neighbors, and co-workers for used dog houses which can be modified and serve as good shelters. Contact local youth groups to find out if they would help build shelters as a service project. Lots of excellent information is included on [Neighborhood Cats' website](#), including [ideas for making shelters](#) and [keeping water from freezing](#).

If you're trying to keep ants and other insects from getting into the cats' food, you can create a little moat by putting the food bowl into a larger container. Then add about ½ inch of water in the larger bowl. The water surrounding the smaller bowl will prevent ants from reaching the food, but the cats can still lean over and eat. If you are feeding many cats, provide an adequate number of bowls to allow more than one cat to eat at one time. Providing several bowls may also help cats who might be last to the food bowl to get their share.

Since wildlife may also be interested in the food, keep the feeding area clean and free of trash. If another person is feeding, ask them to do so as well. Avoid feeding more than the cats can eat and remember to decrease the amount of food you provide as the colony size decreases so that the surplus food doesn't attract wildlife. Because many of the wild animals who are attracted to cat food are nocturnal, feed during daylight and remove food by dark. Although there aren't any repellents registered for use on coyotes, aversion agents used for dogs and cats have been used with some success. In addition, a technique used by ranchers to protect their cats is to provide a climbing pole that enables cats to escape when surprised in the open by a coyote. Feeding near an area with plenty of trees can offer escape routes and hiding places for cats. If you can provide an enclosure that keeps the cats out of harm's way, you may want to consider doing so. You can search the Internet for "cat enclosures" to see what's available or to get ideas about building your own.

If you're having a hard time affording cat food, check our [list of organizations helping free-roaming cats](#). Some indicate that they provide food. Even if an organization doesn't indicate that it helps caretakers with food, it never hurts to ask.

Your local humane society may have surplus food or know of other agencies in your community that provide food. Pet supply stores and supermarkets may be willing to donate dented cans and torn packages or out-of-date products. Work on a food drive with a local youth group or service organization or hold your own. Place an ad in your newspaper with the details.

If you're a non-profit organization, you probably know about [fundraising](#) and foundations that provide [grants](#) for feral cats. If you're on your own, ask that friends, family, and co-workers celebrate your birthday or other holidays by giving you money, pet supply store gift cards, or cat food instead of gifts.

Protecting Birds and Other Wildlife

A common complaint about cats is that they kill birds and other wildlife. Although not all cats are skilled hunters, studies show that most of the animals killed by cats are small mammals (such as rodents) and approximately 25 percent are birds, including ground-nesting species that are vulnerable to cat attack. Cat predation certainly has a negative effect on the individual animal who suffers and/or dies. Even animals who appear to have escaped unscathed from a cat often die. Birds, for instance, may fly away, but may die later from infection caused by bacteria on the cat's teeth or claws. Birds can also succumb to the stress of having been captured.

However, the need to protect wildlife from cat predation and competition for food should not automatically result in trapping and killing feral cats. Free-roaming cat and wildlife advocates should work together in order to protect both wildlife and cats. Non-lethal options that may be considered include relocation and on-site confinement of cats.

Because there is no one formula which will universally apply to all situations involving wildlife and free-roaming cats, the need for dialogue, open-mindedness, and collaboration is critical. Once a dialogue is under way, the unique circumstances of each situation can be assessed. Although it can be difficult for groups with seemingly competing interests to work together and build trust, it can be done by keeping common goals in mind and searching for effective, non-lethal outcomes that protect cats and wildlife.

Advocating for Free-Roaming Cats

An animal's strongest advocate may be you. That's because you, as a citizen, have the power to influence your legislators – especially on a local level. You do not need any prior experience to [help pass pro-animal legislation](#); all you need is the determination to communicate with those who represent you in your local, state, and federal governments.

The number of caretakers and organizations devoted to helping these cats is growing. As a result, some local governments now recognize that a comprehensive cat management strategy to combat cat overpopulation requires working with advocates.

When advocating for free-roaming cats, it's important to have an idea of the number of cats in the community. Previously mentioned studies by Dr. Julie Levy and PetSmart Charities can help you estimate the number of cats in need of your help. In addition, because officials and citizens are concerned about responsible fiscal management, a [tool for estimating the cost of putting down feral cats versus doing TNR](#) can be useful.

Starting a Community TNR Program

Now that you've gotten your feet wet with TNR, you may be interested in spreading the word about its benefits beyond your own colony. If you are lucky and there is a free-roaming cat group in your community, you may want to volunteer for this group. If there isn't one in your community, you may be the one to start one! Remember the people you spoke to before you trapped your colony? They may be interested in being part of a larger effort to help more cats. You may also look for other like-minded people in the community on websites such as [Yahoo](#), [Facebook](#), and [Meetup](#).

One of the first things you'll need to do is research the local laws because the local Department of Health or animal care and control agency may have what amount to anti-TNR policies in place. For example, health officials may consider leaving out food for cats to be creating a public nuisance, whether or not the feeding site is kept clean. Or animal care and control may have a practice of trying to trap and remove any free-roaming cat spotted, neutered or not. The way to find out is call up the agency overseeing animal control and ask whether there is an official policy on free-roaming cats and, if so, what it is.

The reason you want to find out about local laws and policies is obvious – you don't want to go through the trouble and expense of TNR'ing cat colonies, maintaining them for a time, and then be charged with some civil offense and have the cats taken away. If you are facing that possibility, then an effort to change the laws or policies should be attempted first, before anything else is done. In these instances, it is the town council, the mayor, the head of animal care and control or the Commissioner of Public Health who need to be educated. Once official approval has been gained, the strongest possible foundation for community-wide TNR has been built.

If you need to go the route of changing laws first, then please consult with an organization with experience and success in [pro-TNR lobbying](#). This is very important because it is not always apparent how to get the results you want. Organizations to consult may include a nearby free-roaming cat group that got their town on board, a feral-friendly humane society or SPCA, or an organization such as [The Humane Society of the United States](#) and/or [Neighborhood Cats](#) which can provide advice and resources.

A couple of tips for TNR advocates – focus on the population control aspect of TNR and its ability to reduce the number of cats. Don't try to persuade public officials with arguments that TNR is humane and the cats have a right to their lives and territory. Public officials will care much more about the impact of the cats on the community. A second tip, if you are meeting resistance, is to propose a pilot project rather than demand a complete change in the law. Then, if they agree, make sure the pilot succeeds. For in-depth information, read The HSUS's book, "Implementing a Community Trap-Neuter-Return Program." [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#).

If you are performing TNR in a legal vacuum – no laws or policies for or against - the day may come when municipal officials begin to take notice and show an interest in free-roaming cat policies. Prepare for that day by documenting your work – including veterinary records and colony tracking sheets – to be able to prove the benefits of TNR.

If you plan on working with free-roaming cats and practicing TNR on a large scale, forming a non-profit corporation has great advantages, especially when it comes to fundraising. When donations

are given to non-profits approved by the IRS, they are tax-deductible which may provide an incentive to give. Perhaps as important, an IRS-approved charity has credibility in the eyes of a potential donor as a viable organization worth supporting. Most foundations will provide grants only to IRS-approved charities. Furthermore, in many jurisdictions, only incorporated nonprofits can conduct direct mail solicitations, raffles, and other fundraising efforts.

Forming a nonprofit generally takes two steps - first, form a charitable corporation in your home state. Second, seek approval from the IRS for your corporation to obtain what is called "section 501(c)(3)" status. Once you receive this status, donations made to your organization become tax-deductible.

If you are not already familiar with forming a charitable corporation and applying for 501(c)(3) status, it can be a difficult and time-consuming process - even for those with legal backgrounds. You may want to consider using an incorporation service that does almost all the paperwork and filing for you.

While the cost of a service may seem like a lot of money when you're first starting out, it's a small price to pay compared to the time and effort involved in doing the whole thing yourself. Even if you have an attorney willing to assist you at no charge, if he or she is inexperienced in this area, it can dramatically slow the process down. No matter what you do, you'll have to pay the government filing fees (which total in the hundreds of dollars) and most private attorneys, if they do charge full price, will bill in the thousands of dollars for this same service.

Being a Responsible Cat Owner

Spaying and Neutering

In addition to TNR for free-roaming cats, spaying and neutering your cats is the most important thing you can do for your cat and the millions of cats who are put down every year. Afraid your cat will get fat, or his personality will change? Think it's not necessary because your cat never goes outdoors? Or maybe you just haven't gotten around to spaying your cat? Can't afford it? Do you think your cat is too young to get pregnant? Find the [answers to these questions](#) and more before it's too late.

Keeping Cats Indoors

If you think it's cruel to keep your cat indoors, think again. Going outdoors is not a prerequisite for feline happiness. It's simple to keep your cat happy indoors through playtime every day, cat trees for climbing, and cat grass for an occasional snack. Even cats who have lived outdoors can be [transitioned to an indoor lifestyle](#).

Pet cats should be kept indoors, but that doesn't mean they can't have some outdoor time in a safe enclosure or on a harness and leash. There are specially-constructed [cat fences](#) that are advertised as escape proof, but other animals can still enter a yard and harm your cat, so your cat should

always be supervised when outdoors. If you allow your cat outdoors unsupervised for any part of the day or night, you're risking your cat's life as well. In addition, [cats pose a risk to birds and other wildlife](#).

It's not necessary to put your cat outside or get rid of him because of a few minor issues. If he [doesn't use his litter box](#), it's possible to find out why and to correct the situation. If you're going through life changes such as [allergies](#), you're [pregnant](#), or you're [moving](#), these issues can be challenging enough without the addition of cat "problems.", but solutions are usually available.

Providing a Collar and ID

It's tragic that only 2-5% of cats in shelters are reunited with their families. A collar and visible identification is your cat's ticket home. Most pet owners think their cat will never get lost, but even strictly indoor cats need identification in case they escape during an emergency or through a torn screen. You may be afraid to put a collar on your cat or think that he won't tolerate a collar. Learn how to [change his attitude](#) – and yours – about collars.

Searching for Lost Pets

Searching for a lost cat is quite different than searching for a lost dog. Cat owners are often told to post flyers and to drive to animal shelters to check the cages, like one would do for a dog. However, these actions will not help you find your cat if he or she is trapped in a neighbor's shed or is injured and hiding in fear under a neighbor's deck. First, look in every nook and cranny in your house, around your yard, and throughout your neighborhood. Many pets who are thought to be lost are merely hiding or sleeping somewhere on your property: in cabinets, boxes, closets; beneath blankets; on a pushed-in dining room chair; behind long curtains; in trees, garages, crawl spaces; on roofs; and under decks and porches.

The primary method that you should use to find your lost cat is a thorough search of your cat's territory (for an outdoor-access cat) or humane trapping (for indoor-only cats who escape outdoors).

When an indoor-only cat escapes outside or when cats are displaced into an unfamiliar area (such as escaping from their carrier on the way to the veterinarian), the cat is likely hiding in fear near the escape point. That is because cats are territorial and your cat's territory was inside of your home. Once a cat is transplanted into unfamiliar territory, he seeks shelter because he is afraid. Cats who are afraid (and cats who are injured) will often hide under a deck, under a house, under a porch, or in heavy brush, and they will not meow. Meowing would give up their location to a predator. Their behavior has nothing to do with whether the cat loves you, recognizes your voice, or can smell you – it has everything to do with the fact that a frightened cat will hide in silence.

If your cat will never be allowed free access outdoors, train your cat that humane traps mean food and safety. Place a trap inside your house. Prop open the door so it won't close when the cat steps on the trigger plate, and feed him inside the humane trap every day so that he enters and leaves without fear. If your cat should ever escape outdoors, you will increase your chances of recovering

your cat by setting baited humane traps because your cat associates the traps with food and is not afraid of them.

If your cat is allowed access outdoors, do not train him to enter a humane trap because pest control companies, apartment complex managers, and cat-hating neighbors routinely use humane traps to remove cats from their property. When an outdoor-access cat doesn't come home at the usual time, it means that something has happened. Because sick, injured, and trapped cats are often found within their territory, it's likely that your missing outdoor-access cat is somewhere within a 5-house radius of your home. Cats who have been chased may be several houses or a few blocks from home. Sometimes cats travel up to a mile (or more) from their territory and those who end up many miles away, whether they were intentionally or unintentionally transported out of their territory, are the most difficult to find.

Time is of the essence in finding lost cats. You don't want to stress out about what to do when you're already stressed out by the absence of your cat, so prepare a recovery kit in advance to enable you to start your search immediately. At a minimum, your recovery kit should include a flashlight and log sheets and pen to record sightings that could be your cat.

Routinely check with your local animal shelter and also with any local rescue groups in your area. Some groups list lost pets on their telephone messages and keep information about lost and found pets. While some cats will end up in shelters the same day they vanished, others might not end up there for weeks or even months! Sometimes found cats end up being placed in feline rescue groups that place them in temporary foster homes until they can be adopted to a new family. Your local shelter should have a listing of the organized feline groups in your area. Take your pet's photograph to local veterinary offices and leave a copy of your "lost pet" flyer with them.

Place a notice in the Lost Pets section of your local and/or community newspapers' classified section, and check every day for notices in the Found Pets section. Many newspapers now have classifieds listed online.

Alert your neighbors, as well as mail and newspaper carriers. You can even enlist the help of neighborhood children, who are often eager to help.

Thank you for your efforts to help free-roaming cats and good luck.

Resources at a Glance

Check our website at humanesociety.org/feralcats for the latest information and resources. Take our self-paced online course for feral cat caretakers. Find the Kismet Account's "[feral cat manual](#)" [in Spanish](#) (see the bottom right-hand side of the page). The HSUS's handout about helping homeless cats, "[Buena Ciudadana](#)," is also available in Spanish.

An excellent website for all things feral is <http://www.neighborhoodcats.org>. You'll find information on the basics of TNR, safely socializing kittens, cat containment systems, trapping equipment, and more.

1. Looking at the Big Picture

[Watch The HSUS' 16-minute video, "Trap-Neuter-Return: Fixing Feral Cat Overpopulation,"](#) and read our [FAQs](#) and [Position on Trap-Neuter-Return](#). Read an excellent [article](#) that reviews the common arguments opposing and supporting TNR.

2. Understanding Problems Associated with Free-Roaming Cats

Read articles about how the animal sheltering community is helping cats, including "[Taking a Broader View of Cats](#)," "[The Way to Tame a Feral Kitten's Heart](#)," and "[Scaredy Cat or Feral Cat?](#)"

3. Evaluating Solutions: Trap and Remove, Feeding Bans

[Estimate the cost savings of TNR versus trap and remove](#)

Read about feeding bans and much more in "Implementing a Community Trap-Neuter-Return Program," [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#).

4. Helping Feral Cats: Trap-Neuter-Return

For an in-depth overview of TNR, read "[The Neighborhood Cats' TNR Handbook: A Guide to Trap-Neuter-Return for the Feral Cat Caretaker](#)."

Take a self-paced [online caretaker course](#) through Humane Society University.

View a comprehensive list of local groups to help you. You may also find experienced individuals on [Yahoo](#), [Facebook](#), and [Meet up](#).

5. Overcoming Common Obstacles

Read a comprehensive book about implementing a community trap-neuter-return program [link to book]

Read about [working with veterinarians](#) and how [veterinarians can help care for feral cats in the clinic](#).

[Download a training video for veterinarians on performing pediatric spay and neuter](#).

[Revise this letter](#) to and [use these forms](#) to recruit veterinarians in your community

[Visit the Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs](#) to learn about the latest research to find non-surgical sterilants.

6. Trapping: Who and When

[Read about performing a mass trapping](#).

[View Neighborhood Cats' 30-minute video about performing mass trapping](#).

7. Testing for FeLV and FIV

[Read how to keep feral cats healthy.](#)

8. Sheltering and Feeding

[Read a caretaker's tale of providing shelters](#) and learn how to [build the ultimate shelter](#).

9. Resolving Issues with Neighbors

Read more about peaceful co-existence and how to keep cats out of yards and gardens in "[The Neighborhood Cats' TNR Handbook: A Guide to Trap-Neuter-Return for the Feral Cat Caretaker.](#)"

10. Protecting Birds, Other Wildlife and Cats

Read more about the [importance of collaborating](#) and finding effective [strategies for protecting birds](#), other wildlife, and cats.

11. Advocating for Free-Roaming Cats

Read a [brief overview of lobbying](#) on behalf of cats or download our in depth "[Advocates Tool Kit.](#)"

12. Being a Responsible Cat Owner

[Educating cat owners](#) is an important responsibility of the veterinary community, but there is lots of [additional information](#) out there to help you keep your cat. You can find [pet-friendly rental housing](#), resolve [behavior issues](#), [protect your cat](#) if she goes missing, and purchase cat products, including [enclosures](#), to [entertain your cat](#) and keep her safe. Learn how to conduct an effective [search](#) in the unfortunate event that your cat becomes lost.