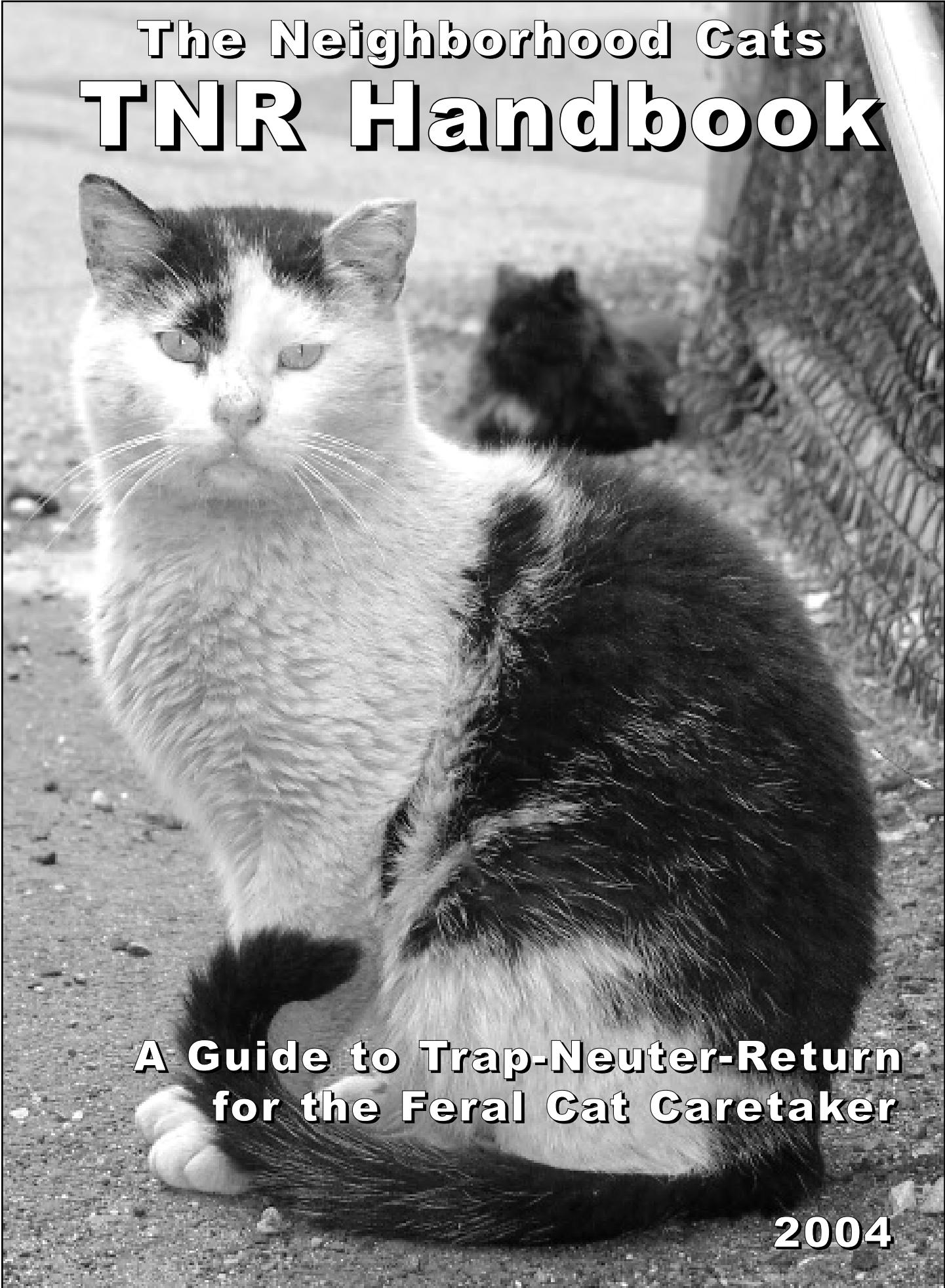


# The Neighborhood Cats **TNR Handbook**



**A Guide to Trap-Neuter-Return  
for the Feral Cat Caretaker**

**2004**

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for the Feral Cat Caretaker*



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# Foreword

"If we keep 'em in a cage, at least they'll be safe." This has been the reasoning of numerous well meaning cat rescuers in the past. Surely the operative words here are "at least" for we would have to admit that, for an animal or a young child or any of us, a lot more than safety is required if anything resembling a normal, healthy life is our goal. Happily, there is a better way, a veritable win-win situation. For feral cats, TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return) is the answer.

My own concept of feral cats was limited by the glimpses I had caught of them over the years. Pitiful, thin creatures with runny eyes and weeping sores. Most of them were sick or lame, scurrying along the alleys or underneath the cars parked at the curb. My heart broke but what could I do if the cats wouldn't even let me come close.



It was Bryan Kortis who explained TNR to me and showed me my first managed feral cat colony. Late on a midwinter afternoon when the temperature was below freezing with ice underfoot and a promise of more snow tomorrow, Bryan led me through a maze of Upper West Side alleys and courtyards, around rows of garbage cans and under rusty fire escapes. I had steeled my mind and emotions for the pitiful sight I knew I was about to witness. Was I ever in for a surprise!

We rounded the last corner into a small courtyard. To my left the space was enclosed by a three-foot stone wall topped by an enormous chain link fence. I scarcely had time to turn to my right where four large Styrofoam boxes were held up off the ground by stacks of bricks, because one second after we rounded that corner, a series of furry bodies exploded out of those boxes, hit the pavement, streaked for the fence, flew up, cleared the top, hit the ground running on the other side and disappeared into the twilight of the alleys beyond. In the four or five seconds that they had been visible, I had seen bright eyes, rich, thick furs, rippling muscles and a feat of athletic prowess I had never imagined possible for a cat. My heart leapt for joy.

"They're beautiful," I cried. "They're healthy and clean and strong."

"They're a managed colony," Bryan replied. He led me over to the Styrofoam boxes. "These are insulated shelters. They cost about twenty-five dollars each. Stick your hand inside. Don't worry, the cats have all gone."

I peeled the glove off my icy fingers and reached through the little round door in the side. The box was like an oven!

Now, with this handbook, anyone can manage a feral colony. Everybody's ferals can be strong and happy and proud. The book is beautifully organized; the instructions are crystal clear and logical.

May your path be as full of wonder and laughter as mine has been ever since that winter evening when I discovered the intriguing world of feral cats.

Anitra Frazier (author, *The New Natural Cat*)  
October, 2004

# 1. What is a Feral Cat?

A “feral” cat is a feline who lives outside a normal home and has to some extent reverted to a wild state. Ferals tend to be fearful of people and keep their distance unless the person is someone they have come to know and trust. They originate from lost or abandoned domestic cats who either became wild themselves after living on their own or parented feral offspring. In contrast to ferals, a “stray” is a lost or abandoned cat who still retains his tame nature.

Most cats living on their own are feral and live in groups called “colonies.” The cats in a colony share territory and a common food source. Often the cats in a colony are related by family, but not always. Feral colonies can form anywhere there is adequate food and shelter. In urban areas, they can be found in alleyways, vacant lots, abandoned buildings, warehouses, factories, parks and backyards, to name a few. The vast majority of ferals are not completely wild because they rely on people for their food source, whether it’s a restaurant dumpster or a kind neighbor who comes by once a day. Relatively few subsist by hunting alone.

Cats can be feral to different degrees. Just how wild a cat is will depend on a combination of four factors:



- **Age**  
Usually, kittens six to seven weeks of age or younger are not yet developed enough to be highly feral and can easily be socialized within a matter of days. As the kittens progress to eight weeks and older, their feral nature grows stronger and socialization becomes increasingly difficult with each passing week. Beyond five to six months of age, the cat in most cases is fully feral and will likely remain so for life.
- **Number of generations feral**  
Cats grow wilder with each succeeding feral generation. For example, a cat who herself once lived in a domestic home will tend to be less feral than her offspring, while a tenth generation feral cat will tend to be wilder than one who is second generation.
- **Amount of human contact**  
The amount of contact the cats have with people on a regular basis is another important factor. A cat who lives in a community garden and has visitors coming everyday to talk and play with him will be less feral than a cat who lives in the woods and rarely encounters people.

- **Personality**

On rare occasion, a feral cat is naturally friendly towards people despite being beyond kitten age, born of a feral mother and/or living in a reclusive environment. But the naturally occurring “gregarious feral” is very much the exception. However, after neutering, some feral cats do gradually become friendlier and more approachable, sometimes to the point of becoming adoptable.

Assessing whether a cat is feral can be relevant to determining what is the best situation for the feline. If the cat is a friendly domestic, then adoption is the best option, but if the cat is feral, then allowing him to live in his own territory with his colony mates might be the most compassionate choice. For more on this question, see “Determining if a cat is adoptable” in Chapter 15.

## 2. What is Trap-Neuter-Return?

Trap-Neuter-Return, commonly known as TNR, is a method for humanely and effectively managing feral cat colonies and reducing feral cat populations. The process involves trapping the cats in a colony, getting them neutered, eartipped for identification and vaccinated for rabies, then releasing them back into their territory. Whenever possible, friendly adults and kittens young enough to be easily socialized are removed and placed for adoption. A designated caretaker provides regular food and shelter to the returned cats and also monitors the colony for newcomers and mediates any conflicts between the cats and the surrounding community.

TNR offers a number of benefits on both the colony and community levels. As a TNR activist, it's wise to be knowledgeable about these advantages and be able to articulate them whenever necessary. TNR is still a relatively new concept and many people don't understand why it's a good idea to put the cats back where you found them. So let them know!



- **The advantages of TNR – colony level**

For a particular colony, getting the cats neutered has the following advantages for the local neighborhood:

1. **No more kittens and a gradually falling population.** If all the cats are fixed, or at least all the females, no more litters will be born. If newcomers to the colony are quickly trapped and altered or adopted out, the size of the colony will tend to decline over time.
2. **Noise is dramatically reduced.** Most of the noise from an unmanaged feral colony comes from mating and fighting – behaviors which are greatly reduced by neutering.
3. **Odor becomes much less noticeable.** Unaltered males mark their territory by spraying urine tinged with testosterone, causing a particularly noxious odor. Neutering eliminates the testosterone and its foul odor. In addition, most altered male cats will mark less frequently or stop all together.
4. **Rodent control is maintained.** Cats provide a natural form of rodent control, primarily as a consequence of their scent. Returning the cats allows this to continue.

5. **A healthier and less visible colony.** Neutering, regular food and adequate shelter greatly improve the colony's health. One benefit of this is far fewer parasites, including fleas. In addition, neutered cats tend to roam much less and thereby become less visible.
6. **Removal of the pity/sadness factor.** Concerned neighborhood residents no longer have to observe such plights as hungry cats or dying kittens.
7. **The presence of a caretaker.** With TNR, someone is there to take responsibility for the colony, watch over them and work out any problems with neighbors.
8. **Prevents a new, unaltered colony from forming.** Removing most or all of a colony leaves the territory vulnerable to re-colonization by new, unaltered cats and the resumption of the same problems as before. Neutering the colony and then leaving them in place breaks this cycle.

- **The advantages of TNR - community level**

The advantages of TNR when the method is practiced on a community-wide scale extend well beyond each individual colony:

- a) **Feral and stray cat population reduction for the community as a whole.** Current theory holds that when 70% of the homeless cats in a given geographical area are neutered, births equal attrition and the population stabilizes. Above 70%, the population starts to decline with the rate of decrease growing increasingly faster as 100% altered is approached.
- b) **Lower euthanasia rates.** Fewer feral cats in the community as a result of TNR lower euthanasia rates at local shelters in two ways. First, fewer unadoptable feral cats are brought in and immediately put down. Second, fewer feral kittens are brought in and adopted out, freeing up shelter space and homes for cats who otherwise would have been euthanized for lack of these resources.
- c) **Fewer complaints to animal control.** A declining feral cat population achieved through TNR means less nuisance behavior in the community at large (yowling, fighting, unaltered males spraying, marks on cars, feces) and so fewer complaints.
- d) **Mobilization of volunteer work force.** Because TNR is life affirming, it attracts large numbers of volunteers unlike efforts to trap and kill feral cats. With estimates on the number of feral cats in the U.S. in the tens of millions, the ability to mobilize an army of volunteers is essential in order to put an end to feral cat overpopulation.

- e) **Cost savings.** Lower euthanasia rates at local shelters, fewer complaint calls for animal control and the use of a large volunteer work force all save money for municipalities. For example, in San Diego County, TNR was introduced in 1992 and in two years resulted in a 40% drop in euthanasia rates. Based on how much it cost the local shelter to intake, hold and euthanize each cat, the decline saved the county hundreds of thousands of dollars.
- f) **Gaining caretaker cooperation.** Caretakers know the cats' numbers, whereabouts and habits, and they can withhold food and facilitate the trapping. Their cooperation is crucial for a successful attempt at feral cat population control. TNR gains their assistance because the cats will not be harmed, whereas attempts to trap and euthanize provoke caretaker resistance.
- g) **Improved public relations for animal control.** When animal control supports TNR instead of trying to round up and kill the cats, their public image improves. This can lead to more volunteers, more people coming to municipal shelters to adopt cats and improved fundraising.

- **Failed alternatives to TNR**

One of the most persuasive reasons for doing Trap-Neuter-Return is that nothing else works! Whether the goal is population reduction or lowered nuisance behavior, no other technique has been shown to have a realistic chance of long-term success. An examination of the available alternatives makes this plain.

### **Trap and kill**

“Trap and kill” has been the predominant approach by animal control agencies in the U.S. for decades. Trapping feral cats, carting them off to a shelter and then euthanizing them may, in the short term, reduce the population in a given area. But in most cases this reduction is only temporary and eventually the cat population returns to its former level. There are several reasons for this:

#### ***The vacuum effect***

Feral cat colonies spring up and subsist in certain locations because the habitat provides adequate food and shelter for them to survive. When a colony is removed from a location, but the habitat is left unchanged, unneutered cats from neighboring colonies sooner or later will move into the vacant territory to take advantage of the still remaining food and shelter and the cycle starts all over again. This phenomenon, termed the “vacuum effect,” was first documented by wildlife biologist Roger Tabor in his studies of London street cats (Tabor, Roger, *The Wild Life of the Domestic Cat* (1983).)

Altering the habitat to remove the food source is difficult to achieve as a practical matter. All it takes to create a source is an unsealed dumpster, open garbage cans or one person leaving out cans of food when they spot a cat. Trying to stop people from feeding is virtually impossible. In the face of feeding bans with civil and criminal penalties, experience has shown that compassionate people will persist, one way or another.

### ***Overbreeding***

Trapping all the members of a feral colony requires a sustained and dedicated effort. Few animal control agencies have the resources to accomplish this and, instead, usually put out some traps, catch who they catch and then move on to the next problem. Inevitably, some cats are left behind. These cats now have less competition for the food and shelter remaining at the site. As a result, they will give birth more frequently and more of their kittens will survive until the former population level is again attained.

### ***Abandonment***

Domestic cats are constantly being abandoned into the outdoors and typically they are not neutered. They too, can quickly repopulate a suitable territory from which a feral colony has been removed, but food and shelter remain.

### ***Lack of animal control resources***

Few cities or towns have the resources to even consider trying to trap all the feral cats inhabiting their municipalities. In large cities, for example, where there are relatively few animal control officers and feral populations in at least the tens of thousands, trap and kill as an overall solution is simply not an option.

These four factors – the vacuum effect, overbreeding, abandonment and lack of animal control resources – combine to render trap and kill completely ineffectual as a method of feral and stray cat population control. Communities that continue to utilize this method experience constant levels from year to year of seized cats, complaints and euthanasia rates. These unchanging levels indicate all that is being accomplished is population turnover rather than reduction – new feline faces, but not fewer.

### **Stop feeding**

At first glance, this method has the appeal of simplicity – don't feed the cats and they'll go away. The problem is, unless there is another food source nearby, they won't. Feral cats are extremely territorial and will not wander far in search of food. Rather than leaving, they tend to come closer, taking more risks in encroaching on human habitations as they grow increasingly desperate to find something to eat. In addition, a cat can go without food for several weeks and continue to reproduce. Trying to starve out cats results only in hungry, unhealthy animals vulnerable to disease and severe parasitic infestations, such as fleas. What might have seemed like a simple solution ends up making the situation much worse.

Furthermore, nothing is harder than trying to stop people from putting out food once they know there are cats in need. People will risk their jobs, their apartments and even bodily harm to prevent the animals from starving. Attempts to make feral cats go away by banning feeding usually result in suffering for the cats and increased conflict with feeders, but little else.

### **Rescue or relocation**

The goal that all ferals should be rescued and placed in homes is not realistic. There are far too many cats and too few homes for this to happen. Perhaps one day this will

change, but we are a long way from that time. Resources are better spent neutering the feral population rather than going through the long and uncertain process of socializing and placing feral cats. For the cat's sake, too, allowing a feral to live out his life in the wild may be a more compassionate choice than having him spend years in a cage or hiding under a bed.

Relocation to a safer site or a sanctuary is a solution people often jump to when they first come upon a feral colony in distress. But there are few reputable sanctuaries and little room in them. If you're going to relocate to a new site, you have to find a suitable place yourself and a reliable caretaker willing to make a life-long commitment to the cats. If you succeed in finding a good situation, the relocation process is difficult, too, requiring two to three weeks of confinement in the new territory to teach the cats that their food source has changed. If everything is done properly and by the book, a substantial percentage of the cats will probably still disappear if the new territory is not fenced in.

Rescue and relocation also suffer from many of the same defects as trap and kill when it comes to population control. Removing ferals from their territory without permanently altering the habitat by removing the food source means some combination of the vacuum effect, overbreeding and repopulation by abandoned cats will likely return the colony to its former size.

### **Do nothing**

If nothing is done, then the size of a feral cat colony will reach a natural ceiling, that being how many cats the available food and shelter can support. When the carrying capacity of the habitat is exceeded, population control comes in the form of disease and starvation. All the problems associated with unmanaged feral colonies remain, including noise, odor, complaints, dying kittens and costs to animal control when attempting to address the situation.

In sum, trying to simply remove feral cats from their territory – whether to euthanize, rescue, relocate to another site or place in a sanctuary – does not end up lowering the number of feral cats. In nature's ongoing cycle, new cats replace the old ones and nothing much changes in terms of overpopulation and nuisance behavior. Leaving the cats where they are and neutering them through TNR is the only hope for improvement.

## 3. The TNR Process – An Overview

Properly implemented, TNR is not only about trapping the cats and getting them neutered. It's also about creating a safe, healthy environment for them to live in. So practicing TNR also includes setting up feeding stations and good winter shelter, and building good relations with the community.

Every situation will present its own unique challenges that require creative solutions. The process described here is best understood as a general framework to be adapted as needed. Each step will be covered in more detail in following chapters of this handbook.

Note that “trapping” comes towards the end of the process, not the beginning. The best way to stay out of trouble and avoid ending up with a household full of feral cats is to think things out first and have as much set up and arranged as possible beforehand, then trap. Not every problem can be anticipated and prepared for ahead of time, but most can.

### **Step one: Build good community relations**

Most feral cat colonies are found within a community, not off by themselves in the woods. Whether it's a backyard, a parking lot, a factory, a barn or an alley behind an apartment building, the cats have human neighbors. The effectiveness of your TNR project and the long-term security of the cats will depend in large part on the cooperation and understanding of the people who live and work in the area. They need to be educated about your work and have their own concerns heard and taken into account.

### **Step two: Set up feeding stations and shelter, and establish a feeding pattern**

Regular feeding will improve the cats' health and will also better prepare them for the stress of trapping and surgery. Health problems can often be resolved through improved nutrition alone, including ringworm, parasites and upper respiratory infections. Warm, dry shelter, especially in wintertime, is also a key to good health and a must if spayed females with shaved stomachs are to be released in cold weather. In addition, the location of feeding stations and shelters can help reduce tensions with neighbors.

At least two weeks before the trapping, the cats should be fed at the same time and place on as consistent a basis as possible. Establishing a feeding pattern will let you get to know the colony. How many cats are there, what condition are they in, are any adoptable? Knowing all this ahead of time allows you to arrange for special vet care, line up foster homes and find out what your options are.

A consistent feeding pattern will also make the trapping much easier because you will have trained the cats where and when to show up. You won't have to go searching throughout the territory for them – they'll come to you instead.

### **Step three: Secure a holding space**

During the trapping period and after the spay/neuter surgery, the cats will need to be kept confined. At all times, except for the surgery, the cats should remain in their traps as a matter of safety and to prevent escapes. If you use the techniques described in this

handbook, the traps effectively double as cages and the cats can be comfortably housed and fed in them.

Depending on how many cats you're working with, the time the cats are held will usually run from four to six days. The holding space must be warm, dry and secure. Examples could include a garage, basement, warehouse, empty room in an apartment, a canopy set up in a backyard and anywhere the temperature can be kept warm, the cats can be protected from the elements and no threat of harm can come from other animals or people not associated with the project.

### **Step four: Schedule spay/neuter and secure needed equipment & transportation**

Once you've educated the community on what you're doing, set up a feeding pattern and counted the cats, and found a suitable holding space, you can safely schedule your spay/neuter date. How many of the cats you schedule at once will depend on the cost and availability of spay/neuter, the availability of traps, your time limitations and the size of the holding space. If traps are available for borrowing, reserve them right after you've scheduled your spay/neuter appointment. You may need to adjust your appointment in order to have enough equipment on hand. Also, if needed, arrange for transportation for bringing the cats from their territory to the holding space and then to the spay/neuter clinic.

### **Step five: Trap**

Now that everything is in place, the trapping can proceed. Food is withheld from the cats the entire day before trapping begins. How many days you allot for trapping will depend on the number of cats you're after. Leaving two days is advisable, three if you're after more than a few cats. This leaves room for poor weather, the cats for some reason not showing up that day or other unexpected conditions.

### **Step six: Spay Day**

Food and water are withheld the night before the surgeries. The next morning, the cats are transported to the clinic where standard treatment includes spay/neuter, eartipping and rabies vaccination. Flea and ear mite treatment are recommended if available and affordable.

### **Step seven: Recovery & release**

If everything goes normally, the cats are confined for 48 hours after surgery, then released back to their territory. During the time they're held, both before and after the spay/neuter, the cats should be fed and their traps cleaned twice a day.

### **Step eight: Long-term care and monitoring**

While the bulk of the work is done after the cats are neutered, TNR does not end there. For the method to be successful, a designated caretaker must feed the cats regularly, make sure there is adequate shelter, watch out for and trap any newcomers, and act as an intermediary with the community.

## 4. Building Good Community Relations

For the most part, feral cats live among us, their territory overlapping our own. Many people will interact with the cats on a daily basis, whether it's leaving out food, playing with them or watching them from a distance. There will be those who love the cats and enjoy their presence, while others may be angry at the noise and odor. Few people are aware anything can be done to improve the situation both for the cats and the community they live within.

To ensure the long-term security of the colony and to facilitate your trapping and caretaking, the community and its attitudes towards the cats must be taken into account. Whenever possible, efforts need to be made to shape these attitudes in a favorable way. To ignore this aspect of TNR and go about the work with no concern for the neighborhood in general is to potentially place the cats and your project in needless peril. With a little education about what you're doing and its advantages, understanding and support can be built. In this respect, TNR is not only about working with cats, but about community activism and working with people.

What exactly is the "community" will vary according to the circumstances. It might be a factory and the people who work there, a municipal facility and the agency that runs it, a homeowner and his backyard, a condominium complex, a hospital or even an entire town or neighborhood. No matter how broadly or narrowly the relevant community is defined, the importance of developing good relations is paramount. For example, it will be much easier to trap if you have permission to enter someone's property than if you trespass and try not to be spotted. Feeding and care, too, is simpler and more reliable when you have the community'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.

By performing TNR, you're helping to get a problem under control that effects everyone who lives or works at the colony's location. In this respect, TNR is a community service. So let people know you're helping them! You may be surprised at how many welcome and appreciate your efforts.

Before you can win over the neighborhood, you need to educate yourself about TNR and be able to speak persuasively about its many advantages. Review Chapter 2 closely for this purpose. Once you can talk about TNR in a convincing manner, then you can begin to effectively use the following community development techniques.



## • Community development techniques

### 1. Walk and talk

One way to gauge the prevailing attitude in a community towards the cats, as well as learn about the history of the colony, is walk around and talk to people. Talk to doormen, superintendents, store owners, parking lot attendants, local residents whose front or backyards are part of the cats' territory, the closest veterinarian, people you notice stopping and watching the cats – anyone who might be acquainted with the felines. The idea is to gather as much information as possible: How many cats are there? Who feeds them? When? How often? How did the situation start? Has anyone tried to do anything about it before? How do people feel about the cats – welcoming, hostile, indifferent? If you come across someone friendly to your cause, try to get their contact information or give them yours – down the road you may need their help or they may have more information for you. Stay alert for people who might help feed or trap, or who want to donate food, money or holding space.

During this “get acquainted” phase, explain to people what TNR is and let them know you are organizing a TNR project. Keep repeating the mantra, “No more kittens, no more noise, no more odor.” Refer those interested to resources where they can learn more about TNR, such as feral cat websites. If you can, make up business cards and keep your appearance neat and clean. The more professional an image you convey, the more effectively your message will be delivered.

### 2. Deal calmly with hostility and resistance

Often, a feral cat problem will come to your attention after a crisis situation has already developed – there are too many cats, people can't sleep at night because of the yowling, piles of unsightly empty cat food cans litter the block, backyards can't be used because of the smell. These are all typical signs of an out-of-control, unmanaged colony. Most people affected by these conditions will resent the cats and blame anyone who feeds them for keeping them there. Their attitude towards you, a cat-friendly person, may at first also be hostile and confrontational. Anticipating and dealing well with this kind of hostility is essential, especially if the person or agency involved has the authority to allow or prevent a TNR project.

The key is not to take it personally and be hostile in return, as difficult as it may be to hold back a good retort. Instead, try to understand why someone might be frustrated and unhappy with the cats. Put yourself in the place of those complaining – if cats fighting woke you up every night at 2 a.m., if your garden had become the neighborhood litter box or if the laundry room in your building stank from the spray of unaltered male cats, you might be resentful, too. Especially if no one took your grievances seriously or ever offered a solution.

Don't argue with those who voice these complaints, but listen carefully. Openly sympathize with what they've had to deal with and explain how TNR will help and why trying to permanently remove the cats from the area will just end up with new cats and the same old problems. Point out the benefit of the cats' natural rodent control. Most people calm down and respond well when they see their side of the story is being heard. When they understand there's a way to keep the cats and lose the problems, most are willing to give it a try.

There will be times when someone in a position of authority won't agree to TNR no matter how well you perform your role as advocate. Don't give up easily. Try to get others who are more "official" than you to speak to the person, such as a representative from a local animal welfare organization. If you still don't get anywhere, keep the lines of communication open. Eventually, if other attempts at resolving the feral cat situation fail, the person or agency may become more open to trying TNR. You want to remain available to help in the event that happens.

### **3. Hold community meetings**

If your work involves an apartment building, make an appointment to meet whoever is in charge - the landlord, the co-op board or the superintendent. If it's a government facility, locate the manager or top on-site official and find out whom you need to get permission from. Then try to meet with them. If it's an entire neighborhood that you're targeting, schedule a meeting at a local coffee shop and post flyers announcing it around the area. When holding a community meeting, invite everyone interested in the cats, pro and con. If you can get the hostile people to attend, you have an opportunity to change minds.

Find out if there is a local Community Board. If so, call up and get on the agenda for the next meeting. Be prepared to speak for a few minutes and have a suggested list of volunteer activities, such as providing a holding space, and a sign up sheet. The people who regularly attend these Board meetings are among the most active members of the community and the most willing to help out.

Churches, libraries or the offices of local elected officials could be asked to host a meeting. Getting the backing of recognized community leaders - like the mayor, a council member, a respected priest - is a plus, so try to meet with them, too, and ask for their endorsement. Check with your local police precinct to see if they have a community affairs officer. These officers can be helpful in a variety of ways, from helping gain the cooperation of others to reserving parking space for a mobile spay/neuter van.

### **4. Send a community appeal letter**

One technique for informing people of your work and gaining their support is a letter addressed to everyone in the neighborhood. Real estate brokers have the names and addresses of all residents in a particular area. If you know someone in the business, ask if you can use the list to do a mailing. Or else slip the letter under everyone's door. The letter should explain the current problems going on with the cats, what TNR is, and how you intend to use TNR to solve the situation. Include a contact number for yourself or the organization you're working with. Mention ways that people can help.

### **5. Post informational flyers**

A one page flyer describing TNR and how you propose to implement it in your neighborhood is another way to build support. Keep it simple and easy to read (don't use small type) and list contact info. Post it on bulletin boards, permissible public areas, veterinarians' offices and local animal shelters.

## 6. Work to change municipal laws and animal control policies

In some municipalities, there are laws which effectively outlaw TNR, such as bans on feeding any animal outdoors, or limits on the number of animals a resident can “own” with “ownership” defined as feeding. In other locales, animal control may have a policy of trying to trap and remove any free-roaming cat they spot, neutered or not. To openly practice TNR in such communities, these kinds of stringently hostile laws and policies must be addressed.

Effective advocacy of TNR on this level requires a certain amount of expertise. If you are just starting out and are relatively new to TNR, consult with more experienced activists before meeting with the town council or the head of animal control. See if there is a feral cat organization or program locally or nearby with the knowledge of how best to present TNR in this context. Or for advice, contact Neighborhood Cats ([headcat@neighborhoodcats.org](mailto:headcat@neighborhoodcats.org)) or Alley Cat Allies ([www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)).

### • Poisoning threats

Occasionally when a feral cat colony is unmanaged and in crisis, a threat to poison is made. In many jurisdictions, poisoning is animal cruelty and a crime, even a felony with a possible prison sentence. Check your state’s laws by calling your local SPCA or animal control agency. Find out if poisoning is an offense and what the penalties are.

People who threaten or actually attempt to poison are usually ignorant of the fact that this conduct is a serious offense. One way to deter them is to let them know. Make up a “Poison” poster similar to the one on [page 102](#). Print out copies on bright neon pink paper and post them around the neighborhood in question, leaving a few extra copies in front of the suspect’s residence or place of work.

It’s extremely unlikely anyone will ever be arrested, let alone convicted, as a result of information gained from the flyer. So you can rest easy about having to pay the reward. But the flyer nonetheless has two important effects – it alerts the would-be poisoner that he would be committing a crime and it also lets him know others are watching. Not many of this type of person will care enough about getting rid of the cats to risk going to jail.

The Poison Poster should only be used if there is a *reasonable* suspicion of possible poisoning. It should not be used simply because you’re afraid someone is so angry, he might try it. Something concrete like an articulated threat or the mysterious death of a cat should be the threshold. Otherwise, you could be needlessly planting the idea.

### • Fleas

One reason someone may give for wanting to rid an area of feral cats is fleas. The problem can become severe, especially if the cats’ shelter is in an area favorable to the insects, such as the crawl space beneath buildings. At a workplace, employees may complain of flea bites and repeated attempts to fumigate may fail. The theory then goes –

get rid of the cats and we'll get rid of the fleas. This is much easier said than done and there is a better way.

Every animal has parasites in their system. When the parasites, such as fleas, are so plentiful that the condition reaches the level of an infestation of the animal, this is a sign that something is wrong with the creature's health. Healthy cats have strong immune systems and do not become flea infested. They may carry a few, more or less depending on the time of year, but not to the point where it would become a serious problem to others sharing the same environment. Situations where feral cats are causing flea infestations are almost always unmanaged ones with unneutered, poorly fed felines.

Neutering the cats and providing them with regular food and adequate shelter boosts their immune systems and usually eliminates the problem. While the cats are in surgery, the areas infested can be fumigated and the cats given flea medication so everyone can start off clean. In addition, by managing the colony and deciding where the cats will eat and sleep, they can be drawn out of locations which fleas favor and away from the immediate areas where people live and work.

## • Keeping cats out of gardens & yards

A common complaint about feral cats comes from people who don't want them in their yards or gardens or on other parts of their property. Trying to work with property-owners to alleviate this problem is a better way to protect the cats than arguing the felines have a right to go wherever they want. Listed below are several products and methods for attempting to control the cats' movement. In our experience, the motion-activated sprinkler is very effective when the area in question is well-defined, such as a garden or a backyard, and not too large. The other methods have worked for some and may work for you, too.

### ***Motion-activated sprinklers***

Motion activated sprinklers work by emitting an infrared field that you set the boundaries on. "The Scarecrow," listed below, has a range of 45 feet. When a cat enters the infrared field, the sprinkler shoots out a burst of water for a few seconds in the general direction of the animal. This rarely gets the cats wet, but does frighten them. Before long, the cats learn not to enter the field and the sprinkler is rarely triggered. At that point, the sprinkler may become unnecessary. The device won't work in winter conditions because the water will freeze, but if you start using it in warmer weather, by wintertime the cats will be trained. Two on the market include:

- The Scarecrow, by Contech (\$79.00)  
1-800-767-8658; [www.scatmat.com/Products/Scarecrow/](http://www.scatmat.com/Products/Scarecrow/)
- Spray Away, by Havahart (\$89.99)  
[www.havahart.com/nuisance/cats/cat\\_repellents.htm](http://www.havahart.com/nuisance/cats/cat_repellents.htm)

### ***Scent repellents***

We recommend using only naturally based scent repellents unless the product is used in a container and not loose. Chemically based repellents often contain the active ingredient methylnonylketone. Manufacturers claim this ingredient is safe, but also warn the chemical is poisonous and should not be applied to food crops. Naturally based choices include:

- The border plant Coleus-Canina, from Gardener's Supply (\$29.95)  
1-888-833-1412; [www.gardeners.com](http://www.gardeners.com)
- Repellent Evaporators, by Gardener's Supply (\$19.95)  
This product is an apparatus containing puffed rice treated with oils. It keeps a constant odor emanating around the garden for three to four weeks, then can be refilled.  
1-888-833-1412; [www.gardeners.com](http://www.gardeners.com)
- Cat Repellent Model 5400/5401, by Havahart (\$12.99 for 32 oz.)  
This product uses capsaicin pepper and oil of mustard as its active ingredients. It repels by both taste and odor, yet has a lemon scent not offensive to humans, lasts 7-10 days and needs to be reapplied after rain or new growth. Like any spray repellent, it should be sprayed around the edges of the yard, the top of fences and on any favorite digging areas or plants.  
[www.havahart.com/nuisance/cats/cat\\_repellents.htm](http://www.havahart.com/nuisance/cats/cat_repellents.htm)
- For protecting gardens or flower beds, you can plant the herb rue or sprinkle it in its dry form. Other items to be sprinkled or dripped include orange and lemon peels (cats dislike citrus smells), coffee grounds, pipe tobacco, lavender oil, lemon grass oil, peppermint oil, eucalyptus oil, and mustard oil.

### ***Ultrasonic devices***

Ultrasonic devices emit a high frequency sound annoying to cats and not perceptible by people. The key to their effectiveness is matching the capacity of the device to the size of the area to be covered. A device not powerful enough for the size of the territory in question won't work. These devices can be found at large outdoor/garden stores or mail order garden supply companies. Check that the frequency is designed for larger animals like cats and make sure it's strong enough for your purposes.

Here's one, which is activated when the cat enters an infrared field, as opposed to most ultrasonic devices which simply emit a constant sound:

- Yard Control Dog and Cat Repeller, Model P7810 (\$69.95)  
By using an infrared field (with a 30 foot range), this product saves battery life over devices which are always on. It's designed to attach to a wall, fence, stake in the ground, etc.  
[www.crappychemicals.bigstep.com/](http://www.crappychemicals.bigstep.com/)

### ***Barriers to digging***

Gardens and flower beds can be protected from digging by building or implanting obstacles such as the following:

- Cat Scat from Gardener's Supply (\$14.95 for a set of five; \$13.00 each for two or more)

This item consists of plastic mats with flexible spikes. The mats are pressed into the soil and the spikes are harmless to cats and other animals, but discourage excavation.

1-888-833-1412; [www.gardeners.com](http://www.gardeners.com)

- Cover exposed ground with rough surfaced rocks.

- Take branches from a thorny plant, like a Rose of Sharon tree, and lay them on the ground in a lattice-type pattern, then plant flowers and seeds in the openings. Regular lattice type fencing used in this way will also discourage digging.

### ***Make an Outdoor Litterbox***

One way to keep the cats from using the garden or the lawn to do their business is by giving them somewhere more attractive to go. A child's sandbox, strategically situated in a far corner of the yard, will do the trick and should be scooped out occasionally.

If you want the outdoor litterbox to be contained, make one out of a large Rubbermaid storage bin (also called a storage "tote.") Using a box-cutter, open a doorway in one side of the bin several inches above the ground. An 8" x 8" opening will work. Then fill the bin up to the bottom of the doorway with regular sandbox sand. Cover the bin with its lid.

If you can, put a couple of pieces of the cats' poop in the sand to help draw them over. Scoop occasionally and once a month or so, dump and replace the sand, which is relatively inexpensive.

Instead of filling the Rubbermaid storage bin with sand, you can place a normal cat litter box inside instead, if you're willing to clean it frequently. Cut a doorway in the Rubbermaid bin a several inches off the ground. Then place a normal litterbox with regular litter inside. Cover the bin with its lid.

# 5. Food & Water

Food forms the basic connection between humans and feral cats. They reside at a location because there's a food source, usually supplied by us in one form or another. What kind of food is provided and how it's set out can go a long way towards improving the health of the colony and keeping good relations with neighbors. That said, every colony is different and caretakers must adapt to the conditions at the site and take their own time and budgetary constraints into account. As is so often the case with feral cats, you do the best you can.



- **Feeding stations**

### ***Location***

Location is the first factor to be considered when setting up a feeding station. Ideally, the spot will be easily accessible to the caretaker, but out of sight and not accessible to the public. This protects the cats best and allows them to feel secure about coming and going from meals. For example, if you live in a house and the colony is on your property, it would be much better to feed them in the backyard where nobody would see them than in the front driveway.

This type of setup is not always possible, but aim for getting as close as you can. If your colony is in a lot that people walk by, feed as far away from the sidewalk as possible and hide the food and water behind rocks or debris. If the territory is behind a factory, pick a spot that's little traveled and shield it from view behind some old boards.

The visibility of a feeding station can be related to how often cats are abandoned at a site. The more people see that cats are being cared for at a certain location, the more likely someone will choose to abandon an animal there. It's another reason for being discrete.

### ***Type of feeding station***

The type of station you set up will depend on where it's located and what the property owner will permit. If you feed in a spot easily accessible and visible to the public or if the landowner won't allow you to put out any kind of structure, then you're limited in what you can provide. On the other hand, if you have complete say over what goes where, then you can be as elaborate as you'd like.

The perfect feeding station shields the food and water from the elements and allows a cat or two to be inside while eating. You can turn a Rubbermaid storage bin into a

station. Cut out one of the long sides of the bin with a box cutter, leaving a lip at the bottom of about three inches off the ground. A large opening like this is needed to prevent a dominant cat from going in and keeping everyone else out. If more suitable to the location, a smaller bin can be used that is large enough to contain the food and water, but not big enough to fully accommodate any cats in the interior space. Feeding stations made from storage bins are easy to clean because of the removable top and quick to put together. The Rubbermaid brand is recommended because of its durability in freezing temperatures.

A feeding station could also be made from a wooden box, leaving one vertical side completely open to serve as the entrance. It should be kept slightly raised off the ground to keep out rain, water and snow, perhaps by resting it on bricks or two by four planks. If someone you know is handy, build the wooden station with a roof pitched to allow rain to run off towards the back and not towards the front entrance. To prevent rot, a wooden station should be coated with latex deck paint and the seams sealed with silicone glue.



### ***Automatic feeders and waterers***

If feeding the cats regularly is a problem, an automatic dry food dispenser and an automatic waterer can be put inside the station or left in a spot protected from the elements. These gravity-driven devices are excellent when everyday access is not possible, for example when the caretaker can't be there on weekends or the fenced gate to the lot is locked on certain days. If you put these items inside a sheltered feeding station, make sure the station is large enough to accommodate them.

The Le Bistro brand of automatic feeders and waterers is a popular one and can be found in a range of sizes in many stores and catalogues. The best prices we've found are offered via mail order by KV Vet Supply (prices listed do not include shipping):

- Le Bistro Feeder, from KV Vet Supply
  - XS – 2 lbs. (item #83829; \$7.59)
  - S – 5 lbs. (item #83827; \$10.99)
  - M – 10 lbs. (item # 80128; \$14.95)
  - L – 20 lbs. (item #80129; \$17.95)
  
- Le Bistro Waterer, from KV Vet Supply
  - XS – 2 qts. (item #83831; \$7.59)
  - S – 1 gal. (item #83828; \$10.99)
  - M – 2.75 gals. (item #80192; \$14.95)
  - L – 5 gals. (item # 80193; \$17.95)

Call 1-800-423-8211 or order online at: [www.kvvetsupply.com](http://www.kvvetsupply.com).

### ***Amount of food and attracting new cats***

One of the advantages often claimed for TNR is that a neutered colony of cats will defend their territory against intrusions by new, unneutered cats and thereby prevent the reproductive cycle from starting up again at that location. The truth is a bit more complicated. One key factor in determining how well a colony defends against newcomers is the size of the food source. If there is always more food available than the colony cats need, then they have little motivation to exclude strangers. On the other hand, if food is in short supply, the cats have powerful reasons for defending their territory. The key is to find the right balance and feed your cats what they need, but without being excessive and attracting the rest of the ferals in the neighborhood.

### ***Clean up!***

One easy way to avoid friction with neighbors is to keep the area where you feed clean. Pick up and remove empty cans, plates, plastic spoons, etc., even if someone else left the debris there. Not only is a mess unsightly for residents, it could result in a health code violation for the property owner for creating an unsanitary condition. If you can, help keep the general area clean and not only the feeding area. This will reinforce the impression that your presence at the site is a benefit to the community.

## **• Feeding tricks**

### ***Ants***

Ants can be kept out of food by building a small moat. Take a pan, tray or Tupperware container – anything flat, wide and with raised edges – and fill it with a quarter inch or so of water. Then place the food in a bowl and place the bowl in the middle of the pan. The water will keep ants from reaching the food while the cats can easily lean over and eat.

### ***Slugs***

The best way to keep slugs out of the food is to feed them separately. Sprinkle bits of dry food on the ground several inches away from the cats' bowls and dishes. The slugs will eat this more easily reached dinner before they'll go through the trouble of climbing up into the bowls.

### ***Flies***

Flies are mostly a problem when wet food is left out in hot weather. They'll land on dry food, too, but not nearly as much. During the hot season, leave out wet food only at night to avoid them.

### ***Rain***

If you can't place a covered feeding station on your site, you can still put food out and protect it from the rain. Take a round Tupperware container a few inches in height and with a diameter of approximately nine to twelve inches and fill it with dry food. Then take the lid, turn it upside down and use it to cover the container and food. Put a few

pieces of dry food on top of the turned-over lid. The lid, even upside down, will keep the rain out of the food. When the cats come by after the rain stops, they'll smell the food in the container and push the lid off to get at it.

### **Fences**

If you feed through a fence, keep the food and water out of arm's reach of anyone walking by. To do this, fill the food and water containers and place them by hand on the other side of the fence. Then use an "arm extender" to push the food and water as far back as possible. It's even better if you can push the dishes behind a bush or pile of rocks and hide them at least partially from view. Arm extenders are what stores use to reach items on high shelves, are inexpensive (approximately \$8) and can be found at most hardware stores.

### **Pigeons**

Pigeons nest and sleep after the sun goes down. Avoid having them eat the cats' food by feeding after dark.

### **Raccoons**

Raccoons sleep during the day and are primarily nocturnal creatures. To avoid attracting them, cat food should be placed out during daylight and removed by dark.

## **• Preventing water from freezing**

A common problem during the winter in cold weather climates is how to prevent the cats' water from freezing. While cats usually drink very little water, they do need some. This is especially true when they're being fed mostly dry food, as is often the case in wintertime when wet food freezing is also a problem. There are a number of ways to either keep the water unfrozen or at least slow down the freezing process. Which method you choose will greatly depend on your colony's circumstances. If you're feeding them in your own backyard, then an electrically heated water bowl is an option. But if you travel to a vacant lot and feed behind a pile of old tires, a small Styrofoam box or just a deep, wide dish may be your best choice.

One common myth is that it's better to put out hot water than cold because the hot water supposedly will take longer to freeze. The reverse is true. Warm water evaporates quickly in cold temperatures, leaving less water in the bowl. This lesser quantity will freeze faster than if colder water had initially been used. In other words, don't heat up the water.

Here are some ideas to keep the tap flowing:

### **1. Electrically heated water bowl**

This is the ideal solution when circumstances allow. A cord supplies electricity to the bowl, which remains heated at all times. The water will evaporate relatively quickly, so the bowl needs to be large and re-filled everyday with a gallon of water. Wet food can be placed in one of these bowls as well, but will quickly dry up. One product you can try:

- **Plaza Heated Bowl** (item #86041), from KV Vet Supply (\$23.95)

This 5 quart dish is made of high density polyolefin with a six foot metal shielded electric lead with ground. It has a wide base, making it difficult to spill and is waterproof.

1-800-423-8211; [www.kvvet.com](http://www.kvvet.com)

## 2. Solar heated water bowl

- **The Solar Sipper** (model no. 10011), from Happy Bird Corporation (\$22.95)  
This dish uses solar energy to keep the water warm, and works at 18 degrees Fahrenheit and above.  
1-781-235-0531; email: [solarsipper@cs.com](mailto:solarsipper@cs.com);  
[www.world.std.com/~sippers/animalsipper\\_dlx.html](http://www.world.std.com/~sippers/animalsipper_dlx.html)

## 3. Microdiscs

- Snuggle Safe (item #9B-9599), from Foster & Smith (\$19.99)  
The disc is 9 inches in diameter and was designed for keeping pets' bedding warm during chilly nights. It can also be taken outdoors after being heated up and placed under a water bowl, preventing freezing for up to two to three hours in frigid conditions. It has been reported to us that the discs can be safely heated for up to 8 minutes in a 1000 watt microwave. Beyond that, you risk having it melt. Having two disks is convenient. That way you can leave a fresh warm one on site while you take the used one home to be reheated.

The product can also be used to provide warmth inside the cats' shelters. Wrap it in cloth in a way that the cats can't open.

1-800-826-7206; [www.drsfostersmith.com](http://www.drsfostersmith.com) (Note: do a search for "Snuggle Safe" if a search for the item number doesn't turn up the product)

## 4. Styrofoam cooler

Buy a medium sized Styrofoam cooler – one of the white ones normally used for soda or picnic lunches. They cost a few dollars and measure approximately two feet long by one foot wide. Using a box cutter, cut out a doorway 6" x 6" at one of the narrower ends. Place the water bowl inside and cover with the cooler's top. The Styrofoam's insulating quality will slow down the freezing process. Don't use too large of a cooler or the cats might use it as a shelter. Winter shelters for ferals need to be dry at all times for health reasons, so you don't want them to sleep in the cooler and get wet.

## 5. Styrofoam vaccine shipping container

Vaccines are typically shipped to veterinarians (and others) in small Styrofoam boxes measuring about 8 inches long by 4 inches wide. Cut a hole in the top of the box large enough for a cat to drink from. Then line the inside of the box with a plastic bag and fill the container with water. Again, the Styrofoam will slow down the freezing.

## **6. An old tire and rocks**

Find an old car tire that's been removed from its rim and stuff it full of rocks. In the center hole of the tire, wedge a container like a bucket and fill it with water. Use more than one tire if necessary to completely surround the container. The tire absorbs sunlight and warms the rocks, which then radiate heat, slowing down the freezing process. This method is used to provide water to horses in pastures.

## **7. The drain from an indoor heating system**

Place a large, deep water dish filled with small rocks beneath the drain from an indoor heating system. The water coming out of the pipe will be warm plus the rocks will absorb and radiate heat from the sun.

## **8. Thick plastic containers that are deep and wide**

Freezing is slowed if the water bowl used is made of thick plastic. Likewise, a dish that is deep and wide is better than one that is shallow or narrow.

## **9. Add water to the wet food**

If the cats come when you're there and will eat right away, add a little extra water to their wet food to help them get the moisture they need.

## **• Preventing food from freezing**

Because of its high moisture content, wet food left sitting out in cold weather will freeze and become impossible for the cats to eat. Freezing can be avoided if the cats have insulated winter shelter as described in Chapter 6. Insulated shelters trap body heat and keep the interior warm enough to prevent or reverse freezing of food while the cats are in them.

First make sure there are no cats inside, then place a bowl of wet food in a corner of the shelter away from the door. Often you'll later find the food eaten. But only place food in the shelters, NEVER put water inside them. For the cats to stay healthy over the winter, their shelter must be both warm and dry. Water could easily spill, dampening the interior and getting the cats wet.

Some of the products for preventing water from freezing may also assist with stopping wet food from becoming frozen, though not as well. The problem is that as the wet food is warmed by a microdisc underneath the food bowl or an electrically heated dish, the moisture in the food evaporates and the food dries out.

If you're unable to place food in the shelters or otherwise keep wet food from freezing, then rely on dry food as the staple during cold weather. It may be a good idea to make dry food available anyway as a backup in frigid temperatures.

## • Nutrition

Feral cats should be fed the highest quality food that you can comfortably afford. This principle takes two important considerations into account. First, nutrition is important for ferals who often endure a physically demanding and stressful outdoor existence. There is no better way to help boost their overall health than to feed them well. Second, equally important are your own financial circumstances. There's no glory in feeding the cats premium brand food if this means you can't pay your rent. You count too, and must be comfortable with what you're spending on the cats. If you're managing a five cat colony and the extra money it costs to buy high quality food won't make much of a dent in your budget, then that's a good choice to make. On the other hand, if you're feeding 30 cats in multiple locations and it's hard enough already to afford the bargain brand bags of dry food, then that's what's best and shows no less sacrifice.

In order to know which food is the best within your budget, you need to know a bit about cat nutrition. Here are some of the basics:

### ***Interpreting the ingredients label***

One quick way to evaluate the quality of cat food is to read the ingredients label. This won't tell you everything you need to know, but it's a good start. The ingredients are listed in the order of greatest quantity. If the first ingredient listed is "turkey," then turkey is the largest ingredient. If the first ingredient is "corn meal" followed by "turkey," then the food contains more corn meal than turkey.

It may not be readily apparent what some of the ingredients listed actually are. Most people, when they read a cat food has poultry, beef, meat or fish "by-products," assume this is some part of the animal normally consumed by people, too. In fact, by-products are the waste parts of the slaughtered animal. They may include feathers, hair, hooves, eyeballs, moldy, diseased or rancid meat rejected for human consumption, fecal waste, or any other part of the animal you would normally assume would have been tossed out.

If a food lists by-products on the label, don't be fooled by the tasty-looking sauces, neatly cut slices or artificial coloring. By-products are almost always poor nutrition no matter how nicely they're dressed up. Don't assume either that a food full of by-products must be healthy because your cats love to eat it. Poorer quality foods often have added sugars and fish flavoring to hook your felines.

Pet food manufacturers use by-products because they're cheap. This is why, with pet food, you usually get what you pay for. Many brands of food available in high-volume stores like supermarkets or large discount stores are cheap, but usually contain by-products as one of the first ingredients listed on their labels. But beware, there are some brands which trick people into believing they're of high quality simply because they cost more, but they too consist largely of by-products or other inferior ingredients. Always read the label and don't go by price alone.

Another ingredient to watch out for is any kind of meat "meal," such as chicken, fish or turkey meal. In the cheaper brands of food, meal is often the same waste parts of the carcass as by-products, just ground into an unrecognizable form. "Animal digest" is another ingredient of questionable nutritional value.

What you want to see on the ingredients label are whole meats listed as the largest ingredients, such as “chicken,” “beef,” or “turkey.” With few exceptions, the better brands will not contain any form of by-products or meat meal.

Another common large ingredient in low quality foods, especially dry food, is some form of corn. The label might read “corn meal,” “ground yellow corn” or something similar. In recent years, experts in cat nutrition have found that felines do not digest grains well, especially when fed to them at the same time as meats. If corn is the first ingredient on the label, then the largest part of the food consists of something that has little nutritional value for the cat and is basically only filler. It would be like having a meal yourself with the largest portion being potato chips. You’ll get full, but it’s hardly a healthy diet.

Also check the ingredients for unnecessary sweeteners like corn syrup, blueberries, brown rice syrup or beets. These all contain sugars meant to improve the taste. Any kind of chemical, such as artificial coloring, artificial flavors, scents and artificial preservatives, should be avoided. Artificial preservatives include BHA, BHT, propyl gallate, nitrates and benzoate of soda.

Knowing the real makeup of cat food empowers you as a caretaker to make educated choices. It doesn’t mean you’re doing something wrong if you need to purchase foods which contain by-products or lots of corn meal. Unfortunately, the higher quality brands are usually much more expensive and not everyone can afford them. The bottom line is the cats are better off being fed by what you can afford to provide for them than not.

### ***Wet vs. dry food***

Generally speaking, a wet food of a particular brand will have more nutritional value than a dry food of the same brand. This is because the dry food goes through a baking process which dries out the meats and takes away nutritional content. In the cheaper brands, vitamins and minerals are added *before* the baking process, with the result they are often destroyed in the oven. The better quality brands add the supplements after the baking, which is another reason why they cost more.

There are some common misconceptions in wide circulation regarding dry food. One is that it should be left out all day so the cat can eat whenever he wants. Little else could be more potentially damaging to a feline’s health. Cats in the wild are “feast and famine” animals. They kill their prey, gorge upon it, then might not eat again for several days. Cats are not “grazers” like cows, who are constantly eating. The digestive systems of the two types of animals are not the same. Feast and famine animals need time away from food for their systems to clean themselves out. If they are constantly eating or even constantly smelling food, their digestive systems never stop working. As the cat ages, this can eventually result in kidney and liver disease.

With indoor cats, the optimal way to feed is to leave food out twice a day for 20 to 30 minutes, then take what’s left over away and don’t put out more food until the next meal. With feral cats, that kind of routine is often not possible and a steady supply of dry food must be left out to ensure all the cats in the colony get fed. It’s not as much of a problem though because outdoor cats tend to not be as obsessed with eating as their indoor counterparts and are less likely to hang out at the food bowl all day.

Another myth is that dry food is good for cleaning a cat’s teeth. Possibly dry food provides some minimal exercise for the jaw, but that’s about it. Prolonged chewing and

gnawing at something hard is required for a cat's teeth to be scraped clean. Raw bones, especially raw chicken necks, will achieve this. Cats can digest raw bones and in the wild they derive their calcium from them. The bones and necks must be raw because cooked bones can splinter and can cause injury. As with any raw meat, it's important the bones or necks be very fresh to avoid bacterial buildup and illness.

### ***Using ground beef to cheaply improve nutritional content***

One way to dramatically and inexpensively improve the nutritional content of low quality cat food is to supplement it with ground beef, preferably ground chuck because of its high fat content (which is good for cats). When feeding ground beef, it's imperative to add calcium in order to balance the phosphate content of the meat. Otherwise, you could cause long-term health problems. Mix in one teaspoon of either calcium lactate or bonemeal to each one pound of ground beef. The beef mixture can be added to wet food or fed separately. Mixing it with dry food creates a real mess. If you want to go the extra yard, add chopped-up and steamed vegetables to the beef/calcium recipe, such as broccoli, zucchini or carrots. Dried barley is also nutritious. Never add onions – they're potentially toxic for cats even in a small amount (like chocolate).

Fresh ground beef can be fed to the cats raw and uncooked. Raw meat is the most natural diet of all for cats who after all, when they catch a mouse, don't cook it first before dining. But raw meat must be fresh, meaning it was put out that day at a reliable store and shows no outward signs of browning. If it concerns you to feed the meat raw, then lightly cook it. It will still greatly increase the quality of the cats' diet. Chicken and turkey can also be used in place of the ground beef (again adding calcium in the same proportions). However, because of its greater susceptibility to bacterial buildup, we recommend you do cook the poultry unless it's very fresh and organic.

Don't feed the cats only the meat mixture described here, but use it as a supplement. If you want to feed only a self-prepared raw or cooked meat diet, you need to learn more about cat nutrition, including what vitamins and minerals to add. These books are excellent resources for learning more:

- ◆ “The New Natural Cat,” by Anitra Frazier (Penguin Books, 1990)
- ◆ “Dr. Pitcairn’s Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs & Cats,” by Dr. Richard Pitcairn, DVM (Rodale Press, 1995)
- ◆ “Food Pets Die For (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.),” by Ann N. Martin (NewSage Press, 2002)
- ◆ “Protect Your Pet: More Shocking Facts to Consider,” by Ann N. Martin (NewSage Press, 2001)

### **• Vitamin C to the Rescue *by Anitra Frazier***

It is certainly easier, cheaper and a lot more pleasant to prevent illness than it is to trap a sick cat, transport him to a vet and then try to diagnose and treat the frightened animal.

Vitamin C, the first vitamin discovered by humankind, is truly a friend indeed to the caregiver of a feral colony. An efficient healer and powerful protector, it works like a

nutritional knight in shining armor fighting against invasions and battling stress of all kinds. Germs, viruses, dirt, x-rays and chemicals such as antibiotics, steroids, tranquilizers, anesthetics, pesticides and the preservatives in commercial pet foods have all been shown to use up large quantities of Vitamin C.

Healthy cats can make some Vitamin C in their intestine. The operative words here are "healthy" and "some." Cats can manufacture enough C only if the diet is rich in all the other nutrients they need and only if daily stresses do not become too numerous, too extreme or too prolonged. Stresses such as extreme heat or cold, fighting, being wounded or hurt, being trapped or caged, loud noises, strong, unpleasant smells or forced change of territory use up Vitamin C at an alarming rate. Even a healthy, well-nourished cat couldn't produce enough to cover the kinds and amounts of stress faced by the feral on a daily basis. Depletion of Vitamin C leaves a cat easy prey to every germ or virus that happens along.

The life of a feral cat, especially a city feral, is full of stress every day. Any trap-neuter-return program is bound to include being trapped, caged, cut and having a shocking number of chemicals used on the body. The smell of the cage cleaner alone is enough to reduce a cat's Vitamin C to the danger level. The rest of the veterinary procedures raise the stress level to astronomical proportions. Is it any wonder that many succumb to upper respiratory and other diseases shortly after their neutering experience? What we need here is a knight in shining armor to bring the cats safely through all this stress. Enter Vitamin C. Just as Rescue Remedy works on the emotional plane, Vitamin C works on the physical body. This inexpensive and easily obtainable supplement will greatly enhance any cat's chance for survival.

The most common forms of Vitamin C are calcium ascorbate (which used in the buffered variety tastes nasty), ascorbic acid and sodium ascorbate. Ascorbic acid is usually the cheapest and has the happy side effect of acidifying the urine. An acid urine prevents the growth of germs and the formation of crystals in the bladder. When found in its natural state in foods, Vitamin C is accompanied by bioflavonoids, rutin and hesperadin. Science has found that these nutritional sidekicks are provided by nature to help the body absorb the C and put it to work more efficiently. A cheap jar of ascorbic acid powder will certainly give a lot of support and protection and it will help acidify the urine. A C complex powder of ascorbic acid with bioflavonoids, rutin and hesperadin will do a lot more for only a little more money. Health food stores will have several choices available. I use Twin Lab Super C, yellow label.

Vitamin C does not need refrigeration but you must keep the contents of the bottle dry. Use a clean, dry measuring spoon. C cannot be stored by the body so it must be given every meal. A cat can absorb no more than 250 milligrams at a time; in most brands that's 1/8th tsp. of powder.

If everything is going well for a colony, I give only 125 milligrams or 250 for each two cats. If the weather turns harsh or some other stress presents itself, increase the dose to 250 milligrams per cat. During trap-neuter-return projects when stress will skyrocket, I give the full dose for two days before trapping. During confinement and treatment, I feed three or four small meals a day in order to get the C into them more frequently. If a cat objects to the sour flavor, as happens occasionally, cut the dose down by half or use just a few grains. Any amount is better than zero. I find I can get away with more if I

add a "bribe food," something they love that has a strong flavor. PetGuard Savory Seafood works very well. You can also sprinkle brewer's yeast on top.

Because we are practicing prevention, caregivers may find it difficult at first to pinpoint a clear demonstration of results. The benefits are mostly about what does not happen. Cats do not die under anesthesia; wounds do not become infected; there is no outbreak of respiratory infections shortly after a new cat arrives in the colony. Resistance is high; the cats are more resilient.

I would not feel even half as secure about managing a feral colony if I didn't have the help of Vitamin C, my trusty knight in shining armor, to back me up

## 6. Winter Shelter

Feral cats are adept at finding shelter and a place to sleep out of the rain and out of sight. In warm weather, shelter is usually not a problem for them although you still might provide them with a cozy place just to make sure. When the temperature drops and winter sets in, that's when they most need your help. Without a warm, dry place to bed down, the cats can fall seriously ill. In severe climates, cats can get frostbite on their ears, nose and paws. Clearly, providing adequate winter shelter is one of a caretaker's primary tasks.

There are probably as many ways to build adequate shelter as there are creative caretakers. All good designs share two qualities: strong insulation and minimal air space. The insulation is needed to trap the cats' body heat, effectively turning the cats into little radiators. Empty air space needs to be eliminated in order to keep the amount of space that needs to be heated to a minimum. Both good insulation and minimal air space must be present. A well insulated large dog house won't work because there will be too much air space for the cats to warm. Likewise, a tight-fitting space with thin plastic walls won't do the trick either because the cats' body heat will pass right through.

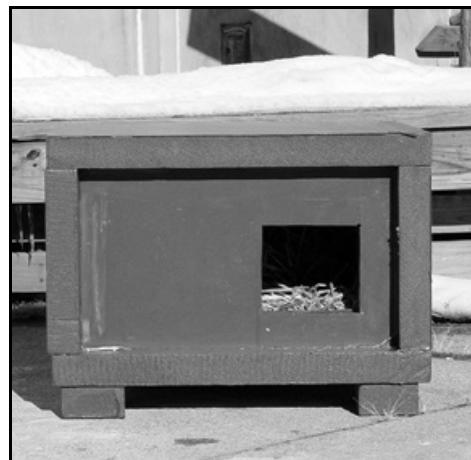
With these design factors in mind, it's better to build two smaller shelters which will hold three or four cats each, then one large shelter to house six to eight felines. With the smaller shelters, even if only one or two cats go in, enough heat should be generated. But with the larger shelter, if only a small number of the cats use it at the same time, there will be too much empty air space.

The shelter designs described below are inexpensive and fairly easy to assemble.

- **Neighborhood Cats Feral Cat Winter Shelter**

Our favorite shelter was invented by Karen Hancock of Port Washington, NY. It's made from a single 8 foot x 2 foot sheet of two-inch thick hard Styrofoam, which is usually pink in color and available at most lumberyards and large home supplies stores like Home Depot or Lowe's (but call first!) The sheet of Styrofoam costs approximately \$10 and the rest of the supplies will add up to around an additional \$10 to \$15.

The exact, step-by-step instructions on how to build it are detailed on **pages 103-107**. The first step of cutting the 8 foot sheet into the smaller pieces needed is the only one where you might need some help. In order to keep the edges straight so the pieces will fit together properly, a table saw should be used. Once the pieces are cut, all that's needed is to cut out a doorway, glue the pieces together, cut some linoleum tile with a scissors and apply it to the floor and put on a couple of coats of paint.



When completed, the interior space of the shelter measures 18" W x 20" L x 12" H. Three or four cats can fit comfortably inside, but even with only two cats, there is relatively little air space and the two-inch Styrofoam is excellent insulation. In an experiment one cold winter night, a volunteer taped a thermometer to the interior roof of one of these shelters. The outdoor temperature was 11 degrees Fahrenheit. After two cats had been inside for an hour, the thermometer inside the shelter read 56 degrees Fahrenheit.

The shelter in the experiment had a plastic flap over the door. Flaps help keep cold air out and warm air in. Flaps should not be added, however, until after the cats are used to going in and out. They can be attached with duct tape above the doorway or, more permanently, with the plastic nuts and bolts used to attach toilet seats. To use the bolts, cut holes in the flap and drill holes in the Styrofoam above the doorway. If you don't add flaps for any reason, the shelter will still be very effective.

Once out on the site, the shelters should be weighed down – they are strong but light. A large rock or heavy board can be placed on top. If a pair of shelters is being used, place them about a foot or two apart with the front doors facing each other. Bridge the gap between them by resting a board two feet wide and at least a few feet long on the roofs of the two shelters. Then weigh down the board. This arrangement cuts down on wind getting inside the shelters and offers more protection from rain. The covered area between the shelters can be a good place to put food or water.

The shelters should be painted to match their surroundings, using grey, green or Indian red latex deck paint. Draw the cats inside the shelters by placing catnip or tasty treats inside. Bowls of food can be placed in the interiors, but never water.

## • **The Rubbermaid Storage Bin with Styrofoam**

This shelter was designed by CSM Stray Foundation of Kew Gardens, Queens and costs about the same as the Neighborhood Cats feral cat winter shelter. Purchase a large Rubbermaid storage bin (a.k.a. storage tote) with a removable lid. It's important the brand is Rubbermaid or otherwise the plastic walls may crack in frigid temperatures. You'll also need an eight foot by two foot sheet of one-inch thick hard Styrofoam, a yardstick, a boxcutter and straw, shredded newspaper or other insulating material. Then assemble as follows:

1. Cut a doorway six inches by six inches in one of the long sides of the bin towards the corner. To prevent flooding, cut the opening so that the bottom of the doorway is several inches above the ground.
2. Line the floor of the bin with a piece of Styrofoam, using the yardstick and box cutter to cut out the piece. You don't need an exact fit, but as close as you can.
3. In similar fashion, line each of the four interior walls of the bin with a piece of the Styrofoam. Again, perfect cuts are not necessary. Leave a gap of three inches between the top of these Styrofoam "wall pieces" and the upper lip of the bin.
4. Cut out a doorway in the Styrofoam interior wall in line with where the doorway has been cut out already in the storage bin.

5. Stuff the bottom of the bin with straw or other insulating material to hold the Styrofoam wall pieces in place.
6. Cut out a Styrofoam “roof” to rest on top of the Styrofoam wall pieces.
7. Cover the bin with its lid.

This shelter is easy to clean by taking off the lid and the Styrofoam roof. It's also lightweight and may need to be weighed down. A flap over the doorway is optional.

### • **Meat packing Styrofoam crates**

The basic material is a Styrofoam packing crate or box, the kind which restaurants and grocery stores often receive their fish and meat in (the Styrofoam keeps the product cold or frozen). If you ask around, you'll likely find a place that will donate them to you. They come in all sizes, from only enough space for one cat to enough room for three or four. To turn them into winter shelters:

1. Using silicone glue, glue the lid onto the top of the crate.
2. Turn the crate upside down so that what was the roof now becomes the floor.
3. If the crate is large enough to hold a few cats, cut a 6" x 6" doorway in one of the long sides towards the corner. If the crate is small and will only hold one cat, then cut the doorway out from one of the short sides. In either case, cut open the doorway several inches above the ground to prevent flooding.
4. Paint the exterior to match surroundings with latex deck paint.
5. Stuff the interior with insulating material.

For photos and more ideas for winterizing a Styrofoam packing crate, go to the feral cat winter shelter page of Animalkind, an organization based in Hudson, NY:

[www.all-creatures.org/ak/feral-shelter.html](http://www.all-creatures.org/ak/feral-shelter.html)

### • **Igloo coolers**

We haven't tried this one out yet because Igloo coolers can be costly, but it sounds like it would work as long as the plastic doesn't crack while cutting open a doorway.

Buy a large Igloo cooler, making sure it's big enough inside for at least a cat or two. Then use a jig saw to cut out a 6" x 6" doorway in one of the long sides towards the corner, using a drill to make a starting hole. (Make the doorway in one of the short sides if the cooler is only large enough to hold one cat.) Cut the doorway so the bottom is several inches off the ground to prevent flooding. Then that's it! The cooler is already well insulated and has minimal air space, plus the lid makes for easy cleaning. (If you try this, drop us a note and let us know how it went).

- **Cardboard boxes**

A simple cardboard box will do temporarily in a pinch as cardboard does provide some insulation. Tape the top and bottom of the box closed and seal all seams with duct tape. Then cut a 6" x 6" doorway a few inches off the ground in a long side of the box towards the corner. Wrap a plastic trash bag around the box, generously taping it in place by wrapping duct tape around the bag and box. Cut away the plastic bag around the doorway and tape the loose edges of the bag to the box. If possible, place the box underneath something that will shelter it, such as a tree or wide board.

- **Insulating materials for the interior**

Putting insulating materials inside the shelter will increase comfort and warmth for the cats. But they should only be used if the shelters can be periodically checked to see if the materials have gotten damp or too dirty and need to be replaced. If regular checkups are not possible, leave the interiors bare.

Only insulating materials which the cats can burrow into should be used. Items which the cats will only lie on top of should not be used, like blankets, towels or flat newspaper. These items, when they are underneath the cat, will draw body heat out and actually make the cat colder.

Straw is the best insulating material to use. Straw is better than hay because it can absorb more moisture, is less prone to mold or rot, and does not carry risk of an allergic reaction by the cats. Shredded newspaper will also work. One innovative idea is offered by Ellen Perry Berkeley in her book, "Maverick Cats." Loosely fill a cotton pillowcase with Styrofoam peanuts, the kind used to pack fragile items during shipping. Then put the stuffed pillowcase inside the shelter. The pillowcase will conform to the cat's body and wrap her in the heat-capturing peanuts.

- **Extreme cold**

In environments where the winter is especially harsh, such as Canada or the northern Midwest, extra measures may be needed. One technique is to line the interior walls of the shelter with pieces cut from a Mylar reflective blanket. Mylar creates warmth by reflecting body heat back and is marketed as a thermal safety blanket for people stranded in their cars during winter. It can also be laid down on the floor of a shelter because it reflects heat rather than absorbing it like a normal blanket.

Here's one (untried) source called The Country Store for ordering large Mylar blankets at only \$1.50 to \$1.95 each:

[www.healthyharvest.com/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=690](http://www.healthyharvest.com/product_info.php?products_id=690)

Another product for adding extra warmth is the "Flexi-Mat Mysterious Purr Pad" available from PETCO. The pads are made of polyester fibers and absorb then retain body heat, so they'll also work if placed on the floor of the shelter. You can buy them at

a PETCO store or order online at the PETCO website: [www.petco.com](http://www.petco.com). A set of two pads sells for approximately \$10.

## • **Placement**

Similar to placing feeding stations, the more discrete, the better. You have more choices with winter shelters because you don't need constant access. At the same time, if it can be arranged, it's nice for the cats if the feeding station is near their shelter so they won't have to travel far in bad weather to eat. The main thing though is security and putting the shelters where few if any strangers will have access or even see them. The more secluded their location, the more the cats are apt to use them.

Shelters can be camouflaged not only by painting them to match their surroundings, but also by covering them with boards, branches or other debris. If there's a choice, put them behind something like a pile of bricks or a bush rather than in front. If they can't be hidden from view, place them behind a locked and gated fence or other enclosure closed to the public. If the shelters are in a location where they might get damaged or stolen, don't invest in expensive ones which will be costly to replace.

Note that the location of shelters and feeding stations can have a lot to do with where the cats spend much of their time. Their placement can "herd" the cats to a more acceptable and less visible area, improving community relations.

## 7. Preparations for Trapping – the Sequence

### 1) Establish a feeding pattern

When you're ready to trap, it will be much easier if the cats come to you at a time and place of your choosing, then if you spread traps throughout their territory, wait all day or night and hope they show up. At least two weeks before the trapping, put out the cats' food at the same time and place on a daily basis. Cats are very habitual creatures and will quickly learn the routine. If you can't do this everyday, stick to the pattern as closely as you can.



Remove excess food after the feeding or come back after a couple of hours and take away the leftovers. Don't leave food out all day if you can help it. Your efforts to establish a pattern might be thwarted if the cats know they can come any time they want and find food. If for some reason you have to leave food out all the time, perhaps because otherwise some cats won't get to eat, then establish a pattern of arriving at the site at the same time and place everyday and putting out something tasty like a can of tuna. The cats will learn that when you show up, so does the good stuff.

In choosing the time of day for the feeding, anticipate making it easier for yourself when the time comes to trap. Pick a time when the site will be quiet and less trafficked. Also take into account that when the trapping takes place, you'll need time to set up the equipment, transport the cats to their holding space, provide them with food and water, etc.

If the cats are already used to showing up at a certain hour that would be inconvenient for the project, then gradually shift the feeding time to one that's better. For example, if the cats are used to being fed at midnight, then start putting the food out at 11 p.m. Then when they come for that, next time put it out at 10 p.m., etc. Re-training cats in this manner may require you to begin establishing a feeding pattern sooner than two weeks before the trapping. If you don't have that luxury, then just put the food out at the time you want them to come. Before long, they'll probably figure out things have changed and adapt their feeding pattern accordingly.

### 2) Count and assess the cats

While you're establishing the feeding pattern, get an accurate count of the number of cats in the colony. If necessary, take notes or photos to log and record the cats and help you tell them apart. Knowing the correct number, or at least getting close, is important for scheduling spay/neuter surgery and borrowing the right amount of equipment. There's nothing worse for a clinic (and your reputation with them) if you say you'll be

trapping a colony of 20 cats, then it turns out there are only 10 and half the clinic's day goes to waste. Getting a reasonably accurate count avoids this.

Unless it's a colony that you are personally familiar with or the caretaker has already gone through this process of carefully counting, don't take anyone's word for how many are there. Most people are not used to seeing more than a few cats at a time. When they see ten cats at once, they're liable to believe there are far more. Most untrained people overestimate the numbers, though sometimes they'll undercount. A reliable figure can be arrived at only by carefully observing the colony over a period of a week or two.

In addition to counting the cats in the colony, assess if any are adoptable, either because they're kittens young enough to be quickly socialized or abandoned adults who are still friendly. If adoptable cats are present, try to line up suitable foster homes before the trapping. Whenever good foster resources exist, these cats should be removed from the colony.

Observe whether any of the cats appear sick, whether it's from being too thin, having runny eyes or nose, coughing or having an unkempt appearance. Make arrangements beforehand for extra-veterinary care. Be prepared for the possibility that a sick cat may need extra recuperation time, especially if they need a course of antibiotics, and arrange for the necessary holding space.

Often, when a colony in general appears sickly and many of the cats have upper respiratory infections or even ringworm, improving the quality of their food and adding Vitamin C will have a profound impact. Ensuring they have warm, dry shelter in cold weather will also help. The better nutrition and shelter should be started as far before the spay/neuter date as possible, giving the cats a chance to regain their health prior to being operated upon.

### **3) Secure a holding space**

During the course of the trapping, which usually lasts two or three days, and for 48 hours after the spay/neuter surgery, the cats are kept confined. As described in Chapter 10, their traps double as cages and the cats never leave them except for the surgery. A space is needed to hold the cats while they're in the traps during this typically four to six day period.

An adequate holding space is one that is warm, dry and secure. "Warm" means at least 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. While confined, the cats can't move around, huddle together or sleep in insulated shelters, so if the space is cold, they can get sick. In addition, during the spay/neuter surgery, the cat's body temperature drops and does not return to normal until they have fully recovered from the anesthesia. If the cat is placed inside a cold space before the anesthesia has worn off, he could die.

A "dry" space is protected from the elements, whether rain, snow or direct sunlight. For their well being, obviously the cats can't get wet. A "secure" holding space is only accessible by people associated with the project and not by strangers or by other animals.

Examples of adequate holding spaces may include a garage, basement, ventilated shed, empty trailer, empty room in an apartment, empty retail or office space, part of a warehouse, bathroom if there's only a couple of cats, terrace, unused adoption van, cargo van parked in a driveway and a canopy in the backyard during warm weather.

Fleas are sometimes a concern. If the cats are well fed and healthy, their immune systems will be strong for fighting off parasites and it's unlikely they will have severe flea infestations. But they may still have some. In our experience, it's rare for a flea infestation to occur in the holding space as a result of the presence of the cats for a week. If the traps are kept mostly covered with a light sheet and the space is cleaned or vacuumed thoroughly after the project, there shouldn't be a problem. If there is, flea bombing the space afterwards might be necessary. Another way to cut down on the risk, if you can afford it, is to have flea medication applied to the cats during the spay/neuter procedure.

One trick, if the cat is staying in your bathroom, is to place the trap in your bathtub on top of some bricks, raising the trap off the bottom of the tub by a few inches. Then fill your bathtub with an inch or so of water. Between the trap being covered with a sheet and the moat, it would be very hard for fleas to spread.

Another concern sometimes expressed is whether the cats will make a great deal of noise. Simply put, they won't. Feral cats are very quiet in captivity, trying to make themselves as unnoticeable as possible. Once in a while, you might get a colony where one cat meows softly and others join in for a couple of minutes, but even that is rare. Most of the time, they remain still and silent. If you do get a cat who's meowing a lot and appears to be crying out for attention, this may mean the cat is actually an abandoned domestic and not feral.

If you are going to hold the cats in part of your home, segregate your own cats to minimize any risk of disease transmission.

During the project, the holding space can also act as your command center where you keep the equipment, supplies and records, and meet up with volunteers. For how to set up the holding space, see "Preparing the holding space" in Chapter 10.

## **4) Schedule the spay/neuter**

Once you have an accurate count of the cats and have secured an adequate holding space, then you can confidently schedule an appointment with your spay/neuter clinic or veterinarian. Clinics usually take one of three forms: (1) a mobile spay/neuter van that travels out into the community, (2) a fixed clinic housed in an agency's building, or (3) a Mass Spay Day held on a periodic basis which is designed to handle large volumes of animals in one day. When you schedule your appointment, find out the unique procedures for that clinic and be sure to follow them closely.

The availability of low cost or free spay/neuter is a significant issue in many communities, especially for feral cats. It's one of the most important factors in determining how quickly TNR can advance in a given area. If there is no organized clinic for ferals where you reside, then advocating for this may become part of your work. Study the advantages of TNR discussed in Chapter 2 and meet with officials from your local humane society, SPCA, Department of Health or animal control agency and begin a dialogue. Especially in places with severe feral cat overpopulation, you might find a willing audience. Propose a pilot project to start, one that will not demand many resources but can demonstrate TNR's effectiveness. Contact us at Neighborhood Cats for further guidance and materials.

But don't wait for a spay/neuter clinic to open before you begin to get your cats fixed. Lobby local veterinarians to give you discounted rates for ferals or hold one low cost spay/neuter day per month. Contact local animal rescue groups to find out which veterinarians they use – you might get a good rate from them. Referrals might also be gained through local humane societies or shelters. Sometimes a veterinarian who has recently opened his practice and hasn't built up a client base yet is happy to have the business, even at a heavy discount.

See if there are any low cost spay/neuter certificate programs in your area. These certificates can be purchased from a nonprofit then redeemed at one of their participating veterinarians. If you use a certificate, always check two things: (1) make sure the veterinarian you have in mind will work with ferals, and (2) get a complete cost estimate *before* the spay/neuter surgery so you're not unexpectedly charged for services you thought were included in the certificate price. Two national programs are:

- **SPAY/USA** – call 1-800-248-SPAY; phone counselors are available Monday-Friday from 9 am to 4:30 pm, EST. Or register for a certificate online at: [www.spayusa.org](http://www.spayusa.org)
- **Friends of Animals (FoA)**– call 1-800-321-PETS, or purchase certificates online at [www.friendsofanimals.org](http://www.friendsofanimals.org)

## 5) Arrange for transportation

Unless your clinic offers a transport service or a mobile spay/neuter van will be parked outside your holding space, you'll need to bring the cats back and forth from the spay/neuter clinic. Transportation may also be needed during the trapping if the cats' territory is distant from the holding space. Plan for this ahead of time. If you're thinking of using your own vehicle, figure out how many traps will fit inside. You may need to rent a cargo van, at least for the Spay Day, in order to transport all the cats at once. If more than one person is volunteering their car, draw up a schedule and let everyone know in advance when they will be needed.

When you do the actual transporting, line the seats and floor of the vehicle with thick plastic to catch any urine, such as a plastic drop cloth at least 3 millimeters thick. Roll up the plastic carefully when you're done and throw it away.

## 6) Reserve or secure traps and dividers

Once your spay/neuter date is set, arrange to have the necessary number of traps at the appropriate time. Always get two or three more traps than there are cats. This is recommended for two reasons. First, a cat you didn't know about may appear. Second, when you're down to trapping the last cat or two, it's easier to do this when you have a couple of extra traps. With three traps to catch the last cat instead of only one, you can cover more of the territory and give yourself more chances to catch her. The types of traps to use are discussed in Chapter 8 under "Recommended Equipment."

In addition to traps, arrange to have at least one pair of trap dividers on hand. As explained in Chapter 10, the dividers are essential tools for feeding and cleaning while

the cats are confined and should always be used in pairs. Having two pairs available will permit more than one person at a time to feed and clean. Dividers may also come in handy during the trapping itself as, for example, when two cats get caught in the same trap and need to be quickly separated.

In communities where TNR has taken hold, traps can often be obtained at little or no cost from “trap banks” run by local nonprofits. In other places, animal control or rescue groups may have traps to lend. To find out if there is a feral cat group operating near you which might be able to assist with equipment, log onto Alley Cat Allies’ website at [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org), and do a search for their “Feral Friends Network.” The network lists feral cat organizations by state.

If there are no resources available, then you may have to purchase traps yourself. This may limit how many cats you can trap at a time and may preclude doing a mass trapping of the entire colony at once. Stick to what you can afford and proceed with the TNR project as steadily as you can. Even in areas which do have trap banks, few stock trap dividers. These are relatively inexpensive items and can be easily ordered by mail, so you might want to purchase a pair to make sure you’ll have them (see “Recommended equipment – trap dividers” in Chapter 8 for prices and ordering information.)

The availability of traps may be relevant to when you schedule your spay/neuter date. If you need twenty traps, but they won’t be available for a month, then there’s no point in scheduling the spay/neuter before then. To avoid having to re-schedule after you’ve picked a spay/neuter date, check into the availability of equipment first if that might be an issue. Then once a spay/neuter date is set, reserve the traps right away.

## 8. Trapping

Prior to trapping, a feeding pattern has been established, the cats have been counted and assessed, arrangements have been made for adoptables and sick cats, a spay/neuter date has been scheduled, and equipment and transportation have been lined up. In addition, efforts to foster good community relations have been made. While it's difficult to ever entirely predict what will happen once you start catching the cats, having followed these steps will ensure the trapping goes as smoothly as possible and surprises are kept to a minimum. Proceeding in this type of thought out, strategized manner will mean less stress for the cats and for you.

- **The advantages of a mass trapping**

Whenever possible, the mass trapping of an entire colony at the same time is preferable over a gradual “one-cat-at-a-time” approach for several reasons. First, the situation at the site is often in crisis with too many cats and kittens, neighbors complaining and threats to harm the cats. By neutering the entire colony at once, the crisis gets quickly resolved from the immediate, dramatic decrease in the amount of noise and odor and the prevention of more kittens. Second, your ability to catch all the cats in the colony is enhanced by doing a mass trapping. When you trap one cat at a time, you run into a problem when you get down to the last few cats and have to pick them out from the rest of the colony. This can be difficult. In comparison, when you’re down to the last few cats during a mass trapping, they’re the only ones out there plus they’re getting increasingly hungry as the trapping period proceeds. Third, in the long run, a mass trapping is much less work. It’s more intensive, but in the end you only have to find a holding space once, take care of the cats while they’re confined once, transport the cats once, etc. These efforts have to be continually repeated when the colony is slowly neutered.

That said, not every community offers free or low cost spay/neuter for ferals, not everyone has access to the number of traps needed for a mass trapping, a large enough holding space for the entire colony cannot always be found, etc. In these circumstances, the goal becomes to catch and neuter as many of the cats at the same time as you can.



## • Recommended equipment - traps

The standard type of trap used for feral cats is generically termed a “humane box trap.” Shaped like a large rectangular box, the trap works by having the cat enter through the front door at one end in order to reach bait at the other end. On the way, he steps on a trip plate and the front door shuts and locks behind him. There are many different makes and models of humane box traps available. For working with feral cats in the manner described in this handbook, two features for a trap are essential: (1) a rear door that opens by sliding it up (guillotine-style) and (2) a length of approximately 36 inches.

The sliding rear door is needed to feed and clean after the cat is caught and the trap becomes a cage (see Chapter 10: “Caring for Cats in Traps.”) A rear door is also important for securely transferring a cat from one trap to another trap, or from a trap to a carrier. It’s also safer to release a cat or any inadvertently trapped wildlife by sliding open the rear door than by trying to let them exit out the front of the trap.

The trap should be 36 inches long in order to adequately double as a cage while the cat is being held before and after the spay/neuter. A smaller length can make it difficult to feed and clean and cause the cat to be cramped for space. A trap longer than 36 inches is unnecessary and can be overly bulky and heavy.

The traps we’ve worked with and can recommend are listed here. None are perfect and each has its pluses and minuses. Which is best for you will depend on your budget, storage space, how many cats you’re dealing with and your own personal preferences.

- **Safeguard Large Raccoon Trap with Rear Door, Model SG-36D**

Available from Animal Care Equipment & Services (ACES) at \$49.50 with a 10% discount for ordering two or more at a time

1-800-338-ACES; [www.animal-care.com/cata06a.htm](http://www.animal-care.com/cata06a.htm)

The Safeguard trap is lightweight at approximately 12 lbs. and measures 36” L x 12” W x 11” H. Setting the trap is easy and is done by placing a hook-shaped trigger under a crossbar by the front door. It’s economical, being the lowest priced trap of its size and quality. If you’re stocking a trap bank and need large quantities, this model is an excellent option.

On the down side, because it is lightweight, it is not as durable as the Tru-Catch or Tomahawk traps described below. The trap gets bent fairly easily and if you use many of them often, you’ll learn to become proficient at using needle-nosed pliers to adjust the trigger hook back into place. Also, the sliding rear door becomes sticky after multiple usage because of the bending of the metal. Over all, the Safeguard trap is more likely to get banged up and need repairs over time.

The trap suffers from two design flaws when it comes to feral cats. First, the trip plate is too small and, left as is, many cats will either step or lean over it to reach the bait.



This is easily gotten around by taping a piece of cardboard approximately 9 ½ inches wide by 7 inches long to the middle of the trip plate, effectively extending it.

The second flaw is the rear door's locking mechanism. The rear door locks by means of hooks which go under crossbars on top of the trap. It's easy for someone to forget to put the hooks under the crossbars. This omission allows the door to be pushed up and open from below when a cat is struggling to get out. If you use this trap, you must develop a habit of constantly double-checking that the rear door is locked, especially when the cat is returned to you in the trap by your spay/neuter clinic or veterinarian.



**Cardboard extender for trip plate**

- **Safeguard Collapsible Large Raccoon Trap with Rear Door (Model SG-35F)**  
Available from Animal Care Equipment & Services (ACES) at \$63.00 with a 10% discount for ordering two or more at a time  
1-800-338-ACES; (this model is not currently listed on their website)

Measuring 35" L x 12" W x 11" H, this version of the Safeguard trap discussed above has the advantage of being collapsible. It weighs about one lb. more than the SG-36D, but takes up only a quarter of the space in storage. It's ideal when storage space is limited and the collapsible feature also makes it possible to transport large numbers of traps at once in a normal sized car.

There are, however, many problems with this model which make it practical only in situations where saving space is critical. First, it costs more than the non-collapsible version. Second, it's made of relatively lightweight steel and can be easily bent. This is quite problematic because, in order to be collapsible, the model has several extra parts. The folding/unfolding mechanism is not that easy to use, though not overly difficult either. To avoid damaging the trap, some care must be taken.

The likelihood of this trap getting damaged after repeated usage by multiple trappers makes it a risky investment for a trap bank because it may not last that long. On the other hand, if the trap will only be used by one person who is careful when assembling and collapsing it, it's a great way to save space in the closet.

Like the Safeguard Model SG-36D, the trip plate is too small but can be easily extended with a piece of cardboard. The locking mechanism for the rear door is better than the SG-36D, but the frame for the rear door easily falls down when the sliding rear door is removed. This is fixed by using a twist-tie to attach the rear door frame to the top of the trap once the trap has been assembled. In our limited experience, the trigger mechanism on the SG-35F is a little too sensitive at first (making the trap likely to go off when bumped or moved in any way), but improves with usage.

□ **Tru-catch Large Raccoon Trap with Rear Door (Model 36D)**

Available from Animal Care Equipment & Services (ACES) at \$65.00 with a 10% discount for ordering two or more at a time  
1-800-338-ACES; [www.animal-care.com/cata06.htm](http://www.animal-care.com/cata06.htm)

Weighing approximately 14 lbs. and measuring 36" L x 12" W x 14" H, the Tru-catch trap is a model of solid workmanship and durability. It's strong and not easily damaged, its metal is coated to help prevent rust and its front door is designed to close quietly and not alarm the cats, in contrast to the slamming front doors of most traps. The trip plate is large and needs no adapting. Because of its size and design, the trap has a lot more interior space than other 36" traps and makes a nicer cage.

Negatives include cost, weight, and a trigger mechanism that can be tricky to use. For people new to trapping, this can be a problem. The trigger is set by resting two bars against one another, but if you don't do it correctly, it takes an animal heavier than a cat to set it off. To avoid this happening, the bars have to rest close to each other's tips. When the trap is set, the front door sticks out its entire length, increasing the potential of a cat knocking it down accidentally on the way in, though we have yet to see that happen.

□ **Tomahawk Flush Mount Raccoon Transfer Trap (Model 608.2)**

Available from Tomahawk at \$78.13 per trap if ordering 1-5 traps, \$66.01 for 6 or more.  
1-800-272-8727; [www.livetrap.com](http://www.livetrap.com) (click on "deluxe transfer traps")

Measuring 36" L x 10" W x 12" H, this trap is similar in appearance to the Safeguard Model SG-36D, but is made of stronger materials and is more durable. Like the SG-36D, the trap is set by moving a trigger hook underneath a crossbar and is easy to use. It's a good, reliable trap that will last.

Cost may a problem if you're stocking a trap bank, plus the trap is slightly heavier than the Safeguard model. The Tomahawk also suffers from too small of a trip plate. Like the SG-36D, this is solved by taping a piece of cardboard measuring the width of the trap and seven inches long to the middle of the trip plate. The locking mechanism on the rear door is a safety snap which is simple and avoids the mistakes made with the hooks on the SG-36D. Being slightly narrower than the SG-36D, there's a bit less room for when the trap serves as a cage, but not significantly.

## • Recommended equipment – trap dividers

□ **The Tru-catch Trap Isolator for Large Raccoon Trap (Model TD-2)**

Available from ACES, \$12.00 with a 10% discount when ordering two or more  
1-800-338-ACES; [www.animal-care.com/cata06.htm](http://www.animal-care.com/cata06.htm)

**WARNING: Don't let the seller talk you into buying a different brand (see below)**

One of the most useful pieces of equipment for working safely with feral cats is the trap divider, also called a trap isolator. This pitchfork-looking tool slides through the bars of the trap and divides the trap in two. When feeding and cleaning, it allows you to section the cat off on one end of the trap while you open the door on the other (see

Chapter 10.) Other uses include separating two cats who've been caught in the same trap, pinning the cat to one end of the trap so an anesthetic injection can be administered, lessening the space a frantic cat can move about in during transport, and directing the cat's movement during a transfer from the trap into a carrier or another trap.

Many trap manufacturers sell dividers designed specifically for their traps. **However, there is only one model we have found to be adequate and that's the Model TD-2 by Tru-catch.** All the other brands are made from inferior materials, bend easily, become difficult to insert or are not wide enough. They are not safe for the methods we teach. By contrast, the Tru-catch model is strong, durable, the correct size and easy to use. The Model TD-2 fits not only Tru-catch traps, but also the Safeguard and Tomahawk models, as well as other traps of similar construction.

Because their usefulness is not yet well known, you may have difficulty finding a trap bank or shelter where you can borrow trap dividers. It could end up being easier to purchase them yourself and always have them around, especially as they're relatively inexpensive. Two trap dividers should be used when feeding and cleaning inside a trap, so we recommend you order them by the pair.



## • Trapping supplies – the basics

Provided here is a generic list of what you'll need when you go out in the field and trap. Depending on your circumstances, you may need other items, but these are the essentials for all situations:

- ◆ Traps (2 or 3 more than the number of cats)
- ◆ Trap divider
- ◆ Bait (two kinds)
- ◆ Can opener
- ◆ Plastic forks or spoons
- ◆ Small paper or plastic plates
- ◆ Pounce or a similar cat treat which can be easily crumbled
- ◆ Cardboard extenders for the trip plates of the traps (if needed)
- ◆ Duct tape
- ◆ Sheets (one per trap)

Having a few more traps than cats makes it easier when you get down to the last few cats. It's also insurance against any unfamiliar felines making an appearance. The trap divider is for unlikely but possible situations, including separating two cats caught in the

same trap so they don't hurt one another, and for doing a trap-to-trap transfer (described later in this chapter).

Two kinds of bait are recommended because some cats may prefer one over the other. Usually, cheap tuna does the trick (we use Figaro), but it should be supplemented with a smelly wet food for those rare cats who dislike tuna. There are as many favorite baits as there are trappers. Some suggestions include roast beef, grilled chicken, human quality tuna, mackerel, fast-food hamburgers, white bread dipped in clam sauce, valerian root and freshly cooked fish of any sort.

Bait is placed on the plates with a plastic spoon or fork. Pounce or a similar cat treat is crumbled and sprinkled on the ground in front of the trap to create a trail leading in. The cardboard extenders lengthen the trip plate if it's too small (and most are). The extenders should be a little less than the width of the trap and six to seven inches long. They're attached to the front half of the trip plate with duct tape.

The sheets are used to cover the trap after the cat is caught and at all times thereafter until the release. They are critical for calming the cats and avoiding injuries to them.

## • Trapping supplies - optional

This following list of items may or may not be needed depending on the circumstances of your project. Some you might want to bring along just in case.

- ◆ Newspaper
- ◆ Clothespins
- ◆ Blankets
- ◆ Plastic drop cloth
- ◆ Flashlight
- ◆ Needle-nose pliers
- ◆ Vegetable oil spray
- ◆ First aid kit
- ◆ Pens or pencils
- ◆ Labels
- ◆ Logging sheet
- ◆ Another person or two

Once in a while, a cat won't like the feel of the wire floor of a box trap and this will cause him to hesitate to enter. One way around this is to place a couple of sheets of folded newspaper on the floor of the trap leading up to the trip plate. If there is even the slightest breeze, attach the newspaper to the sides of the trap with clothespins. Otherwise the paper will blow around and frighten the cats away. In our experience, it's rare that a cat won't enter because of the wire floor so we don't usually bother with the newspaper. Other long-time trappers would disagree.

Blankets are useful if you're trapping in cold weather and trapped cats cannot be quickly moved into a warm space. Wrapping a blanket around the trap, while leaving

some ventilation, will buy you a little time, but not a lot. A plastic drop cloth should be used to line the seats or floor of any vehicle being used to transport the cats.

A flashlight is necessary if you're trapping at night or in a dark space like a basement. Needle-nose pliers are handy if a trap's trigger mechanism needs adjustment though it takes some experience to do this properly. A fraction of an inch can be the difference between an adjustment that works or doesn't. Vegetable oil spray is good for traps whose parts need a little lubrication.

A basic first aid kit is a smart thing to have on hand in the unlikely event of a bite or scratch or some other injury. Quickly cleaning a wound inflicted by a cat can stop a more serious infection from developing later. The kit should at a minimum include hydrogen peroxide, cotton balls and band-aids.

If you're trapping at multiple sites, the traps should be labeled when a cat is caught to avoid mixups later about where the cat came from. Use a different color label for each colony and stick it on the top of the trap by the handles. Write the location of the colony on the label, plus give the trap a number (going sequentially) and write that on the label, too.

The cats should be logged, using a tracking sheet similar to the one on [page 108](#). This can be done at the site or later in the holding space provided the traps have already been labeled. Use a different sheet for each colony. One idea is to attach a piece of a label to the tracking sheet which matches the color designated for that colony. This too, avoids mixups.

Finally, having another person assisting you is highly advisable, especially when trapping multiple cats. Attention to more than one cat or trap at a time may be needed. Also, if an item was forgotten or a phone call needs to be quickly made in the heat of the action, having help can make a huge difference. At the same time, don't have more helpers than you need. Too many people standing around talking can make the cats more wary. For smaller colonies, two or three people will do just fine. As you approach 20 or more cats, three or four is a good number.

## • Winter trapping

Some TNR workers don't like to trap during the winter because the females have their stomachs shaved and lose that protection against the cold. In our experience, the lost fur does not cause the cats to get sick *if* they have warm, dry shelter. Before any winter trapping, efforts should be made to ensure adequate shelter will be available after the release.

Trapping in the cold season 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.

## • The trapping

### 1. *Withhold food*

Most feral cats are wary of entering an unknown, confined space. Hunger is the key for getting them to overcome this wariness and enter a box trap. It is the single most important factor in trapping. You could prepare everything else perfectly, but if the cats are not hungrier than usual, most of them will not go in no matter how tempting the bait.

Food should be withheld the entire day before the trapping begins. For example, if the trapping begins on a Friday, then the cats should be fed at their regular time on Wednesday and then not at all on Thursday. The only exceptions are young kittens, nursing mothers, and cats who are clearly ill. If you can feed them separately and not let the other cats get any of the food, then they can eat the day before the trapping, but not the day of. If you can't feed them separately, then withhold the food.

Withholding food is often harder on the caretaker who knows her hungry wards are wondering what happened than it is on the cats. They won't like skipping their daily meal, but adult cats can go weeks without food. You have to remind yourself that a day's discomfort is a small price for the cats' life-long benefit.

If you're trapping for more than one day, fresh water should be left out at all times. While the trapping proceeds, continue to withhold all food.

The importance of withholding food points to the need for locating and coordinating with other feeders. On occasion, you may run up against someone who will not cooperate, not matter how articulately you explain that what you're doing is for the good of the cats. If this happens, you need to try to work around that person as best you can. Find out when they put food out, then show up soon afterwards and remove it. Or start trapping well before they usually come to feed.

### 2. *Allow enough time for the trapping (two days minimum)*

Typically, if preparations have been carefully made, the first day of trapping will net most of the cats and, in smaller colonies, even all of them. In larger colonies, some cats won't show up the first day and others won't enter the traps for whatever reason. The second day usually results in most of these remaining cats getting caught, but sometimes there are one or two stubborn ones who still won't go in. It can take a third day of being deprived of food to get them.

This is why we suggest allowing three days for trapping large colonies of ten or more cats. Three days is also good, but not as critical, for smaller colonies if you want to give yourself the best chance of catching everyone. You should never allot less than two days. It might rain; someone might unknowingly leave out a bowl of food the night before; construction might be going on next door on the planned day; some of the cats may not show up or go in the traps, or any number of unexpected developments could occur which would interfere. After all the planning and preparations, it's not worth risking this for the sake of saving one day.

If it's absolutely unavoidable and one day of trapping is all you can manage, then be extra careful to make sure the cats are very hungry and start out early, leaving yourself as much time as possible.

### ***3. Check the traps and practice using them***

Check the traps before the trapping begins and become familiar with how they operate. The best time to check is when you pick them up from wherever you're borrowing or purchasing them, but if this wasn't done, do it before you go out into the field. If you don't know how to use the traps, read the manufacturer's instructions or consult an experienced trapper. Test each trap by setting the trigger, then pressing down on the trip plate through the side of the trap with your finger or a pen. The front door should easily close once the plate is down.

If you discover a trap is malfunctioning at the last minute and can't fix it, all is not lost. Mark it as broken and bring it with you anyway. If you end up needing an extra trap, you can transfer a cat from a working trap into the broken one, thereby freeing up the functioning trap. Trap-to-trap transfers are explained later in this chapter.

### ***4. Transport and then prepare the traps***

After you've arrived at the colony's site with your equipment and supplies, unload all the traps and line them up in a row, rear doors all facing the same way. These final preparations should be done a comfortable distance away from where the cats are located in order not to alarm them. Out of the cats' sight is preferable.

Remove the rear doors, placing each on top of its trap, and then tape the cardboard extenders onto the trip plates, making sure the cardboard and not simply the tape reaches the middle of the plate (*see photo on p. 40*). Next, open the bait and place generous portions on the plates. Use mostly your favorite bait but also add at least a bit of a second kind. Then place the bait behind the trip plate – right next to the rear door is good. Shut the rear doors, double-checking that they're locked properly.

If you're using newspaper for the trap floor, go to the front of the traps, open the front door and line the floor, using clothespins if there's any wind. Finally, take a sheet and tuck it between the handles on top of the trap. That way, when a cat is caught and you need to cover him quickly, you won't have to go looking around for a sheet.

One exception to using a fair amount of bait is if you know a cat is going to be operated on within hours of the trapping. In that case, only use a small amount of very smelly bait. Ideally, when a cat goes for surgery, her stomach is empty to avoid possible complications from the anesthesia such as choking and gagging. If the cat did eat within hours of surgery, be sure to inform the veterinarian.

### ***5. Place the traps and add final touches***

Once all the traps are ready, bring them all out into the territory at the same time. The fewer intrusions you and others make into the territory, the fewer chances a cat will be frightened off and not return. Position the traps to cover as much of the feeding area as possible, as well as other nearby locations where the cats are known to frequent. How

much of the cats' territory you need to cover will differ with each situation and will depend on factors such as how many cats are there, how large is the territory, what parts do you have access to and how many traps do you have on hand. Most traps should be concentrated around the feeding station or along routes they travel to get there.

When placing the traps, don't rest them on the ground out in the open so that they're surrounded by empty space. Instead, put them up against something length-wise whenever possible – a fence, a wall, a curb, the front bumper of a car, a dumpster, a bush, a tree, etc. The trap then appears to the cat to be part of another familiar structure and is less threatening than when it's off by itself. Make sure, however, that the ground is level beneath the trap. Sacrifice having the trap butt right up against a wall if moving it out a foot or two will mean it's sitting steady on the ground. Don't put traps right next to each other, but separate them by at least a few feet.

Once a trap is in position, open the front door and set the trigger. Remove any debris or branches which might block the front door from completely closing. If possible, make the trap appear more like the landscape by sprinkling some dirt or pebbles or leaves on the floor in front of the trip plate. This isn't necessary if the trap is being placed on grass and the trap floor isn't covered with newspaper.

If you're out in hot, direct sunlight, pull the sheet from the handles and drape it over the sides of the trap in the rear, shading the bait so it won't quickly dry out. Place a rock or some small heavy object on the sheet to keep it from blowing off. Some trappers like to always cover the entire top and sides of the trap with the sheet, believing this makes the interior of the trap more inviting for the cats. We only do this in special situations where we'll be unable to check on the traps as often as we'd like. That way, when the cat is trapped the covering will help provide some sense of calm. But usually we don't cover the traps entirely because the sheets blow around in the wind. Also, we haven't ourselves observed that covering the traps makes much of a difference in whether most cats will go in or not. If you do cover the trap, then make sure the rear door (as well as the front door) is not covered. The cat should be able to see all the way through in order to minimize the sensation she is entering a closed-in, confined space.

Finally, take a piece or two of the Pounce, crumble it up and sprinkle a trail leading from a couple of feet away into the trap and up to the trip plate. This same technique can be done with the juice from tuna or little bits of the bait – don't use too much and risk the cat being satisfied before she gets to the main dish.

## ***6. During the trapping***

Once the traps are all in place and set, exit the territory. Tempting though it may be to keep an eye on the action, the cats will be aware that you're watching them. Stay out of sight and don't stare, especially when one is right in front of the trap and thinking about going in. If you're trapping in your own backyard, go inside the house and watch from there. If you're at another location, wait inside your car or stand just around the corner. The less tension and anxiety you exude, the better.

Unless the territory is secure from strangers, the traps should never be left unattended and you should always be nearby and able to observe whether anyone is entering the territory. The cats are completely vulnerable once they're trapped and dependent on you

for their safety. Traps can be checked every half hour or so, but should not be left unchecked for more than a couple of hours at most.

If you're watching the scene from a distance and see a cat trapped or hear a trap door shut, don't immediately go running into the territory to cover the cat up. Remember, you want to keep intrusions to a minimum. Observe how the cat is reacting to being trapped. Most will become frantic and start dashing back and forth. If that's happening, go over and cover the trap with the sheet, then stand back for a minute and give the cat a chance to calm down. But if the cat is eating or sitting quietly, then stay back and wait.

When a cat does panic, never release the cat out of fear she'll hurt herself if you don't – she'll be fine in a moment and you may not ever catch her again. In the extremely rare case that a cat does not calm down and continues to thrash about after being covered, use a trap divider to section the cat off into a third or half of the trap and thereby restrict her movements. Then cover the trap again. Bloody noses or torn claws will sometimes occur from cats banging against the sides of the trap, but are not cause for serious concern.

After the cat has been covered and quieted down, pick up the trap and move it a few feet away, leaving the cover on. Then place another trap in the same exact spot where the old trap was. You'll often find there are "hot spots" where one cat after another keeps going in.

Carry trapped cats out of the territory to a secure spot where you can keep an eye on them. If the cat starts moving back and forth while you're carrying her, tilt the trap at about a 45 degree angle, forcing the cat to expend her energy hanging on to the wire floor instead of moving around. After you put the trap down, put a label on it and write down the location and a trap number on the label (making the numbers sequential). You can enter this information on the logging sheet ([page 108](#)) either at that point or later when the cats are brought to the holding space. If it's cold, drape or wrap the trap with a blanket, but this should only be done as a temporary measure. Cats in traps should be brought to a warm space as soon as possible. If you have enough help, one or two people can start taking the cats to the holding space while the others continue trapping. At all times, until the release in a few days, a sheet should remain over each trap.

If time allows, continue to trap as long as there are any cats still in the area and there's a chance they might go in. Usually on the first day of trapping, if the colony is large, there are a few who either don't show up or simply will not be enticed into a box trap. If it's clear you're down to these last cats and they're just not interested, then shut



down for the day, bringing in all the traps. Continue to withhold food and transport any trapped cats to the holding space who remain at the site.

Traps should not be left unattended for stretches of hours at a time. Bad things could happen, such as two panicked cats getting caught in the same trap, a raccoon wandering by or a stranger passing who could harm the cats. Overnight trapping should only be attempted if the traps are in a very secure area where no one and no other animals besides the cats have access and even then only if you can periodically (at least every two hours) check on them. Otherwise, wait for the next day when the holdout cats will be hungrier and more likely to take the bait. If you do trap overnight and will only be checking every couple of hours, drape the sheet over the sides so the cat won't feel totally exposed if caught. If there's a chance of rain, tape a large trash bag instead over the top and sides, leaving the rear door still exposed.

Just before you pack it up, there is one method that we've been successful with at Neighborhood Cats that you might want to try. If you have a drop trap (see Chapter 9), break it out and see if any of the holdouts will go in – probably some will. A drop trap falls down over a cat and does not require the feline to enter a confined space like with a box trap. As a result, cats are often unafraid to walk under it.

Subsequent days of trapping largely follow the same pattern as the first except there are fewer cats to catch. The traps should be set up and placed in the territory as previously, although you could try a different kind of bait in case it's more attractive than the first day's offering. If the same cats show up and still won't go in, then try one or more of the techniques described below under "Hard-to-catch cats."

Keep in mind that your best chance of catching those last one or two difficult cats is when the rest of the colony has already been trapped and removed. You don't have to try to pick them out of a crowd because they're the only ones out there, plus they're growing hungrier and more likely to go in a trap with each succeeding day. Because you may never get a better opportunity, we recommend continuing to try to trap any remaining cats as long as the rest of the colony is confined - even after your spay/neuter date has passed. The hassle of having to make special arrangements to get the last cat or two to a veterinarian will probably be much less than the trouble involved in trying to catch that cat later when the rest of the colony is back out in the territory.

## • Trap-to-trap transfer

During the trapping, there are at least two situations in which you might want to transfer a cat from one trap into another. First, if two (or more) cats are caught in the same trap at the same time and, second, if you discover a trap is broken and end up short one trap. The first situation is resolved by separating the two cats with a trap divider, then transferring the cat closest to the rear door into a new trap. The second situation is fixed by transferring a trapped cat into the broken trap, thereby freeing up the one that works.

A trap-to-trap transfer is done by lining up the rear doors of the two traps right up next to each other, perfectly aligned. The trap which the cat will enter should be backed up against something immovable like a wall so it can't shift during the transfer and create

an opening between the two rear doors. Ideally, a transfer is done with two people, each holding one of the traps in place. Both traps should be covered with sheets at the outset.

Once both traps are securely in place, both rear doors are lifted. To get the cat to move from the trap he's in now into the empty trap, fold back the sheet covering him, folding towards the empty trap. Feral cats naturally move from light to dark, so when the cat is exposed, he will usually travel into the empty, covered trap. If he doesn't move, either tap the side of the trap lightly or use the trap divider from above to give him a gentle push. After he's in the second trap, shut the rear door, making sure it's secure before moving the first trap away.

## • Special cases

### *Friendly ferals*

Never try to pick up a feral cat and place him inside a trap or carrier, regardless of whether the cat likes to rub against your leg, regularly lets you pet him or has even allowed you to pick him up before. Ferals get to know and trust their caretaker and some will show these signs of affection. Don't be fooled by this into thinking you can therefore treat them like you would a domesticated cat. It is extremely dangerous to lift or grab a feral and try to force him into a closed space. Faster than you can react, they can become terrified and twist around to bite or scratch out of fear and a desire to escape. This can result in serious injury. Err on the side of safety and go through the trapping process with every cat unless you are certain a particular feline is a recently abandoned, friendly domestic. Even then, you could be taking your chances because some domestics don't take well to being placed in carriers and also will attack. If you are sure the cat is friendly and a carrier is appropriate, place a can of tuna or something tasty in the back of the carrier and let the cat walk in on his own. Then quickly shut and lock the door behind him.

### *Kittens*

The same traps used to capture adults can be used to catch young kittens, even five or six weeks old. Unless the trap is creaky and needs some oil, a kitten's weight on the trip plate will be enough to shut the front door. One way to ensure this is by a method known as "setting the trigger lightly." On the Safeguard and Tomahawk traps, the trigger is shaped like a small hook. It's set by pushing it slightly forward and resting it under a cross bar above the front door. When the cat steps on the trip plate, the trigger is pulled back and out from under the cross bar, causing the front door to shut. Normally, the elbow of the trigger is what rests under the cross bar. If instead, the tip of the trigger is rested under the cross bar, it will take less weight on the trip plate to cause the trigger to pull back.

The same principle applies to the Tru-catch trap, although the trigger mechanism is different. With Tru-catch traps, the trigger is set by resting two bars against each other. One bar is connected to the trip plate, the other to the front door. When pressure is applied to the trip plate, the bar connected to it moves away from the bar on the front door, causing the front door to shut. To set this trigger mechanism lightly, the two bars

should rest against one another at their very tips. Even with adult cats, the Tru-catch trigger should be set fairly near the ends of the bars or else too much weight is required to set it off.

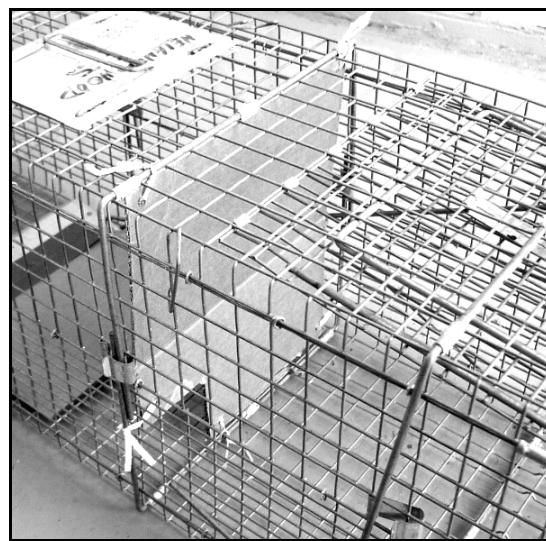
One kitten will often follow another into a trap. This creates the danger one will step on the trip plate while another is at the front door, possibly causing injury, though usually the kitten at the front door is scared away. The way to eliminate this risk and maximize the chance of trapping multiple kittens at once is to not set the trap in the normal way with the trigger. Instead take a full soda or water bottle a little less than the height of the trap (a one liter bottle of Poland Spring is perfect) and tie a string tightly around the base. Open the front door of the trap and prop a corner of the door on top of the bottle. Unwind the string until you're a comfortable distance away, then pull the string taut. Wait until the kittens are well into the trap, then yank the string, pulling away the bottle and shutting the front door.

Two words of warning about this technique: first, don't wait too long for multiple kittens to show up. If one or two are in and no one else is hovering close by, go ahead and catch those or else they're liable to walk out on you. Second, practice pulling the string and shutting the door at least once before you attempt it live. If you don't know the feel of it and how much force is needed when you pull, it's easy to do it wrong and only succeed in startling the kittens away.

The string and bottle method is also useful when you're not yet ready to trap any adults, but are after the kittens because you want to get them while they're still young enough to be easily socialized. If you can't use the string and bottle method for some reason and have to set the trap with the trigger, there are a couple of ways still to try to catch only kittens.

One is to use a very small trap, such as a chipmunk or squirrel trap that only a kitten can fit into. However, in our experience, these traps can be problematic. Often the trigger mechanism is very sensitive and goes off too easily, such as when a kitten brushes against the side of the trap. Also, you might be surprised how small of a space an adult cat can squeeze into. Nonetheless, some trappers do swear by their "kitten" traps once they've found the ideal one.

The second technique involves using the normal 36-inch long box trap and building a doorway out of cardboard which only a small kitten can pass through. Cut out a rectangular piece of cardboard the height and width of the trap. In one corner, cut out an opening 3" x 3". The opening will be the kittens' doorway which only they will be able to fit through. Then place the cardboard inside the trap a few inches in front of the trip plate, positioning the cardboard to block further access towards the rear of the trap except for the doorway in one of the lower corners. To prevent an adult cat from simply pushing the cardboard out of



Cardboard kitten doorway

the way, poke holes in each corner of the cardboard and attach to the trap with twist ties. Place bait in the trap and set it as you would normally.

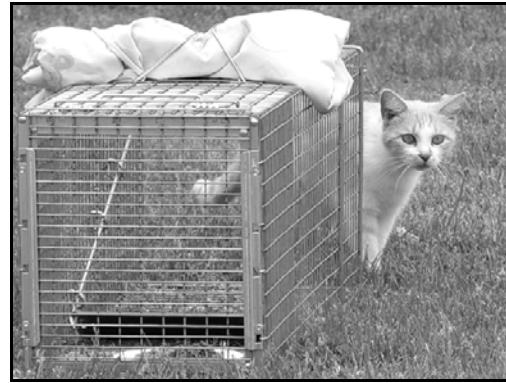
Never try to pick up kittens with your bare hands unless they are less than four weeks old or are accustomed to being handled by people. If you want to pick them up, use gloves with a protective material like Kevlar. Otherwise, those little fangs are very sharp and liable to leave their mark on your fingers.

### ***Nursing mothers***

What action to take when there is a nursing (lactating) mother in the colony depends in large part on how old the kittens are and whether you know where the litter is located.

### **Litters of unknown age and unknown location**

In colonies that are not well known to the caretakers prior to the trapping, it is often discovered after a female cat is trapped that she's lactating and may have kittens somewhere in the territory. One way to see if a female might be nursing is to lift the trap high off the ground and look up from below at the female's belly. If the nipples are noticeably distended, there's a chance she has a litter. If it's clear she is lactating, and sometimes it takes an experienced person to judge this, and you don't know how old the kittens are or where they are located, then you have a difficult choice to make. You could let the cat go, knowing you may never catch her again and she may go on to have numerous more litters. Or you could get her spayed as quickly as possible, release her after 24 hours if she's alert, and hope any kittens survive in her absence.



When making this decision, there are several factors to consider. Feral kittens naturally have a high mortality rate, often 50 percent or more, unless the colony is managed and living in good circumstances. So the kittens may or may not still be alive when you have the mom in a trap. Second, kittens older than two weeks can survive for at least one day without the mother while newborns could die within hours. If you can get the mom spayed and released within 24 hours, then there's a reasonable chance the kittens will survive unless they are less than two weeks old.

Some caretakers believe it is wrong to ever take the risk there are kittens who will die in the absence of their mother. Others believe the responsible thing to do is get the mom spayed while you can and end her procreation. What might be the determinative factor for you is the circumstances of the TNR project. On one extreme, you may be working in a remote industrial area with a large number of feral cats who you may or may not ever see again after you trap them. In that case, if your policy is to immediately release all lactating females without spaying them, there's a good chance you won't fix enough of the population to get the situation under control and the project will fail. On the other extreme, 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 capture her again, then you might decide to let her go.

If the fact that the cat is nursing is not discovered until after the spay/neuter is performed, then release her 24 hours after the surgery, assuming she appears alert and well. Spayed females can still nurse.

### **Litters of known age, but unknown location**

A caretaker may have observed one of her cats was pregnant and noted the approximate time of birth, but not know the location of the litter. Knowing the age of the kittens takes the guesswork out of deciding what to do. Ideally, the trapping of the mother is delayed until the kittens are old enough to start coming around the feeding station themselves and can also be caught. It might not be possible, however, to either delay the whole project for that long or keep the mother out of a trap if the project proceeds. If the trapping of the colony cannot wait, at least try to delay it until the kittens are three weeks old to enhance their chances of survival for a day without their mother's milk. In addition, make arrangements ahead of time for the mother to be spayed right away if you do end up trapping her.

If you know the kittens are less than two weeks old and the mother is trapped despite your efforts, you should release her right away. It's one thing if you really don't know whether kittens may die if you hold onto a nursing mother, but another when you know it's likely. The compassionate choice, in our view, is to let the kittens live and try to catch the family at another time. The sooner you let the mom out of the trap, the less traumatic the experience for her and the better your chance of trapping her again later.

### **Litters of known age and known location**

Knowing both the kittens' age and location gives you more options. The first thing you need to decide is whether you're going to try to socialize and adopt out the kittens. Taking friendly cats and young kittens off the streets and placing them in good homes is always preferable, but resources do not always allow. Determine if foster resources are available before you trap, so you'll know what to do when the time comes.

#### **(a) No foster resources available**

If there is no one to foster the kittens, then try to wait to trap them and their mother until the kittens are old enough to be neutered. The general rule of thumb for early age spay/neuter is 2 months or 2 lbs., though this early of an age does require a veterinarian with experience in these types of surgeries. Waiting until 10 to 12 weeks of age will make for less difficult of a procedure. Once the kittens have been altered, they can be released along with their mother or the rest of the colony.

If you end up trapping the mother before the kittens are old enough to get fixed, then you need to care for the kittens in the mother's absence. If they have not been weaned (usually less than five weeks old), they will need to be brought inside, kept in a warm place, bottlefed and possibly stimulated to pass urine and feces (by gently rubbing their genital areas). If the kittens are weaned and eating on their own, you'll need to feed them and try to keep them in as safe a location as possible, preferably somewhere they can't go wandering off on their own.

**(b) Foster resources available**

If the kittens are going to be fostered for adoption, then there are three ways you can proceed. First, you can trap the whole family and keep them together in a cage until the kittens are old enough to be adopted, which in an indoor situation is approximately eight weeks old (see the Feral Cat Setup in Chapter 11). At that point the mom can be spayed and released. Second, you can let the family stay outside and remove the kittens from the mother when they are six to seven weeks old. The younger age for separation is due to the greater dangers of outdoor life and the need to begin the socialization process as soon as possible. Third, you can bring the kittens in without the mother before they are six to seven weeks old, but if they are too young to be eating on their own yet, you will need to bottlefeed and provide neonatal kitten care.

The first choice of bringing in the mom with the kittens and keeping them together until the kittens are eight weeks old is considerably less work than bringing in and raising unweaned kittens. Bottlefeeding is a labor-intensive process requiring a special formula (*not* cow's milk) and multiple feedings throughout the day and night. It's also less healthy for the kittens than their mother's milk, which conveys certain immunities. Furthermore, the kittens need to be washed, stimulated to defecate and urinate, and constantly watched over. If instead you have the mother in a cage with them, she does all the work and all you have to do is feed her, clean the litter pan and play with the kittens. The kittens also learn more about how to be cats from being around their mother.

There is a slight risk when you capture and confine a feral family that the mother may attack her kittens and even kill them. This is rare, but happens once in a while with female cats who are extremely feral and in great distress from being captured. If you believe you are dealing with this kind of a cat who is much wilder than your normal feral, you might be better off raising them yourself or leaving the kittens with her until they are old enough to eat on their own.

There are a couple of ways to gauge whether the mother is going to accept the kittens in captivity. One is to introduce the kittens to the mother while she is still in a trap. Section her off on one end with a divider and place the kittens in the other end. See how she reacts before removing the divider. A second method, if you're using the Feral Cat Setup described in Chapter 11, is to transfer the mom into a carrier (see "Trap-to-carrier transfer, also in Chapter 11). Place the carrier with mom inside into the cage. Before opening the carrier door, place the kittens at the front of the cage and see how she reacts. If she doesn't growl or lash out, it's likely they'll be fine.

**Trapping the family**

It's best to catch the kittens before the mother. That way, if you miss any, they won't be left alone without their mom. If you do get the mother before the entire litter, then keep trapping until you have them all, only taking long breaks if absolutely necessary.

Assuming you do get all the kittens first, if you're then having trouble catching the mom, you may be able to use the kittens as bait. Put the kittens in a small carrier, then put the carrier behind a trap with the front door of the carrier right up against the trap's rear door. Cover the carrier and both sides of the trap with a sheet, leaving only the front door of the trap uncovered. Set the trap. With this arrangement, the only way the mother can see to reach her kittens is by going through the trap.

If you're dealing with unweaned kittens, have bottlefeeding formula on hand just in case you don't get the mother right away. "Kitten Milk Replacement" formula, also known as "KMR," is available at many pet stores.

### **Pregnant cats**

A cat's gestation period is approximately two months. During the early part of a pregnancy, before the belly begins to swell, there is no way to tell visually that the cat is carrying kittens and this may not be discovered until the actual spay.

If a cat is known to be pregnant, then she can be (1) trapped, aborted and spayed, (2) trapped and allowed to give birth in a confined situation, or (3) not trapped (or released if she inadvertently is caught) and allowed to give birth outdoors. Depending on the experience and comfort level of the veterinarian, cats can be safely spayed right up until the last days. You'll need to discuss this with your clinic or veterinarian to find out what their policies are.

Whether to abort is a decision for the caretaker. For religious or other personal reasons, some caretakers may deem abortion unacceptable. Consideration should be given to the current severe overpopulation of cats and the reality that adding more kittens may mean other cats already alive will not find homes and will be euthanized.

If the decision is not to abort, then the choice is whether to foster the mom, let her give birth in a cage and raise her kittens while confined, or let her give birth outdoors and try to catch the family later. Certainly, having the mom give birth indoors in a secure environment will be much safer for the kittens. The mortality rate for feral kittens is quite high. They can succumb to anemia induced by fleas, are susceptible to disease because their immune systems are undeveloped, may be the victims of other predatory animals, are more likely not to overcome common hazards such as traffic, and so on. The mom can be kept in the Feral Cat Setup (Chapter 11), then when the litter is old enough, spay and release the mom and adopt out the kittens.

### **Cats who avoid the trip plate**

On occasion, you may come upon a particularly bright feline who knows not to step on the trip plate, cardboard extender or no. She will tiptoe around the plate, step over it, or lean over far enough to grab the bait in her mouth. If you see a cat in a trap who has avoided the trip plate and is calmly eating, slowly walk over towards the trap. Don't rush over and cause the cat to panic, because then she may never return. Move slowly, causing her only to become concerned enough that she'll stop eating and exit. Often on the way out, the cat will step on the trip plate. If she doesn't, then after she's a comfortable distance away, cover the trip plate and the cardboard extender with a sheet of newspaper, so she can't see where the plate is next time in. If she still evades the plate, again walk towards her so she exits. Then take a stick and push it through both long sides of the trap just in front of the trip plate and a few inches off the ground. The cat will have to step over the stick to reach the bait, landing on the plate hidden by the newspaper.

## • Hard-to-catch cats

The goal of every caretaker should be to get her colony 100 percent neutered. This alone ensures no more kittens and peace of mind. But many colonies have one or two cats who just won't go in a normal box trap, no matter how long you deprive them of food or how many different types of bait you try. For these stubborn holdouts, there are a variety of battle-tested special techniques described below.

Don't try using a net or graspers to catch a feral cat. These are difficult to use and dangerous if you actually succeed in grabbing the animal and then have to transfer him into a cage or trap. They should be used only by trained veterinary or animal control professionals. Tranquilizers also should not be attempted. A cat could wander off after ingesting the drug and get seriously injured as it's taking effect. In addition, you might not be able to locate the cat after the sedation took hold. Dart guns on an animal as small as a cat are a particularly bad and hazardous idea. Try one of these methods instead:

### ***Drop trap***

The drop trap designed by Laura Burns of HubCats in Boston, Massachusetts, is an excellent tool for finally catching that cat you've been after for five years. The trap works by falling down over a cat – the cat does not have to enter it, but only walk under. As a result, the drop trap does not trigger a cat's natural wariness of entering a confined space and in most hard-to-catch cases, it will work. Laura herself uses the drop trap to catch all the cats in a colony, not just the difficult ones. Because it is such a valuable and efficient tool, Chapter 9 is devoted to its use and construction.

### ***Training the cat to go in a box trap***

If a box trap can be left in the territory for one to two weeks, cats can be trained to enter it to eat. Begin by securing the front door of the trap into an open position. Do this by running a stick or rod through both sides of the trap just below the open front door or by tying the front door into an open position with wire.

Place the trap near the feeding station. If the location is accessible to strangers, remove the rear door of the trap and take it with you. This way, no one can come and set the trap and cause any harm. Loosely tape a piece of clear thick plastic over the rear door frame. The idea behind the plastic is to prevent the cat from entering the trap through the rear, but allow a cat who should not have been trapped to easily break through and get out. Lock the trap to an immovable object with a chain, if necessary.

The first day, place a plate of food a few inches in front of the trap's front entrance. Keep placing the food at this spot until you see it's being eaten. Then move the plate to just inside the trap. Again, wait until you see the cat is eating from this position, then move the plate a few inches further in. Continue this process until the cat is going far enough in to step on the trip plate. Then set the trap.

This training method should not be used if the area is too public and the risk of theft or vandalism is high.

### ***Camouflage trap***

Sometimes blending the trap in with its surroundings or disguising it will lure a cat in. One technique is to drape burlap over the sides of the trap (but not over the rear door) and on the trap's floor. Cover the burlap with leaves and branches, making sure not to obstruct the front door from closing.

There are many other similar ways to disguise a trap. Put it inside a cardboard box, again leaving the rear door uncovered so the cat has a line of vision all the way through. Lean a large board against a wall and put the trap behind it. Rest objects on top of the trap to make it appear more like part of its environment, like debris, a wooden plank or a trash bag.



### ***Trap-in-a-box***

A unique kind of camouflage trap was designed by Susan Green ([www.americancat.net/fastfood.html](http://www.americancat.net/fastfood.html)). Build a wooden box that opens from the top and is large enough to comfortably fit a box trap inside when the front door of the trap is in a set position. Cut out two entrances, each at different ends of the box. This allows for escape from predators or strangers. The interior of the box can be used as a feeding station or lined with insulation and stuffed with straw or hay and used as a shelter. When it's time to catch a cat, the trap is placed inside (without blocking the entrances to the box), baited and set. Put a lock on the cover of the box to prevent tampering.



### ***Lure into a closed space***

If you can lure the cat into an indoor space which has no exits except the door, there are a couple ways to then get him into a box trap. Before drawing the cat inside, you'll need to arrange things in the interior space.

One method for "indoor" trapping is to simply leave a trap in the room that is baited and set in a normal fashion, then wait it out. If the cat is trap shy, it might take two or three days before he'll go in. Leave water available and possibly a litter pan, but no food outside the trap.

A faster technique takes more work. First, remove everything in the indoor space which the cat might go hide behind or under. Then take a large board, approximately 5 feet long and at least 4 feet high, and lean it up against a wall, leaving enough space to put a trap between the board and the wall. When the cat enters the space later, this will be the only place for him to hide and he'll naturally go run behind it.

On the floor at one end of the board, place a set trap with the front door facing in towards the “lean-to”. Cover the trap with a sheet except for the rear and use a second sheet to block off any open space above the trap and to its side. The goal is to make it appear to the cat that the only way out from behind the board at that end is through the trap. They won’t know they can easily push past the sheet above the trap or to its side.

Many times, when the cat enters the space and goes behind the board, they will run right into the trap. If they don’t, approach the board from the opposite end from the trap. Slowly move an object on a long handle, like a broom, towards the cat. This will cause him to run in the other direction and into the trap. If this still doesn’t work, then withdraw, let the cat calm down and then come and try again with the broomstick.

### ***Picking one out from the crowd***

A cat may be hard to catch because there are lots of other cats around too, who you’re not after. This situation is typical when colonies are trapped and neutered gradually and you get down to the last few unaltered felines. You might also be trying to only trap one particular cat because she’s pregnant, recently abandoned, sick or injured.

To pick the cat out of the crowd, use the bottle and string method described earlier in this chapter for trapping multiple kittens at once. Basically, don’t set the trap in the normal way, but instead open the front door all the way and prop a corner of the door on top of a full water or soda bottle. Tie a string around the base of the bottle, then unwind the string and stand a distance away. When the cat you want goes in after the bait, wait until he reaches the trip plate, then pull the string.

Put an extra-large amount of bait in the trap. This will allow a number of cats to go in and eat while you’re waiting for the one you want and you won’t have to re-bait the trap each time. Be sure to practice yanking the string and pulling away the bottle before you try this live.

Using a drop trap (Chapter 9) is another way to pick one out of the crowd.

## 9. The Drop Trap

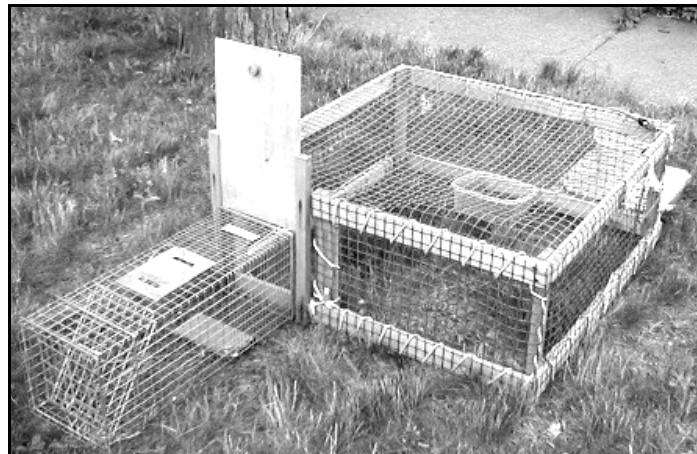
A cat goes under a drop trap, which then falls down over her. There is no narrow, confined space for the feline to enter. Consequently, many cats who shy away from a normal box trap will go in a drop trap, making it an incredibly useful tool. It can be used as your normal trap for all occasions, to catch the stragglers during a mass trapping who won't enter box traps, to catch hard-to-catch felines or to pick out a cat from the rest of the colony.



Currently, there is no large-scale manufacturer of drop traps, so you need to build it yourself. The drop trap described here was invented by Laura Burns of HubCats (Boston, MA) and requires only basic woodworking skills and tools to construct. If you're having any difficulty making or using the trap, you can contact Laura directly at email: [HubCatsBoston@aol.com](mailto:HubCatsBoston@aol.com). A second design for a drop trap using PVC piping and athletic netting can be found on the Resources page of the Alley Cat Allies website ([www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)).

- **How it works**

A wooden frame covered by netting or mesh is propped up on one side with a stick and food is placed in the center-back of the trap. The trapper stands at a distance and when ready, pulls on a string attached to the prop-stick, causing the trap to drop and capturing the cats inside. Each cat is then transferred to a box trap through matching guillotine-style doors for transport.



- **Design and construction**

### *Dimensions*

The frame of the trap is 3 ft. W x 3 ft. L x 14" H. The prop stick is 18" long. The anchor flap is 14" W x 14" L. The door is 7" W x 18" H.

## ***Frame***

The frame is made of a lightweight, sturdy wood. Most preferable is "strapping," which has rounded edges. If you're unable to find strapping, you can use 2"x ½" or 2" x ¾" molding for the eight 36" horizontal pieces, and 1" x 1" regular wood for the five 14" vertical pieces. The wood must be lightweight to avoid the possibility of injury to the cats. Rounded edges are better for avoiding scrapes.

## ***Door***

The door is made of ¼" sanded underlayment plywood (or something similarly thin and smooth) and measures 7" W x 18" H. Slides for the door can be made from straight-grained fir tongue-and-groove flooring ripped in half, or you can purchase a piece of wooden sliding door track. You'll need two 18" pieces. If you use sliding door track, you'll need two extra pieces of 18" strapping or 1" x 1" wood so you can attach the tracks to these two 18" pieces, and then attach the 18" pieces to the frame. A knob for pulling the door up is also needed.

The door should be located off to one side towards the front corner. It's fastened to the frame after the netting has been attached.

## ***Anchor flap***

Attached by hinges to the back of the trap is a flap made of ¾" plywood and measuring 14" W x 14" L. When weighed down, this flap stabilizes and anchors the trap during the trapping operation, allowing the frame of the trap to be light enough not to harm a cat or kitten. It's recommended that a piece of carpeting be attached to the top of the flap for traction. Any heavy object can be used to place on the flap during the trapping, including a bucket of rocks, provided it does not interfere with the propping up of the frame.

The flap can be mounted to the frame with two T-hinges. Be sure the hinges are mounted high enough on the frame so that when the flap is lowered, the bottom of the trap itself is solidly on the ground and not lifted. This is very important for the stability of the trap when it's propped up. The flap is attached after the netting is put on.

The flap should be located at the opposite corner diagonally from the front door. This position helps balance the trap's weight. When a cat or cats are trapped inside and trying to get out, having the anchor flap and weight in the opposite corner allows you to put your knee down on the frame near the door and keep the frame firmly on the ground.

## ***Netting or mesh covering***

Green landscape netting with 1" square holes, commonly available in the garden departments of large stores like Home Depot, can be used for the covering. It should be doubled over because some cats are strong enough to break through a single layer. Other choices include safety fencing with 1" holes or debris netting, available at builder supply stores. With any plastic netting, it's recommended you double it over. Wire fencing, such as poultry fencing, should not be used because it's not visible enough to a panicked cat and they can also break through it. Hardware cloth mesh is too rough a surface for them to hurl themselves into.

One source for excellent netting material is survivalist stores. They often have heavy duty, pliable cotton or synthetic netting in stock for very low cost. One place to try is Major Surplus & Survival, 1-800-441-8855, [www.MajorSurplusNSurvival.com](http://www.MajorSurplusNSurvival.com). For example, at the time this handbook went to press, this company was offering an 8 ft. x 10 ft. "Swiss net" for \$12.95 (item no. 8-0916-3) and the same item in an 8 ft. x 20 ft. size for \$19.95 (item no. 8-0916-4). Athletic netting, found in some sporting goods stores, is also suitable.

To attach the netting, cover the frame with one big piece (or two) ***before*** the door or flap have been mounted. Don't pull the material taut because you want it to be loose and very malleable when a cat tries to break through it. Cut away the extra at the corners, leaving enough for a 3" overlap. Then cable tie the netting onto the frame at the corners and, if you're using two pieces of netting, where the pieces join. Be sure the two pieces are joined together well and there's no opening for the cat to squeeze out between them. Leave the netting long enough at the bottom to overlap the frame.

Fasten the door and slides to the outside of the frame in the corner. Also attach a 14" piece of strapping or molding (at least  $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick, 1" or 2" wide) to the inside of the frame behind the inner vertical door slide. This extra piece will allow the netting to be lashed on around the doorway.

Then, using rope, lash the netting to the frame at the bottom rim and around the doorway. It's best if the netting is only attached at the bottom of the frame and around the door and otherwise left loose. (*Note:* unlike the trap in the photos, which is also lashed on the top of the frame.) This allows for the covering to give when a cat pushes against it and is easier on the trap.

Note: the netting should not be stapled onto the frame. The staples can rust or break the netting upon impact by a cat.

### ***Prop stick***

An 18" prop stick can be made out of a 1" x 1" piece of wood or with the unused half of tongue-and-groove fir flooring used for making the door slides. With either material, notch the top so the frame of the trap rests securely on the prop stick and round the bottom so the stick won't jam when pulled. Towards the base of the prop stick, drill a hole large enough for the string to fit through, to make it easier to tie the string on.

### ***Paddle & string***

A paddle for holding the string can be cut out from  $\frac{1}{4}$ " sanded plywood, though any piece of wood you can wrap the string around will do. If you cut out a paddle, make it the shape of a ping-pong paddle that's been on a diet – thin on top and with a handle below. The string should be the heaviest you can get (best is mason's line) or a thin, strong rope. Fluorescent strings tend to stretch too much when wet.

### ***Transport***

The drop trap is fairly large and bulky. If you don't have a station wagon, SUV or mini-van, you can put the drop trap on a roof rack. Or, if your trunk is large enough, put it in as far as you can, then use bungee cords to tie the trunk securely over it. Remember that you'll also need room in your vehicle for box traps.

- **Directions for use by Laura Burns**

### **Materials needed**

- The drop trap and a cover for it, such as a large sheet or blanket
- The paddle-and-string and an anchor weight for the flap (e.g., bucket with bricks)
- Bait food and a large dish (also, can opener, fork, etc.)
- One or more box traps with rear guillotine doors or a transfer cage with guillotine door

### **WARNING!!**

The drop trap isn't foolproof. Cats can escape at various points in the process, but careful technique can avoid most disasters. Practice this procedure several times and don't use the drop trap for the first time on a cat you've been trying to get for three years. You'll make mistakes at first, you'll lose a few and you don't want it to be THAT one. Once you think you've got the hang of it, you might trap a few eartipped cats for practice (you can update their rabies vaccines or just thank and release them).

### **Quickie directions (*Note: these quick directions provide an overview of how to use the drop trap, but please also review the detailed directions that follow.*)**

1. Set up in a good location where the ground is level and you'll be able to observe the trap clearly from a distance. Position the trap so the door will be facing you as you watch.
2. Place a plentiful amount of food in the center-back of the trap.
3. Leave some box traps and covers within arm's reach of the drop trap.
4. Stand back a good distance (depends on the cats) with an unfolded blanket or sheet, holding the cord. Ask observers to stay back unless you call them.
5. When cat or cats \*\*have settled down\*\* to eat at the back of the trap, give the cord a good yank.
6. Run or walk up to the trap and COVER COMPLETELY. This is important if they're very wild! If you're alone, hold the trap down firmly and wait for the cats to settle before you attempt the transfer.
7. You want to get the cat(s) out as quickly and quietly as possible and reset the trap.
8. Line up the box trap to receive the cat, cover it with a towel or sheet. DON'T cover the far end of the box trap - you want it to look like an exit. CAREFULLY arrange towel and blanket to cover gaps between the two traps, place your foot on the box trap to keep it from shifting -- and open both doors. Stand very still.
9. If the cat doesn't move into the box trap in 15 seconds, twitch the cover over the drop trap or call a helper to motivate the cat to enter the box trap. Keep the cover on between you and the cat so he can't see you standing by the door.
10. Close BOTH doors when the cat has entered the box trap. If there are other cats remaining in the drop trap, you'll usually transfer them one at a time.
11. Cover the box trap fully and remove the cat to some distance if he's the only one. If there are others, just put him aside while you transfer the others. Then reset the trap and move the cats away.

## **Detailed instructions**

### ***Choosing a site and setting up***

- a) Set up the drop trap where you'll be able to see it well! You'll need to see eartips, etc. A super-bright flashlight (or car headlights) work fine at night to spotlight the trap. Cats don't seem to be concerned by lights.
- b) Try not to make multiple trips back and forth with trap, bucket, food, etc. Cause as little commotion as possible.
- c) Lay the trap down first, to be sure that when the trap is dropped, there are no gaps or objects that interfere with it falling.
- d) Place it as close as possible to where the cats will expect to find food – saves time. If you can, set it next to a wall or porch railing to restrict entry to one side. This enables you to place the food further away from the available side which means they'll be farther into the trap when eating. Remember to leave room for placing a box trap in front of the sliding door.
- e) Orient the trap so that the front (the side with the door) is facing you. This means the cat will have to turn her back on you to eat and so won't see your motions. If this is not possible, put the prop-stick on whatever side IS facing you – it may jam otherwise, and not move immediately when you pull on the cord.
- f) Put a box trap or traps (and covers) near the drop trap so they'll be easily accessible when there's a cat or two in the trap. Once the drop trap is covered, the cats will generally be quiet enough for you to go grab another box trap.

### ***Bait***

1. Use a deep, unbreakable dish (I like the Gladware Large Rectangle) or a dish familiar to them if it's unbreakable.
2. Supply enough food for several cats to come and eat their fill if there's more than one cat in the area. Even if you're not after the first few cats who enter and eat, they are useful as decoys to assure the others that it's safe to eat. ***You don't want to run out of food before your target kitty enters the trap.***
3. If possible, use their usual food, especially if they're suspicious of anything new. I use Friskies wet food mixed into a good quality dry food, unless they're the suspicious types. Remember, unless there's only one cat in the area, you want to put down plenty of food. They may associate tuna with trapping if you've trapped their colony a lot.
4. Put the food in the center-back of the trap.
5. You may need to sprinkle some of the food in and around the drop trap if the cats don't seem to realize there's food in the container, they're not used to scavenging for food (because they're so spoiled or they're young kittens), they're very wary or you're using bait that's unfamiliar to them.

### ***Dropping the trap***

- a) WAIT UNTIL THEY'VE SETTLED AT THE BACK OF THE TRAP TO EAT. If you wait too long, or if they're a little nervous and they leave quickly, they'll COME BACK sooner or later – they know there's food there. Don't make the mistake of dropping it before they're comfortably settled at the back of the trap and have them squeeze out! Then they may not come back. If there are two

- eating and one is waiting but inside the trap, wait until they've ALL started eating or one leaves. Otherwise, you're taking a chance that you'll lose one.
- b) If other cats are watching when you drop the trap, they'll scatter when the trap comes down or when you approach. Don't worry, they'll be back. They won't understand that you've taken away the cats inside the trap.

#### ***Transferring a cat from the drop trap to a box trap***

1. Tell observers to STAY BACK unless you call for assistance - avoid getting distracted. Sometimes the transfer from the drop trap to the box trap takes a minute or two. Don't panic, be patient. It takes a few seconds in most cases, but it can take longer or seem longer.
2. Take the time to cover the gap between the traps with the towel and cover. Put your foot on the box trap to keep it from shifting. Focus yourself, then open the two doors together.
3. The cat may not notice the open door right away.
4. Give him 20 seconds or so to see the open door. He should calm down slightly, but might not. You could try closing and re-opening the wooden door to get his attention. Sometimes it helps to twitch the cover slowly towards you and away from the back of the trap; the cat may move towards the front as he attempts to stay under cover. (Don't let him see you and realize he's also moving towards you.) But sometimes the cat redoubles his effort to get out of the back of the trap when the back is uncovered.
5. If the cat is determined to get out one of the far sides of the trap, it's useful to have a helper who could be any observer. Ask them to get DOWN, face to face with the cat, not hover overhead which just frightens them and doesn't give them direction. Assuming the cat can't see where you are standing at the front of the trap because of the cover, the cat will turn away from the helper and run toward the "exit."
6. If you don't have a helper, just re-cover the trap and try again. He'll go in eventually. Just be patient and stay calm and quiet. I don't talk to the cats generally – I want them to forget that I'm standing there, since I want them to come towards me and into the box trap.
7. You'll see the cat pass into the box trap between the two covers. He may hurl himself with a lot of force at the end of the box trap thinking he can get out that way – be sure that he doesn't shift the trap to the side, which would create too large of a gap between the two traps. Quickly drop the cover now and use your free hand to push down the WOODEN DOOR completely. Shut the wooden door first because it works more smoothly than the box trap door. As long as the traps don't shift position, he can't get out and he'll be at the far end of the trap anyway.
8. If there's a second cat in the drop trap, you must close the wooden door before you move the box trap away or the second cat will escape. Keep the box trap from shifting to the side (using a helper or your foot) and close the box trap's rear door, being sure to lock it. Now arrange the towel or sheet to cover the box trap and take him away.

### ***If you blow it***

If the cat escapes at some point in the process, it's not necessarily a fatal error. I've had cats that wiggled out of the trap, only to come back the same day within an hour or two to try again. You'll need to expose the cat to the trap for some period of time (short or long) until she regains confidence. One way for her to regain confidence is to see her friends eating from the trap without incident. So in this case, I would not drop the trap again until you get the cat that escaped.

### ***Strategy***

If there's a cat that's wary, particularly jumpy or pregnant, I like to catch her first and not do anything that will confirm her suspicions until she's safely out of the way. Other cats that eat safely from the trap will return and you can get them another day. If there's a mom cat and kittens, I try to get them first. However, don't get too fancy with this – today's happy chow hound is tomorrow's mom cat.

When one cat finishes eating, there's a delicate moment when one of the other cats who's been waiting will suddenly make up her mind to try out this new thing. If you've been waiting for one of these cats, you don't want her to discover the dish is empty or have to run in at that point to adjust something. If you need to adjust the drop trap for some reason or get a better look at the cat who's in it, approach the trap casually when the first cat is still in there. They'll scatter, but they'll be back as soon as you leave and will generally take up where they left off.

Try to have a good view of the general area around the trap, so you don't drop it just when a second cat is lurking nearby and thinking about entering.

## 10. Caring for Cats in Traps

During the trapping period and after the spay/neuter surgery, the cats need to be kept confined. Except in special cases (discussed in Chapter 11), we recommend the cats never be let out of their traps except during the surgery, after they've been sedated. The method of using traps to hold the cats is economical because it means not having to purchase a large cage plus assorted other equipment for each cat. The method also saves space and may make the difference between whether twenty cats can be held in a garage or not. Most importantly, in terms of avoiding escapes by the cats and injuries to caretakers, using the traps to house the cats is much safer than using normal cages.



Often people who have the cats' best interests at heart hear of this method for the first time and jump to the conclusion it's cruel to keep a cat in that small of a space for any lengthy period of time. This belief reflects a basic misunderstanding of the feral temperament. No matter how large a cage you put a feral cat in, if there's a small carrier in the corner, inside of that is where he's going to stay for pretty much the entire time. In the stressful situation of confinement, ferals greatly prefer spaces that are tight, dark and covered over large, wide-open enclosures. It makes them feel more hidden and protected. (This is why a feral cat kept in a normal cage should *always* be provided with a small carrier or cardboard box or something similar that they can hide in.)

As long as the traps are 36 inches long, covered and kept clean using the techniques described below, the cats are absolutely fine. They quickly get used to the feeding and cleaning routine and some even learn when and where to move as you go through the process. Towards the end of their confinement, they may start to get a little bored and restless, but this is the exception. Most often, during the entire time, they crouch or lie down in their traps and rest quietly.

- **Materials needed**

- Traps (36" long and with rear doors)
- Trap dividers (at least one pair)
- Cotton sheets for covers (one per trap)
- Newspaper (lots of it!)
- Water dishes (with flat bottoms)
- Food dishes (paper or plastic)
- Plastic drop cloth (at least 3 millimeters thick)
- Latex gloves
- Garbage bags
- (optional) Tables
- (optional) Small towels

## • Preparing the holding space

Spread the plastic drop cloth over the floor of the holding space. The plastic will catch any waste that escapes from the traps. When the project is over, the plastic can be rolled up and thrown out, which will usually take care of any odor. To cut down on the smell during the project, replace the plastic when the cats are gone for surgery.

If possible, arrange for tables to place the traps on. Six foot long craft tables are ideal and can comfortably fit five traps each. While tables are not essential, the work of caring for the cats goes faster and easier when the traps are raised up off the ground. If you do use tables, also cover them with plastic.

When the cats are brought in, line up the traps in rows, the rear and front doors all facing the same direction. Every trap should be covered and leave a few inches between them, if you can. If you know two particular cats are close friends or mother and kitten, press their traps up against one another length-wise and use one sheet to cover both traps.

The holding space must be warm (at least 65 degrees Fahrenheit). Keeping confined cats in too cold of a space could result in illness and even death. In hot weather, fans can be helpful in keeping the temperature down. Be sure all electrical cords and appliances used are safely installed.



## • Feeding and cleaning

Below are the steps for cleaning the trap and putting in fresh food and water. This process should be performed twice a day for each cat. Wear latex gloves for cleanliness.

- 1) Start at the front door end of the trap. Get the cat to move to the other end by folding back the sheet in the direction you want him to move. Ferals tend to move from light to dark and will retreat when the sheet is undone. If this doesn't work, tap the side of the trap lightly and shoo the cat. If he still won't move, insert one of the dividers from above and give a gentle shove.
- 2) Once the cat has moved to the rear end, insert two trap dividers from above into the middle of the trap, one right behind the other (Figure 1). The cat is now sectioned off and cannot escape when you open the front door. You should **ALWAYS** use two trap dividers and not get complacent and only use one.



**Figure 1**

The occasional cat will be strong enough to bend the outer tong of the divider and squeeze through or push the divider up and crawl out underneath. None of this can happen if you simply use two dividers back to back. This is an essential safety measure.

If you do find yourself stuck one day with only one divider, then insert it horizontally through both sides of the trap instead of vertically from above (Figure 2). Make sure the divider has gone all the way through the opposite side. This method is also secure, though more time-consuming than putting two dividers in from above, especially if you're working with multiple traps lined up close to one another.



**Figure 2**

- 3) While the cat is isolated on the rear end of the trap, open the front door and line the bottom with thick newspaper. If this isn't your first time in the trap, remove any dirty newspaper first. The newspaper makes the trap more comfortable for the cat and serves as their litter. Don't try putting in a small litter tray or you'll end up with a real mess. The newspaper works fine and some of the cats will even shred it. If you'd like, place the small towel at the front door end. The cats do enjoy sitting on the towel, though it tends to quickly get trashed.
- 4) Close the front door, making sure it's locked, and remove the dividers. Then fold the sheet back over the front half of the trap.
- 5) Go to the rear end of the trap, pull back the sheet and move the cat to the front end. Insert two dividers from above, back to back, then open the rear door. Replace any dirty newspaper before placing fresh newspaper on the floor.
- 6) In the trap near the rear door, place food on a plate and water in a low, flat-bottom container. Don't use cat food cans for the water – they can cause cuts. Bird food cups which hook to the side of the trap are good for water, while small plastic snack containers also do the job.
- 7) Shut the rear door, making sure it's locked. Remove the dividers and fold the sheet back over the rear of the trap.

When dealing with large numbers of cats, it can be helpful to work in an assembly-line manner. First put enough newspaper on top of each trap. Then go down the rows and do all the front ends first. Next, prepare all the food plates and water dishes and put them on top of the traps. Last, do all the rear ends of the traps, placing the food and water in as the final step for each one.

The reason you start at the front end and finish by putting the food in last at the rear is so that you don't end up backing the cat up into the food and water during the feeding

and cleaning process.

## • What if a cat does escape?

If you follow the procedures outlined here of using two dividers and double-checking that the doors are locked after you close them, cats will not escape. But if for some reason there's a mishap and a cat does get out, the most important thing to remember is never try to grab a feral with your bare hands. The cat will be very frightened and will believe you're trying to harm him. He'll fight to break loose from your grip and, in a split second, can inflict an injury serious enough to send you to the hospital for treatment. Don't try to throw a blanket over him and grab him that way, either. That's just as dangerous. What you will need to do is re-trap him.

If your holding space is in an enclosed interior, such as a basement or garage, the first step to take happens before an escape – shut the door, if you can, and block any other possible means of escape. Obviously you can't do this if your holding space is outdoors or in a large, wide open interior, which is all the more reason to be careful when feeding and cleaning.

Assuming the escaped cat cannot get out of the holding space, there are a few ways to re-trap them. One is the method described in Chapter 8 for hard-to-catch cats, entitled “Lure into a closed space.” Briefly described, this technique involves removing all places the cat can hide except one, and setting a trap there. If there are far too many hiding spots in the holding space, such as in a crowded garage, this method can't be used. But if there are only a few spots, then figure out which one the cat is behind and leave him there. Go remove all the other hiding places except for one and prepare the setup described in Chapter 8 of a board leaning against a wall with a covered and set trap at one end. Once the setup is complete, carefully flush the cat out of his current hiding spot by gently reaching in with a broomstick or making a little noise nearby. He'll run out of his spot and behind the board. If he doesn't go right into the trap, but stays behind the board, direct his movement towards the trap by gently poking the broomstick into the space behind the board. (Review the relevant section in Chapter 8 for the full procedure.)

If there's a closet in the holding space, there's another technique you can try. Set a trap in the closet and then shut the closet door, leaving only enough space for the cat to go in. Make sure the closet interior is dark, then make the rest of the holding space as bright as possible. Remove or block off any other dark hiding places. Shoo the cat out from wherever he's hiding with a broom and stand back. His natural tendency will be to run out of the brightness and into the dark closet and hopefully also into the trap.

If these methods don't work or are impractical in the particular space, then simply set a trap or two with bait, cover the sides of the traps with sheets (but not the rears) and wait it out. It can take a few days before hunger drives the cat back in, though usually overnight will do the trick.

Worst case scenario would involve asking a veterinarian or veterinary technician to come and use a fast-acting sedative on the cat. This is possible only if the cat is holed up somewhere where he can be easily reached. The technique should only be attempted by a veterinary professional experienced in working with ferals.

# 11. The Feral Cat Setup: Long-term Fosters

Sometimes a feral cat needs to be confined for an extended period of time. Situations include a serious injury like a bite wound or broken limb that needs time to heal, an illness that requires a course of antibiotics or a mom cat raising young kittens. The techniques described here are also useful when a feral cat is being introduced into a domestic household on a permanent basis (see “Socialization techniques for feral adults” in Chapter 15.) The “Feral Cat Setup” is designed for these circumstances.

When a cat should no longer be confined in a trap and instead kept in the Feral Cat Setup is largely a matter of what the caretaker is comfortable with and the particular cat’s disposition. If a cat is calm and the trap is kept clean, he can be confined in a trap for as long as seven to ten days. Depending on the cat, longer than that is also possible, but when the period of confinement will extend into weeks, the Feral Cat Setup should be used.

The worst thing anyone could do in a long-term foster situation is let the cat out into a room, even the bathroom. A feral cat released in this manner will either go find a place to hide, often a spot you never knew existed, or literally start climbing the walls trying to escape. You lose all control over their movement and when the time comes to transport them out of the room, trying to get them into a carrier will be outright dangerous and trapping them difficult. The Feral Cat Setup, with its carrier inside a cage, is a much safer way to go.



- **Materials needed**

- Cage, at least 36" L x 24" W x 20" H
- Small cat carrier with swinging and lockable front door
- Small litter pan
- Litter
- Yardstick or broomstick handle
- Cotton sheet
- Newspaper
- Food and water dishes
- Twist tie
- Small towel

Fully assembled, the Setup appears as in Figure 1: the bottom of the cage is lined with newspaper. The carrier with the towel inside sits in a rear corner - whether left or right depends on which direction the carrier door opens. The door needs to open towards the side of the cage, not towards the middle. Side by side to the carrier in the other rear corner is the litter pan. Ideally, the pan should fit fairly tight against the side of the carrier, helping to keep the carrier in place. Food and water dishes are placed towards the front of the cage near the cage door. A sheet covers part or all of the cage.

- **Placing the cat inside the Feral Cat Setup**

The way *not* to place a cat inside the Setup is to try to move the cat directly from a trap to inside the cage. This is very risky because at the moment both the trap door and cage door are open, all the cat has to do is exit the trap, twist around and take off. You won't be able to pull back the trap and shut the cage door in time to stop him. Instead of hoping the cat won't do this, the trick is to already have the cat inside the small carrier, then simply place the carrier inside the cage.

If the cat is coming back from a visit to the veterinarian or spay/neuter clinic, then give the carrier (with a towel inside) to the veterinary staff and ask them to put the cat in there while he's still sedated. Otherwise, you'll need to do a trap-to-carrier transfer, which is described later in this chapter.

Once the cat is in the carrier, follow these steps:

- 1) Place the carrier containing the cat into the rear corner of the cage, left or right corner depending on which way the carrier door opens (Figure 2).
- 2) Slide the yardstick through both sides of the cage so it bars the carrier door from opening (Figure 3).



**Figure 2**



**Figure 1**



**Figure 3**

- 3) Unlock the carrier door (Figure 4). Use a plate or a book to shield your hand if you're concerned about getting scratched.
- 4) Place food and water at the front of the cage.
- 5) Close and lock the cage door.
- 6) Remove the yardstick, then use it to reach into the cage through the bars (it's easiest from above) and maneuver the carrier door open until the door is resting against the side of the cage.
- 7) Use the twist tie to secure the carrier door against the side of the cage (Figure 5).
- 8) Cover the cage partially or fully with the cotton sheet to calm the cat.

**Figure 4****Figure 5**

## • Feeding and cleaning

Once the cat is inside the Setup and the carrier door is open, he's free to move about, eat, poop, scatter the litter, shred the newspaper, tip over the water dish, etc. Usually, it's not that bad but you will need to regularly feed and clean. In order for you to safely open the cage door and clean up, the cat must be inside the carrier. Normally, this is not a problem because feral cats will spend most of their time in the carrier to begin with as it's the only tight, dark space available. If they happen to be out of the carrier when you want to get in the cage, they'll usually head straight back inside as soon as they see you approaching.

If they start to get comfortable and don't go in, then you may have to coax them. Unfolding more of the sheet that's covering the cage might work. Other tricks include making a loud sound, tapping the side of the cage, poking gently with the yardstick or spraying a very small amount of water at them. If none of this works and the cat won't move into the carrier, wait and try again later. Do not open the cage door if the cat is out.

Once the cat is inside the carrier, follow these steps:

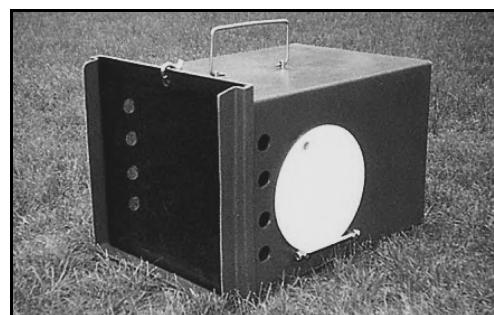
- 1) Untie the carrier door from the side of the cage.
- 2) Using the yardstick, maneuver the carrier door shut.

- 3) Bar the carrier door by sliding the yardstick through both sides of the cage just in front of the carrier door.
- 4) Open the cage door.
- 5) For extra security, lock the carrier door.
- 6) Clean up and leave food in front.
- 7) Unlock the carrier door, using a plate or book to avoid scratches.
- 8) Close and lock the cage door
- 9) Remove the yardstick
- 10) Use the yardstick to maneuver the carrier door open.
- 11) Twist-tie the carrier door to the side of the cage.
- 12) Cover the cage partially or fully with the sheet.

If you'd prefer, you can remove the carrier with the cat inside while you're cleaning, of course after you've locked the carrier door. When you're finished straightening up, put the carrier back inside, bar the door with the yardstick, unlock the carrier door, close the cage door, etc.

## • Feral Cat Handler (a better way?)

The Feral Cat Handler is a product that may be an easier-to-use alternative for the Feral Cat Setup than the carrier and yardstick technique. The Handler comes in the shape of a rectangular box and has dimensions (17" L x 12" W x 12" H) similar to a small cat carrier. It has two doors – a sliding guillotine door in front and a small porthole with a round cover/door on the side.



When the Feral Cat Handler is placed in a cage, the cat enters it through the open porthole. This would comport with typical feral behavior in seeking out dark, enclosed spaces. The cover to the porthole can be tipped shut and into a locked position from outside the cage by reaching in with a yardstick or something similar. In effect, the porthole and its cover serve the same purpose in the Feral Cat Setup as the yardstick barring the door of a normal cat carrier.

The Feral Cat Handler's porthole system is certainly faster and easier than the yardstick method, and its sliding guillotine front door allows for much safer and easier transfers from traps. We ourselves are not experienced enough yet in the use of the product to fully evaluate its usefulness as part of the Feral Cat Setup, but it looks like it's well worth checking out. A Feral Cat Handler is essential if the cage involved is one that only has bars in the front, like most of those in veterinary and animal control facilities. There are no sides in those kinds of cages for a yardstick to slide through and bar a carrier door.

The product comes in two colors, blue or white. More importantly, the guillotine front door comes either clear or smoked grey. You definitely want the smoked grey so the interior will be darker and more inviting to the cat. Here's how to order:

**Feral Cat Handler**

White with clear or smoked door (No. 711 or 712); \$49.50 (1 to 5), \$47.30 (6+)

Blue with clear or smoked door (No. 721 or 722); \$52.80 (1 to 5); \$50.60 (6+)

Available from Tomahawk

1-800-272-8727; [www.livetrap.com](http://www.livetrap.com) (click on “feral cat handler”)

A similar product called the Feral Cat Den is also available. It’s smaller (15” L x 11” W x 10” H) and only comes with a clear front door:

**Feral Cat Den**

White with clear door (Model M-FDWC); \$49.00

Granite with clear door (M-FDGC), \$52.00

Available from Animal Care Equipment & Services (ACES)

1-800-338-ACES; [www.animal-care.com/cata06a.htm](http://www.animal-care.com/cata06a.htm) (listed on the website under Safeguard Products)

## • Trap-to-carrier transfers

A trap-to-carrier transfer should be a rare event and typically is not necessary during a TNR project. Whenever possible, the cat should be confined and transported in the trap. This is safer for all involved and lessens the opportunity for an escape. However, if you’re using the Feral Cat Setup, you may need to transfer into a small carrier so that the cat can be placed inside the cage.

If the carrier is a Feral Cat Handler from Tomahawk or a Feral Cat Den from ACES, then the transfer from a trap is relatively easy and similar to a trap-to-trap transfer. (See “Trap-to-trap transfer” in Chapter 8.) The Handler is butted up against a wall or something immovable and its guillotine door is lined up with the rear door of the trap. The trap at this point should be covered with a sheet. Weight is applied to hold the trap down and, if a second person is present, she should hold the Handler in place. Both the rear trap door and Handler front door are lifted and the sheet on the trap is unfolded towards the Handler, causing the cat to move from light to dark and into the carrier. A trap divider to gently push him forward may be needed if that doesn’t work. Both doors are shut when the cat is inside.

If you’re transferring into a normal carrier with a swinging front door, the process is trickier and requires even more care. Butt the back of the carrier up against an immovable object like a wall and open the carrier door as far as it will go to the side. Then move the trap so that its rear door is up against the front of the carrier, blocking the carrier’s opening (Figure 6). Notice how the carrier’s front door is positioned to the side, away from the trap. If there are two people, one person holds the carrier in place, the other keeps the trap from moving. If you’re doing this alone, make sure the carrier is firmly against the wall and cannot shift as long as your weight is on the trap.



**Figure 6**

Cover the carrier with a towel to make it darker and more inviting. Then lift open the rear door of the trap, but no higher than the top of the carrier. Otherwise, you'll create a gap which the cat might try to squeeze through. After the trap's rear door is raised, guide the cat into the carrier either by unfolding the sheet over the trap or pushing with the divider (Figure 7). As soon as he's in, lower and shut the rear door of the trap.

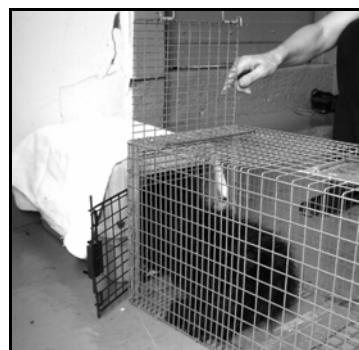
Now comes the tricky part, which is moving the trap away and shutting the carrier door without giving the cat a chance to bolt in the process. You'll need a solid, flat object that is larger than the carrier door. Perfect is a small cutting board with a handle. Slide the board between the rear of the trap and the front opening of the carrier and press it firmly down against the ground (Figure 8). When the trap is pulled away, the board will act as a barrier and block the cat from escaping.

Move the trap away and immediately shut the carrier door, pressing it up against the cutting board (which continues to block the front opening of the carrier). Then, in one motion, slide the cutting board out to the side as you close the carrier door, being sure not to leave a gap between the carrier door and the cutting board (Figure 9.) Lock the carrier door once its completely shut.

If you have two people, one moves the trap away while the other shuts the carrier door and slides the cutting board away. If you're alone, push the trap away with your foot, keeping one hand on the carrier door and holding the cutting board in place with the other. Then it's the same motion of closing the carrier door while sliding away the cutting board in a manner that does not create a gap.

Practice this technique beforehand, going through the steps with the equipment. If you have a willing house cat who will let you practice on her, that's even better. Keep in mind there are four ways the procedure could go wrong: (1) you open the rear door of the trap too high above the height of the carrier and create a gap the cat could squeeze through; (2) the trap or the carrier shifts during the transfer, creating a gap between the doors for the cat to escape through; (3) you use too flimsy an object to block off the carrier opening, like a piece of cardboard, and the cat is able to burst through when the trap is pulled away; or (4) you don't press down hard enough on the cutting board, allowing the cat to push it aside after the trap is moved away and before the carrier door is fully shut.

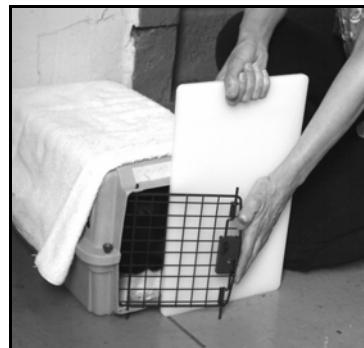
If you practice beforehand and proceed carefully, the method will work. With practice, it can be done swiftly.



**Figure 7**



**Figure 8**



**Figure 9**

## 12. Spay/neuter and Veterinary Care

- **Preparations before surgery**

### ***Withhold food & water***

For adult cats, all food and water should be removed from the traps by 10 p.m. the night before the spay/neuter surgery. It's important for the cat's stomach to be empty during the operation. Otherwise, there is a chance the cat will vomit while anesthetized and the regurgitated food could cause him to choke or gag, a potentially fatal complication. Water should be withheld, too. If too much water is ingested by a female, her bladder swells and is more exposed to an accidental cut during the spay procedure.



For kittens, food and water should not be withheld for as long. They need to eat closer to the time of surgery than adults. How long before the surgery food and water should be withheld depends on their age. The younger they are, the closer in time to the operation they should be fed. Consult your veterinarian for the precise timing. For any age, food and water should be removed at least a few hours prior to surgery.

### ***Arrange for emergency post-surgery veterinary care***

If you're working with experienced, competent veterinary professionals, the incidence of post-surgical complications will be very low. Still, it's best to plan what you would do in the rare event something does go wrong after the cat has been returned to your care. If the veterinarian or clinic performing the spay/neuter will not be available at all times, then try to line up a veterinarian who will be able to respond in an emergency or locate where in your area late or early hour drop-in care is provided.

### ***Special instructions for veterinary staff***

Any special instructions for the veterinary staff should be written on a label on top of the trap. For example, write down if the cat is limping and you want the left front leg examined, the cat is older and you'd like the teeth looked at, there is a wound that needs cleaning, the cat is pregnant, or you want any kind of veterinary care beyond the standard treatment provided. It's especially important to write it down in big bold lettering if you do not want the cat eartipped because you will be adopting him out. (If a mistake happens, don't be overly concerned – eartipped cats are no less adoptable in our experience.)

In addition to placing special instructions on a label, make sure they are also noted on the veterinarian or clinic's intake form. If the clinic is experienced with ferals, they will already have their own form and you'll simply need to relay the instructions while they or you fill the form out. If there is no intake form, don't make the mistake of relying only

on verbal instructions. Something you say could easily be forgotten or misunderstood. Type up your own simple intake form if necessary, stating your name, the cat's description, the date and your instructions, and hand it to the veterinary staff when you bring in the cat. That way there's no confusion about what you want done.

### ***Traps and covers***

Feral cats should always be brought to the veterinarian in traps. It's safe and easy to sedate a cat using a needle through the bars of a trap. In contrast, it's difficult and dangerous if the cat is in a carrier or similar container. Likewise, the traps should always be covered with a sheet to keep the cat calm.

### ***Educating the veterinary staff***

Working with feral cats is still a relatively new area for many veterinarians and clinics. As a result, you may know more than they do about safe handling of ferals. If your veterinarian tells you it's fine to bring a feral in a carrier and has never heard of a trap divider, then educate him. Explain why it's safer for him and his staff to have the cat brought in a trap and buy him a pair of trap dividers, demonstrating their use. If they have never performed an eartip, show them a photo of an eartipped cat and get them literature on how to perform the procedure (see the Resources page on the Alley Cat Allies website: [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)). Find out if they intend to place the cat in a normal cage before or after surgery and explain why it's safer to keep them in the trap and avoid risky transfers.

It bears repeating that you should show an eartip to an inexperienced veterinarian even if they tell you they know what it is. Your idea of an eartip may not be theirs – without guidance, they may do an “ear notch” by taking out a V-shaped piece of the ear on the side, which from a distance outdoors is indistinguishable from a fight wound. Or they may take off too much or too little of the tip of the ear. Don't take chances when a simple photograph or drawing will prevent a mishap.

## **• Types of veterinary treatment**

While protocols will vary from clinic to clinic, the standard treatment for a feral cat should include at a minimum (1) spay/neuter, (2) eartip and (3) rabies vaccination. Medications for fleas and ear mites are considered optional by most clinics, but are part of the standard protocol in others. If flea and ear mite medications are not part of the standard package, then consider requesting them at least in cases of severe infestation.

Testing for feline leukemia (FeLV) or feline AIDS (FIV) is not standard practice and should not be part of a feral cat protocol for the reasons discussed later in this chapter under “FIV/FeLV testing.” Testing should be performed only when a cat is observably symptomatic and ill and the results will assist the veterinarian in diagnosis and treatment.

Likewise, other vaccinations besides rabies are not recommended. When other vaccines are given to ferals, what is usually administered is known as the “3-in-1” shot. The shot includes three different vaccines – panleukopenia (feline distemper), calici virus and rhinotracheitis. It's a hardship on the cat's immune system to process these vaccines at a time when the cat is under great stress from being in captivity, weakened by

anesthesia, already processing the rabies vaccine and possibly also dealing with flea and/or ear mite medication. Furthermore, according to the manufacturers' own instructions, these vaccines require a booster three to four weeks after the initial dose, which is unlikely to ever happen with a feral. A more holistic approach to promoting feral health, including adequate shelter and good nutrition, is far preferable than excessive and possibly ineffective vaccinations.

If a cat is older and the services are available and affordable, it's an excellent idea to have the cat's teeth examined and treated. The time of spay/neuter might be the only opportunity to provide dental care which, by preventing gum disease and mouth infections, could prolong the cat's life by many years. This may not be practical if the clinic is only set up for spay/neuter or affordable if you're dealing with a large number of cats. But keep it in mind as something to do when you can.

Veterinarians experienced with early age spay/neuter can perform the surgery on a kitten who is either eight weeks old or weighs two lbs. Likewise, a pregnant female can be aborted up until just before giving birth if the veterinarian is experienced and comfortable enough performing the procedure. Lactating females or females in heat also can be spayed by veterinarians familiar with working on them. Very early-age spay/neuter, abortion of late term pregnancies and spay/neuter of lactating females or females in heat should not be attempted by a veterinarian who is untrained in these procedures.

## • **Eartipping**

The universal sign of a neutered feral cat is a quarter-inch, straight line cut off the tip of the left ear. While the cat is sedated and unconscious, the tip of the left ear is clamped off with a hemostat and then swiftly removed with a sharp blade. The wound is cauterized to prevent bleeding and the hemostat removed. Performed properly, the procedure takes less than a minute, there is no bleeding and no apparent pain or discomfort when the cat regains consciousness.

While the universal practice is to tip the left ear, along the West Coast of the United States, including California and Oregon, the right ear is tipped instead. Find out what the standard practice is in your area and adhere to that. If there is no standard yet, then stick to the left ear for uniformity's sake.

It's easier to see an eartip out in the field when you are looking at the cat from behind. Binoculars can also be very helpful in this regard.

Eartipping serves several vital functions. It allows caretakers to quickly identify whether a cat in the colony is neutered or needs to be trapped. During trapping operations, the left ear of a cat who is caught can be checked immediately to see whether he should be released right away. Eartipping also gives animal control a visual cue for



determining whether a cat belongs to a managed colony. In progressive systems, animal control will not trap an eartipped cat or, if the cat has been turned into a shelter by a private party, will attempt to locate the caretaker.

For many caretakers and veterinarians new to working with feral cats, there is initially a negative reaction to eartipping. It is seen as a kind of mutilation of the animal and attempts are made to find some other, less invasive means of identification. By now, all other methods attempted have proved failures.

**Eartagging** involves the insertion of a metal clip into the side of the ear. The method suffers from a number of defects. Ear tags were designed for certain domestic farm animals, not for free-roaming cats. The tags are small and almost impossible to observe at a distance. In addition, experience has shown that sometimes they do fall off. They can get caught in twigs and thin branches and cause tears with subsequent infections.

**Tattooing** the inner ear provides no visual cue for determining whether a cat has already been altered without having to trap her first. Even when the cat is in the trap, it often cannot be discerned out in the field whether a tattoo is present or not. Instead, only after the cat has been brought to the clinic and sedated can this be determined. The practice of tattooing also potentially increases the risk of disease transmission. Unless the tattooing instruments are sterilized after use on each cat, blood to blood transmission of germs is possible.

**Photos** are impractical because it's hard to take good ones, they're not always available right when you need to look at them, and no visual cue is provided for third parties like animal control or a concerned neighbor unaware of your work. In addition, photos are not even helpful to the caretaker in colonies where many of the cats share similar appearances, such as an all tabby or all black colony.

**Doing nothing** except relying on the caretaker's knowledge of the colony is risky, even when the caretaker knows the cats extremely well. If the caretaker changes, there's no record. In addition, as with photos, there's no visual cue for third parties.

While in an ideal world, there would be no need to tip a feral cat's ear, in truth it is far less invasive a procedure than the spay or neuter itself. Because it serves a vital purpose, and because there is value in having one universally known symbol of identification, eartipping should always be part of the standard feral protocol.

## • **FIV/FeLV testing**

The vast majority of experienced TNR programs do not perform FIV/FeLV testing on feral cats who are asymptomatic, meaning they are not showing signs of ill health. There are several good reasons for this policy, which are discussed below:

### 1. **Inefficient use of limited resources**

Studies show the prevalence of FIV (feline aids) and FeLV (feline leukemia) in the feral population is similar to that in the domestic cat population – approximately 4% have FeLV and 2% have FIV. On average then, testing 1000 feral cats will result in the identification of 60 cats who test positive for either FIV or FeLV. At a relatively low cost of \$10 per test, that would mean \$10,000 needs to be spent to identify 60 positive cats. That same \$10,000 could be put instead towards neutering hundreds of ferals. If

the primary goal is to stem overpopulation, neutering hundreds of cats should take priority over identifying 60 positives.

But even if disease prevention in the feral population is considered an equal goal, spending the money to neuter hundreds of cats will stop the spread of disease a lot faster than plucking out 60 cats with viruses. Neutering eliminates kittens, the group most susceptible to catching disease because their immune systems are not fully developed. Neutering also eliminates mating behavior, a key transmission route of FeLV. In addition, deep bite wounds are the means by which FIV is transmitted among cats and neutering greatly reduces fighting among males.

## **2. The tests normally administered to ferals are not reliable enough to make life or death decisions**

The FIV/FeLV test is really two different tests – one for each virus. Reliability issues depend on which virus is being tested for and what specific kind of test is being administered.

For FIV and feral cats, most veterinarians and clinics use the ELISA test (Enzyme Linked Immunoabsorbent Assay). Often called a “snap” test, it produces results within minutes. The ELISA test for FIV detects whether antibodies to the FIV virus are present in the blood, not whether the virus itself is present. As a result, a positive test result does not necessarily mean the cat is infected. For cats less than six months of age, FIV antibodies may have been passed to them from their nursing mother, but not the virus. Another complication arises from the advent of the FIV vaccine. Cats who have received the vaccine will test positive for FIV, but only because the vaccine stimulated their immune system to form FIV antibodies.

For FeLV, an ELISA snap test is again the most commonly administered to ferals. The ELISA test for FeLV determines whether the antigen of the virus is present in the blood. Thus, unlike the ELISA FIV test, the presence of the virus can be directly detected. The test though is sensitive and prone to false positives from mishandling. A classic example of mishandling occurs when the result given is “weak positive.” There is no such thing. Either the antigen is present in the blood or it’s not. “Weak positive” almost always indicates some type of testing error and the test should be re-administered.

Even more troubling, just because a cat has the FeLV virus in their blood does not mean they will become permanently infected. Infection does not take permanent hold until the FeLV virus enters the cat’s white blood cells. If exposure to the virus was recent, which is always possible, the ELISA test would show a positive result, but the cat still might be able to fight off the disease. Only a second test can determine whether the virus has entered the white blood cells – this is the IFA test (Immunofluorescence Assay), also known as the Hardy test. The IFA/Hardy test must be performed at a lab and is more expensive. It’s almost never administered to feral cats absent special arrangements.

Thus, to truly know if a cat is infected with FeLV, a positive ELISA test must be confirmed by a positive IFA/Hardy test. To diagnose FeLV based on a positive ELISA test alone is a faulty practice. Only if the positive ELISA test is confirmed with an IFA test or combined with other symptoms of illness can a reliable FeLV diagnosis be made.

Given these facts, the practice of identifying positive cats based on one FIV/FeLV snap test inevitably leads to errors, resulting in the euthanasia of cats who were either not infected or would have fought off infection given the chance.

### **3. FIV positive cats can lead relatively long lives**

Cats infected with FIV have commonly been known to live for many years and some never get sick. While their immune systems are compromised, proper care and nutrition can compensate to at least some degree. By contrast, FeLV positive cats have a much higher mortality rate. Most infections occur in kittens and most of them will die by the age of two to three years old. Still, while they are alive, they can often live symptom free until near the end if properly fed and sheltered.

### **4. Euthanizing positive cats is ineffective colony management**

The theory often advanced is that positive feral cats need to be identified through testing so they can be removed from the colony and the remaining cats can be protected from the disease. In truth, removing the positive cat makes little difference. It's most likely the other cats in the colony have already been exposed to the virus and will have become infected or not. Furthermore, no matter how many ferals are removed because of positive test results, FIV and FeLV will remain in the environment and be an ongoing threat. New cats passing through or entering the colony could carry it and even colony members who tested negative might be harboring the FeLV virus. It's not well known, but the ELISA FeLV test is also not completely reliable when the result is negative. The FeLV virus could be hiding in the bone marrow of an infected cat and not show up in the blood.

The primary cause of illness in ferals, including FIV and FeLV, has more to do with proper colony management than the presence of any virus. Colonies with lots of sick cats are invariably ones that receive poor or insufficient nutrition, have inadequate shelter from cold and rain, and are unneutered. These conditions lead to weakened immune systems and susceptibility to disease. Indeed, some holistic veterinarians believe it is almost impossible for a healthy adult cat to catch FeLV. The best way to prevent the spread of disease is not by testing and removing individual cats, but by improving the quality of food, making sure the cats have warm, dry shelter in winter and getting them altered.

### **5. The life of a FIV/FeLV positive cat has value, too**

At Neighborhood Cats, we euthanize cats only if they are actively ill, suffering and terminal. If a feral cat was to test FIV or FeLV positive, but showed no signs of illness, we would return him to his colony. As a result, there's no point in our doing the testing as a matter of routine. We only test if the cat is sick and the results are needed for diagnosis, treatment or determining if euthanasia is appropriate.

There have been a few instances when we knowingly returned FIV or FeLV positive but asymptomatic cats back to their colonies. These colonies were neutered and well managed. We have yet to observe other cats falling ill as a consequence. Cats who are known to be positive do need to be closely observed for signs the terminal stage of the illness has taken hold. Loss of weight, persistent upper respiratory infections, drooling or difficulty eating indicates the cat should be re-trapped and examined by a veterinarian.

#### ***If your veterinarian insists on testing, anyway***

Despite these factors weighing against the testing of ferals, your veterinarian may insist upon it and not give you any choice in the matter. Or the program providing spay/neuter funding may include testing in its protocol and is inflexible. If that's the

case, then find out **before** the cat is tested what the policy is for handling positive cats. If they will automatically euthanize the animal, which unfortunately is often the case, then we recommend you do not work with them if at all possible. As the caretaker of the colony, as the one who watches over, worries and feeds the cats on a daily basis, it is your right to decide their fate, not the veterinarian's. The veterinarian is there to help and provide information, not make life-or-death decisions in your place. Feral cats are not second-class animals and should receive the same consideration as a domestic cat. A veterinarian would never presume to decide for the guardian of a house cat that the animal is going to be euthanized, nor should he do so for a feral simply because he's providing his services to you for free or at a discount.

## • Post-surgical recovery

### **Anesthetic withdrawal**

Depending on the spay/neuter clinic, the cats may be returned to your care prior to their full recovery from the anesthesia. In those instances, it's important to recognize the typical stages of anesthetic withdrawal so you can properly assess whether everything is going well.

In the first stage, the cat is unconscious (Figure 1). Everything is normal if she is breathing regularly, gums are pink and not white, and eyes are wide open and reflexively blink when tapped at the corner. Care must be taken to ensure the cat does not lie in a position that would constrict their windpipe and cut off their breathing, such as awkwardly twisting their neck. Because this assessment may require handling of the cat, cats in the unconscious stage should not be returned to the caretaker. Only experienced veterinary staff should ever pass judgment on whether it is safe to touch a sedated feral cat.

In the second stage, depending on the type of anesthetic used, the cat may shake or twitch a fair amount, as though violently shivering or in a mild seizure. This is nothing to be alarmed about. The anesthesia causes the cat to lose control over the regulation of her body temperature, which drops. As the drugs wear off, the cat shivers to regain warmth. The drop in body temperature is why it is vital that a recently neutered cat be placed in a warm space for recovery (at least 65 degrees Fahrenheit). During this stage and hereafter, the cat should be confined in her trap.

In the third stage, the cat has regained consciousness, but not full control over bodily movements. The cat may struggle to move about and fall over or swoon, appearing in a drunken state. She may bang up against the sides of the trap, trying to get out. The trap should be covered with a sheet by this point to provide a sense of security.

Finally, upon full withdrawal, the cat will lie or sit quietly, appearing perhaps a little tired but otherwise alert.



**Figure 1**

## ***Food***

Adult cats can be fed three or four hours after full anesthetic withdrawal. Start out feeding about half the normal amount in case their stomachs are upset from the anesthesia. The next morning, full portions can be given. Water should be provided as needed. Sometimes the cats' mouths become dry from the anesthesia and at first they'll drink more than usual. Kittens may need to eat sooner than three or four hours, depending on their age. Ask your veterinarian how long you should wait.

## ***Emergencies***

Symptoms which indicate the need for emergency veterinary care following the surgery include (1) pools of blood or (2) prolonged unconsciousness. Drops of blood around the scrotum for males or the spay incision for females are normal, as is urine tinged with blood for the first day or two. A pool of blood, even an 1/8<sup>th</sup> of a cup, requires immediate attention. Another cause for emergency intervention is if the cat is still fully unconscious a couple of hours after the surgery.

# 13. Return to the Colony

## *Length of recovery period*

Practices vary widely among TNR groups and programs on how long the cats should be confined post-neutering before being returned to their territory. On one extreme, there is at least one large program that releases the cats as soon as they have fully withdrawn from the anesthesia, within hours of the surgery. On the other extreme, other groups recommend recovery periods of up to five to seven days. Then there is everything inbetween – 24 hours for all cats, 24 hours just for males, 48 hours for all cats, etc. Further complicating the matter, every TNR program will in good faith claim their protocol works and is safe.



There are a few reasons for the competing guidelines. Providing recovery time requires a holding space, which does make the TNR process more difficult. If the cats are let go right away, then a trapper can catch them the day before surgery, keep them in the back of the van overnight, bring them to the clinic in the morning and let them go in the afternoon. Streamlining the TNR process in this way probably means more cats get neutered, but probably also means more cats die from post-surgical complications that go undetected.

On the other hand, being overly cautious and confining the cats for too long also has its down sides. First, for the cat, confinement is stressful. Once their wounds are fairly well healed and they're alert, it's healthier for them to be back in their own environment than stuck in a trap or cage. Second, requiring caretakers to find holding spaces for a week post-neutering can be too much of a deterrent to performing TNR.

At Neighborhood Cats, we balance the need for a reasonable post-surgery recovery period to ensure the cats' health and the need to keep the TNR process simplified to ensure caretaker participation by recommending 48 hours recovery time for both males and females. If circumstances require, male cats can be released after only 24 hours, but 48 is preferred. With female cats, because the surgery is more invasive, 72 hours is acceptable if the caretaker is willing to hold them the extra day. Beyond 72 hours, we hold cats only if their condition requires, either because they're ill or for some reason still not fully recovered. It can be a tough call sometimes whether a cat should be held longer. Often caretakers wait until the cats are eating well, but some cats are so stressed by captivity that they're fine but won't eat and sometimes won't even defecate. If the cat appears otherwise fully alert, but is not eating, it could be better to let them go.

No cat should be released without veterinary consultation if there are any serious lingering health issues. The need to consult a veterinarian can also be a matter of judgment. For example, if a cat develops a mild cold while confined, as evidenced by a

runny eye, this could be due to stress and the condition might resolve faster if the cat was released. On the other hand, if the cat is excessively lethargic, has a severe upper respiratory infection and is not eating, then a veterinarian should be consulted before any decision on releasing is made. In general, if there is any doubt on the right thing to do, the choice should be made to seek out professional advice.

A lactating mother presents a special case when her kittens are out in the territory without her. The kittens' need for their mother causes us to release her sooner than we would otherwise, usually 24 hours after the spay, assuming she is alert and appears well.

### ***Location of release***

Feral cats should always be released back to their own territory unless a proper relocation process has been followed for a period of two to three weeks (see Chapter 14.) Ferals are extremely territorial creatures and cannot be safely released into new areas without a transition period. If a cat is “cold released” somewhere unfamiliar, his instinct will be to run away and try to find his own territory. The result could be disastrous with the cat ending up terrified in a place with no caretaker, no colony mates and unknown dangers. Simply releasing a feral cat into a new location without any relocation process amounts to abandonment and should not be done.

After their release, some of the cats may stay out of sight for a few days or even as long as a week or two. But they soon re-adjust to their routine and learn to trust you again in their feral way.

# 14. Relocation & Sanctuaries

- **Relocation**

***When is relocation appropriate?***

When caring but inexperienced people confront a feral cat colony that is unmanaged and the object of community hostility, often their first thought is to move the cats to a safer place. They don't understand how difficult it is to find a safer place, how arduous and uncertain the process of moving the cats can be, and how important it is to the cats to be able to stay right where they are.

The cats in a feral colony cherish their territory. They know their home extremely well with all its pitfalls, shortcuts and hidden passages. Next to food, their surroundings are the factor most important to their survival. Their home – shabby as the parking lot, back alley, empty lot or crumbling building may seem to us – is truly their castle. Once a colony becomes managed, the cats may live relatively long, healthy and satisfying lives if the security of their home remains intact.

Because their territory, as well as their bonds to one another, is so important to them, relocation should be considered only when their environment is truly under imminent threat. Most problems can be solved through TNR. A community's initial hostility due to noise, odor and endless litters of kittens is ended by neutering; encroachment in a garden can be easily deterred; a property owner's complaint might be satisfied simply by moving a feeding station.

Relocation is hard work, requiring the cats to be confined in their new territory for two to three weeks until they learn their food source has changed. Otherwise, they're likely to immediately run off in search of their old stomping grounds. Even with a two to three week confinement, some may still run away after the release. And this assumes a suitable new site has been secured, which is no easy task either.

Yet another consideration is what will happen in the old territory if the cats are removed. If the habitat still contains sufficient food and shelter, then sooner or later new cats will move in to take advantage and the cycle will begin again.

For these reasons, every possible avenue towards allowing the cats to stay should be thoroughly explored and relocation should be considered only as an absolute last resort. For example, if the colony lives in an abandoned building that is about to be demolished or a number of cats have been maliciously killed and the violence can't be stopped. But these are extreme situations and, hopefully, very much the exception.



## ***Choosing a new site***

The first step is to find a new site. You don't have to duplicate the original territory – cats in a warehouse can be moved to a backyard or from an abandoned building to a barn, etc. What the new territory does need are: (1) a reliable new caretaker who will strictly follow the guidelines for relocation and fully accept responsibility for the cats' long-term care, (2) a structure of some sort (barn, shed, garage) that will provide shelter and protection from the elements during the confinement period, and (3) a location away from a construction site or heavy traffic.

Cats can be relocated into territories where there is already a colony, but it makes the process harder for the new cats and should be avoided if possible. Also investigate other factors, including potential danger from predatory wildlife like coyotes, wolves or dogs, hostility from nearby neighbors or businesses, proximity to land designated for hunting and any other potential environmental hazard. It's likely you won't find the perfect site and will have to make some compromises, but it's always good to aim for the ideal.

Don't move the cats until you have personally inspected the new location – things are not always as you might imagine. Not all barns are idyllic, cozy places filled with soft, warm hay. A nice country home may sound perfect, but if it turns out the caretaker only goes up on weekends, that won't work because newly relocated cats need supervision for two to three weeks, including the providing of food and water on a daily basis. So spend the extra time and effort to see the prospective new place and meet the caretaker in person ***before*** you move the cats. Don't risk receiving an unpleasant surprise and having to make a terribly difficult decision on the spot after you've driven for hours with trapped and frightened cats in tow.

Along the same lines, ***never*** hand the cats over to someone to take to a new site you've never seen yourself. No matter how nice the new place may sound and how desperate you are to move the cats, you are placing them in great danger if you blindly trust that someone will take care of everything for you. There are unscrupulous people who take advantage of others' concern for the cats and promise the cats will have a wonderful new life in their new home when nothing of the sort is true. Sometimes they charge a fee per cat, which they pocket and then simply let the cat out the back door of wherever. Others will even kill the animals out of a pathological belief they are doing a good thing for them, whether a fee is paid or not. The only way you can protect the cats from these evils is if you yourself inspect the new location.

## ***Doing the relocation***

Whenever possible, relocate the entire colony in order not to break up strong bonds. If that's not feasible, then at the very least, relocate two members of the same colony together who you know are close. Neuter the cats before relocating them so they can get over the stress of the surgery before having to adjust to a new place, and nurse sick or injured cats back to health first.

The process is going to be a little stressful for everyone, so you want to keep it as smooth, fast and uneventful as possible. Trap the cats, get them neutered if necessary and allow a few days for recovery. Also, be sure to tell the new caretaker-to-be the details of

the cats' past routine. If they're used to eating a certain type of food, continue with it. Each change they have to make will add to their stress.

Before you transport the cats to the new site, have everything set up at your destination. Inside the space where the cats will be confined, set up large playpens or cages in a quiet area, preferably close to a spot where they can hide after they're eventually released. Typically, when they are released after the two to three week confinement period, they will be frightened and need somewhere close by to hide for a day or two while they adjust. So, for example, in a large barn, the cages could be placed near bales of hay. Or in a garage, cardboard boxes with small openings for the cats could be set up near the cages.

The playpens or cages should contain a carrier the cats can hide in, a litter box and food bowls – see the Feral Cat Setup described in Chapter 11. The environment should be temperate, neither too hot nor too cold. Avoid doing a relocation to an unheated space during the severest months of winter – the cats can't move around much or huddle together, so the cold can pose a risk to their health. If you must do it during the cold season, use small insulated shelters inside the cages that are stuffed with hay or straw instead of carriers. Cover the cages with blankets.

No matter what the weather, the cats may try to escape, especially during the first few days. Be certain the caretaker knows the procedures described in Chapter 11 for how to handle feral cats in cages and demonstrate them live. The cats need fresh food and water twice a day and clean litter, so the cage door will be opened often, giving them lots of opportunities to make a run for it. In case of escape from the cage or playpen, have the caretaker set out food and water and sprinkle used litter and old feces around the area. Most likely an escaped cat inside a structure like a barn or stable will stay inside and hide rather than seek the outdoors, especially if sufficient food is available close by.

Encourage the caretaker to talk to the cats and try to bond with them. They need to adjust to a new voice or voices as well as everything else that's new. If the cats form a degree of trust and bond with the caretaker, the relocation process has a good chance of success. Keeping their feeding times on a schedule is helpful, as is feeding wet food during the period of confinement and for a few additional weeks after they're released. The wet food is consumed faster than the dry and helps habituate the cats to a new routine. Gradually, a few weeks after the release, the wet food can be replaced or supplemented with dry, if that's preferable. At all times, water should be provided.

Three weeks of confinement is optimal. Keeping the cats confined for longer periods is not recommended. The idea is to acclimate the cats to their new surroundings so they won't panic upon release. Once acclimation is accomplished, the stress of confinement is unnecessary and can cause the cat to want to flee the area if carried on for too long.

Stay in touch with the new caretaker. You'll want to know how the cats are doing and be available to offer any help or advice you can based on your experience with them. If at any time the relocation space becomes unsafe or unsuitable for the cats, make sure the caretaker alerts you to the situation and knows you are willing to give support and assistance. Whenever possible, have a backup plan – another site where the cats may go, even temporarily – in case of unsolvable problems.

Remember to try to remove all evidence of feral life from the colony's old location, primarily any food sources. Even if construction or renovation in the area is imminent,

it's possible for new cats to move into the vacuum created by the removal of the original cats. You don't want to go through this process all over again!

For more tips and guidelines on the relocation process, go to the Resource Center on the Alley Cat Allies website ([www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)) and look up the fact sheet entitled, "Safe Relocation for Feral Cats."

## • Sanctuaries

Finding a good sanctuary can be harder than doing a successful relocation. The problem is clear: there are millions of feral cats and only a handful of well-run, trustworthy sanctuaries. It is quite difficult to find space in one for even a single feral cat, let alone an entire colony.

To place an animal in anything less than a good sanctuary would be irresponsible. Unfortunately, poorly run "sanctuaries" are abundant. They tend to be inadequate in terms of staff, space, nutrition, finances and caring. There are also, even more sadly, groups and individuals who pretend to have sanctuaries and lie to people desperate to find a place for ferals. They take donations for the cats and then kill them or warehouse them in horrible conditions.

Just as in a relocation, the only way you can ensure the cats in your care are going to a good place and not to a horror show is to investigate the sanctuary yourself. You should not take anybody's word for it, no matter how reliable you think that person is. As the person responsible for the lives of the cats, it's up to you to exercise your own independent judgment.

Most importantly, you should personally visit the facility to make an on-site inspection, preferably before you bring the cats. While you're there, ask lots of questions – if a place is well run, the owners will be happy to tell you anything you want to know. If the owner appears to resent your questions or gives less than full answers, take this as a strong sign it's not going to be a good home for your cats.

Here's what you need to find out about the underlying legal and financial condition of the sanctuary:

- 1) **Is the facility operating legally?** Is a license required by the town, county or state for running a shelter or sanctuary? If so, do they have one and is it current? Ask to see it and call the licensing authority to verify information you're given. Also important is whether the property is zoned for sheltering large numbers of animals. If zoning is a problem or if a license is needed but missing, reject the place.
- 2) **What kind of right does the sanctuary have to the land?** Do they own or lease it? If it's owned, is there an outstanding mortgage? If it's leased, how long is the term? Does the lease allow for a sanctuary? Again, don't be afraid to ask to see the documentation. Cats can live to twenty years, and you need to know the sanctuary is still going to be around for that long. If the lease runs out soon, what do the owners plan to do with the animals?

- 3) **Is the sanctuary in good standing with local authorities?** Call the local health department to see if there have been violations. The local animal control or law enforcement agency will tell you if any complaints for cruelty or neglect have been filed. A call to the Better Business Bureau or Chamber of Commerce may be informative as well. Most states have some type of charity bureau that provides oversight for nonprofits. It's often part of the Attorney General's Office.
- 4) **How is the sanctuary funded?** It takes a great deal of money to run a good sanctuary, between mortgage or lease payments, staff, veterinary bills, property upkeep and food. Preferably, the facility will be a nonprofit registered with the state and the IRS. If so, request a recent financial statement. At least in New York, you have the right by law to inspect the books at the corporate headquarters. If the sanctuary is not run by a nonprofit, find out who pays the bills and how long have they been doing it. Remember it's much harder for someone to raise funds if they are not part of a nonprofit.

If you determine that on balance, the sanctuary is on sound legal and financial footing, you'll still need to inspect the actual physical facility. Pay close attention to your first impression when you first walk in. Does the place appear to be friendly and adequately staffed? Is there literature describing the facility? Walk around the whole place – not just the part where the feral cats live – and see if the living conditions for the animals are clean and spacious as opposed to crowded and unsanitary. Are the facilities warm and dry? Are FIV or FeLV cats kept separate from others? How do they go about adding a new cat – is there a transition period and separate enclosure within the larger space (as there should be) or do they just toss them right in (as they shouldn't)?

Find out if the sanctuary staff is sensitive to the special needs of ferals and understands that ferals are not just “scaredy-cats.” Look to see that there are lots of places for the ferals to hide and that all the cats have plenty of scratching posts, toys and comfortable napping places. Ask what kind of food they use and how often the cats are fed. Make sure the animals look bright-eyed and healthy. Other questions to ask include: How do they handle sick cats – are there veterinary services available on site? What is their euthanasia policy? Do they have a cap on the number of cats they'll take in? Do they have a relocation program for ferals where they will send a number of them to a barn or the like? If so, what are the guidelines and will your cats possibly be included?

Once you've inspected the grounds and gotten the answers to all your questions, you can now make a well-informed decision on whether this is going to be a responsible, healthy place where your cats will live in comfort and have a good chance of leading a happy life. If you're not satisfied, don't settle but keep looking for other alternatives. As the cats' sole guardian, you'll be at peace knowing you've done all you can to ensure their future well being.

## 15. Adoptable Cats

Whenever possible, adoptable cats and kittens should be removed from a feral colony for placement in good homes. This helps reduce the homeless cat population and gives these particular cats their best chance at a long, healthy life free from the dangers of the streets. At the same time, if the resources don't exist to allow you to do this, whether it's because you have no room in your home, the local shelter has no space or you can't afford the veterinary bills, then getting the cats neutered and caring for them as best you can in their territory is still a compassionate choice.



The term "adoptable" as used here means custody of the cat can be easily transferred from the caretaker who rescues him to a new person who wants to make him part of their home. Almost any cat can be socialized to the point where they adapt to being in a domestic situation, but not every cat can be picked up, pet or easily brought to a veterinarian – all the signs of an adoptable cat. So while a feral may learn to live indoors, if he can't be touched and hides under the bed all day, he's not adoptable.

There are three categories of cats in feral colonies who are potentially adoptable: (1) abandoned domestic cats who are still friendly to people, (2) young kittens who can be easily socialized, and (3) the rare case of a friendly adult feral.

- **Determining if a cat is adoptable**

### *Abandoned domestic cats*

There is no simple trick for determining whether an adult cat who you just trapped is a friendly domestic or a real feral. One popular misconception is that if a trapped cat thrashes about wildly, then they're feral and if not, they're friendly. It's not true. Almost any cat, domestic or feral, will panic when they realize they are suddenly confined and at a stranger's mercy. It's only later, after they've calmed down, that you can begin to make a correct evaluation.

If a cat is really a friendly domestic, he may calm down very quickly or it may take longer. When cats are abandoned and then spend some time outdoors on their own, struggling to survive, it can be a very traumatic experience for them. Later, after they're trapped and placed in a safe location, they may express a certain amount of post-traumatic stress, evidenced by prolonged meowing, aggressive behavior or lethargic withdrawal. They need the time and space to go through this process, which moves along much faster in cats than humans, in order to get past the trauma. How long this period lasts depends on the cat, but is usually a few days. Only then can you begin to see who they really are.

One way to start to evaluate whether a cat is a former domestic is to observe his behavior before you trap him and to know the colony well. Is the cat in question a recent arrival, indicating a likelihood he was abandoned? Does he trust you right away or soon after he's met you? There are friendly ferals who will rub up against your leg or allow you to pet them, but it usually takes a fair amount of time before they'll trust you enough to let this happen. Domestic cats tend to be less wary than ferals and seek affection from humans much sooner. Does the cat remain separate from the rest of the cats, indicating he does not belong to their clan? No single factor is determinative, but in viewing the whole situation, you can start to get an accurate assessment.

Another clue, although again only one of many factors to consider, is how the cat reacts once he's in the trap and has calmed down a bit. If he rolls on his back, makes a lot of noise and generally seems to be relaxed or vying for your attention, that would be very unlike a feral. Feral cats tend to back away and hunch up at the end of the trap opposite to you. In addition, many feral cats don't like to make eye contact with you. When they do look at your eyes, they don't connect and instead appear as though they're looking right through you, like you weren't there. Another clue can come from slowly moving a long thin object through the side of the trap towards the cat, like a ruler or a pencil, and see how they react. If they hiss or lash out, then they would do the same to your hand if you tried to pet them.

Veterinarians who are experienced with ferals often develop a good feel for distinguishing them from domestics, so ask their opinion as well. If there's promise, transfer the cat into a cage, using the Feral Cat Setup described in Chapter 11, and try playing with the cat through the bars, using a string or Cat Dancer toy. If he never engages with you, that's a sign pointing towards feral.

Keep in mind at all times that there is no magic litmus test. Every cat is different and all these "signs" must be considered together to make a correct determination. The difficulty of distinguishing ferals from friendly domestics is another reason why you should never try to pick up an unknown cat and place him in a carrier or trap. If you are wrong about the nature of the cat, you could be seriously injured, so use a trap. This warning also applies to kittens, who even at five or six weeks of age have teeth sharp enough and jaws strong enough to do some damage.

### ***Feral kittens***

Age is the key factor in determining whether feral kittens can be quickly socialized. While there are occasional exceptions, kittens six to seven weeks of age are easily socialized, usually within a day or two if they receive a great deal of attention and handling. Seven to eight weeks of age is also normally a good age for quick taming, though it may take several days to a week. Above eight weeks, the degree of difficulty and uncertainty rises with each week of increasing age. Still, if a kitten is three months or less, the chances are good they can, with enough time and patience, be tamed to the point of becoming adoptable.

Beyond three to four months old, the odds start to drop precipitously. It becomes more likely at this age range that if a kitten socializes, she will bond strongly to the person who tamed her, but will hide and be wary of others, making her harder to adopt.

See "Socializing feral kittens" later in this chapter for ideas on how to convert a feral kitten to the domestic life.

### ***Friendly adult ferals***

This is a tricky category because all may not be as it first appears. Simply put, just because a feral cat acts affectionately towards his caretaker while in his own territory, this does not necessarily mean he will react well and remain friendly once he is removed and placed indoors. Most likely, he will at the least need to go through a transition period before his friendly outdoor ways resume (see “Socializing feral adults” later in this chapter).

That said, there are feral cats who take to humans, especially if some time has passed since they were neutered. One good sign that domesticity and adoption is plausible is if the cat starts acting friendly towards strangers, or shows no fear of them and does not run away or stand out of arm’s reach when they approach. If that’s the case, it can be dangerous for the cat to remain outdoors as he will not necessarily protect himself from strangers as much as a feral cat should.

### **• Veterinary care for adoptable cats**

The standard veterinary care for a cat who may be placed in a domestic home differs from that of a feral who is going to be released. The cat should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible before being introduced to a home. He should be tested for FIV/FeLV in order to ensure other domestic cats are not exposed to the virus. Treatment, as needed, should be provided for fleas, worms, ear mites, upper respiratory infections, ringworm or any of the other possible conditions which could result from an outdoor life. Teeth should be examined and an overall checkup given.

### **• Socializing feral kittens**

Some feral kittens socialize the moment you pick them up and hold them in your hands. Most take a little more work. As always in dealing with feral cats, you must be careful. A six week old kitten can easily put his fangs straight through your finger and if frightened enough, he will. Their parents have taught them that humans are large predators out to eat them, so keep that in mind before you straight away go sticking your hand inside their carrier. You have to let feral kittens get to know you a bit before you try to handle them. When they’re a little more used to you, then you can carefully try touching them, using the techniques described here. A good idea is to leave them alone and just talk to them for a day or two before attempting any physical contact.



Once you have them in your home or shelter, it's best to start feral kittens out in a confined space like a bathroom where they will be forced to deal with your presence when you're also in the space. Otherwise, if you let them out into your home at large, they'll run and hide and may never interact with you. At first, put a carrier in the confined space which they can go run into when they want. This way, they feel there is a safe place within their territory. If after a couple of days, they're still running and hiding whenever you show up and won't come out, replace the carrier with an open box. That way they still feel somewhat protected, but can see you and begin to interact.

Before you try to touch or handle them, draw the kittens to you by playing with them. One of the toys with a long wand and a feather on a string is great, as is a widely available and inexpensive toy called a Cat Dancer which consists of little pieces of cardboard on the end of a wire. Once they're engrossed in play, keep running the feather or Cat Dancer over your feet and legs and get the kittens to run over you and touch your body while they're playing. This way, they will learn you're safe. Talk to them constantly.



The kittens may become comfortable playing and haphazardly touching you very quickly or it may take several days. Be patient if it does take time – they're learning to trust you and need to move at their own pace. Once they are at ease, as evidenced by their quickly wanting to play and showing no fear of your presence, then reach down during the play and stroke them once or twice on the back, but no more. Don't let the touching interrupt the play. Gradually, increase the amount of touching, but avoid letting it get to the point where they act at all disturbed by it.

When they're very comfortable with your petting them, which again can take a few days, you can start to pick them up. Once again, escalate the contact slowly. At first, only lift them up off the ground for a second or two. When they're ok with that, then hold them a bit longer. Eventually, place them on your lap, but don't hold them there if they want to jump off. Continue increasing contact until they're lying in your lap and purring as you stroke them. The length of this process – from play to petting to holding at length – will depend on the temperament and age of the kitten.

With a particularly wild kitten who resists these methods, try wrapping him in a towel (to immobilize him), then put him in your lap and pet him on the head and through the towel. Start off doing this briefly and slowly increase the time period. When he's comfortable and appears to enjoy the touching, then you can try doing it without the towel.

Another technique for very wild kittens is to start them off in a cage instead of an open space like a bathroom. Include a litter box and an open cardboard box inside the cage. Use a back scratcher or a long, soft-haired paint brush to reach through the bars and touch him. He may hiss and react poorly at first, but eventually he'll likely realize it feels enjoyable and start to purr. At this point, you can try using your hand, though be on

the alert for a possible scratch. Play with the kitten through the bars, too, with a Cat Dancer or similar toy and give him lots of little treats – anything that gives him a positive association with you is good. As his comfort level with you increases, initiate more open contact. Eventually, when trust has been built up, move the kitten into a confined space like the bathroom and carry on as described above.

The more contact feral kittens have with you, the faster they will socialize. This is very important at the beginning of the socialization process when the kittens, especially the younger ones, are liable to identify you as their surrogate parent. So play and talk with them as often as you can. Interacting with them for short periods several times a day is better than being with them for one long period and then leaving them alone the rest of the time. It's also important with feral kittens that multiple people handle them, if that's at all possible. This way, you avoid the risk of them only socializing to you and not being adoptable to others.

There are a variety of other methods for socializing kittens and it's a good idea to read up on them and find what works for you. Two other resources include the following:

- 1) "Taming Feral Kittens," a fact sheet by Alley Cat Allies. Available on their website ([www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org) – click on "Resources.")
- 2) "Taming Feral Kittens," an article by the Feral Cat Coalition of San Diego. Available on their website ([www.feralcat.com](http://www.feralcat.com).)

Even young kittens who quickly learn to become house cats will usually still retain some feral characteristics, such as extra-sensitivity to changes in their environment and more than the usual fear of leaving their territory when you move or take them to the veterinarian. These behaviors may stay with them their entire lives, should be anticipated and, if possible, prepared for in ways that will lessen their stress.

## • Socializing feral adults

### ***Should you try?***

Socializing a feral teenager (older than 3 to 4 months of age) or feral adult can be a time-consuming, difficult task with uncertain results. The older the cat, the more likely he will socialize only to a certain degree and then only to the person taming him and not to anyone else. Whether you should attempt socialization depends on several factors.

The first consideration is the context in which you're working. Are you caring for one group of cats only or are you setting standards for a citywide feral cat organization? If your target area is the community as a whole and not just your own backyard, then allocating resources to socializing feral adults can take away from your group's ability to neuter and care for other street cats. In addition, most communities are euthanizing already friendly, domestic cats who can't find homes. Having a policy of socializing feral cats could mean even fewer spots for friendly cats already in the system. On the other hand, if your focus is on the one colony you are the caretaker for, these types of considerations are not as pressing.

Second, you need to assess the colony's social structure. Feral cats have complex relationships with each other. Couples may form which last a lifetime. There are also hierarchies, and dominant and submissive roles. Removing a cat from the colony can upset the balance and you may be depriving the cat of her closest ties.

Third, is the colony relatively secure or are they facing imminent danger? Will their site be destroyed by new construction or are there hostile neighbors who have acted violently towards the cats in the past? Certainly the presence of danger would weigh in favor of introducing a feral to domestic life, while a secure situation would tend towards leaving well enough alone.

Fourth, what about the cat himself? Is he old? Alone? Handicapped? Sometimes a feral cat does well in his territory for many years, but as he gets on in age, can't handle the rigors of living outdoors as well.

If none of these factors point towards bringing in a feral, it's always best to allow other beings to live according to their true natures. A long, safe life hiding in fear under your bed is not preferable to a shorter, free life roaming outdoors.

### ***Socialization techniques for adult ferals***

Realistically, the goal for socializing a feral adult is very different from what you are trying to achieve when you socialize a feral kitten. Kittens can become adoptable – for the most part, feral adults cannot. The aim for socializing an adult is not to be able to pick her up, pet her and adopt her out to a stranger. Instead, a more realistic goal is to teach her how to adjust and find her own niche in a domestic environment and avoid having her hide and be in fear for years to come. Beyond this, how far the cat progresses towards being a normal house cat will be up to her, not you or whoever takes her in. One day she may decide you're ok and come and sit next to you, allowing you to touch her. But this may take years, if ever. This uncertainty must be accepted at the outset or the experience can be a frustrating one - for you because the cat is not acting like you want and for the cat because she'll sense your frustration and not feel at ease. More than anything, socializing an adult feral means learning to appreciate and love her for who she is, and allowing her to develop as she chooses.

The key to socialization is how a feral adult is introduced into your home. All too often, people let them loose right away with the predictable result that the cat finds some obscure, unreachable place to hide. Then she only comes out late at night to eat. This pattern can go unchanged for years. The way to prevent this is to start them off in a cage, using the Feral Cat Setup described in Chapter 11.

The cage is vital because it gives the cat a place where she feels safe. Contrary to many people's belief, a feral cat prefers a covered, enclosed space to a wide-open one. That's why they go run under the bed, given the opportunity. By starting the cat off in a cage, you choose their hiding spot, not the cat. This gives you control over the socialization process, including feeding and training the cat to use a litter box. It also gives the cat a sense of security because she'll soon learn she's safe when she's in the cage and separated from you by bars. Keep at least the back portion of the cage covered with a sheet to increase her sense of comfort.

The cage should be placed in a part of the home neither too isolated nor too busy. This gives the cat a chance to learn the new sights and sounds of a human home without becoming overwhelmed. Remember, she has never heard a phone ring or smelled dinner

being prepared. By being in a well-situated cage, she'll also be able to watch you and learn your patterns – such as the fact that you won't attack her when you walk by. Learning all these little things are crucial to the socialization process and won't necessarily happen if you simply let the cat go run and hide anywhere she wants.

You should talk to the cat often so she learns to know and trust your voice. This period in the cage also allows the feral to get to know and become comfortable with any other animals in the residence. They can interact with her through the bars of the cage.

The cat should be kept in the cage until she grows visibly comfortable in your presence, but no less than two weeks. The desired comfort level is manifested by the cat no longer darting into the carrier whenever you walk into the room. Instead, she'll remain perched on top of the carrier or she'll come out to eat the food you just placed in the cage while you're still in the room. It may seem like a long time to confine the cat in a cage, but it's worth it considering this early process will shape the cat's relationship with you for years to come.

Once the cat is comfortable with your presence, leave the door of the cage open, but don't change anything else. Above all, don't try to coax or force the cat out of the cage. Just casually leave the door open one night and let her come and go as she pleases. Do this at night before you go to bed because she'll feel safer venturing out for the first time when it's quiet and dark. Do not take the cage away but leave it just as it's always been. This is her safe spot and often the cat will continue to use the cage for some time to come to sleep in and use the litter box. You should continue to feed in the cage as well.

If a month has passed since the cat was first confined in the cage and she is not acting at ease, open the door anyway as described. Past a month, the stress of confinement can take away from whatever progress towards socialization the cat has made.

When the day comes that the cat no longer uses the cage as a refuge and can be easily fed elsewhere, then you can break the Feral Cat Setup down. At that point, the transition into your home is complete and successful. This doesn't mean the cat is going to jump into your arms or not run when you approach. Now she has to learn to adapt to the entire home and that will take time, too, and may cause her to temporarily regress a bit in her behavior. But many of her initial fears have been assuaged and the chances of her finding her own comfort zone and living without constant fear in your home are greatly increased.

If you need to bring your feral cat to the veterinarian or otherwise confine her, you'll need to anticipate this a week or two in advance. You can set up the cage again with the carrier inside and start feeding her in there. That way you can get her into the carrier at the opportune time. Or else you can start feeding her inside a trap, then set it when you need to transport her.

If you move to another house or apartment, you should go through the socialization process with the Feral Cat Setup again, though it will likely be a much shorter period of time before the cat appears at ease enough to let her out.

## • **Finding good homes: adoption procedures**

Finding a cat a *good* home, as opposed to just any home, takes work. Unfortunately, many people are not mature or responsible enough to take on the life-long care of an

animal companion. You, as the cat's guardian, need to recognize who will give the cat a loving, secure home, and who may not. There are good homes out there. There are also people who get an animal on an impulse that won't last, give the animal away as a gift without asking if the recipient wants one, want the cat only to keep away mice or are unable to adequately care for themselves or the dependents they already have, let alone a new cat. There are also unscrupulous types known as "bunchers" who sell tame animals to laboratories for experimentation.

In order to protect the cat and guarantee he ends up in a good place, there are certain procedures that should always be followed in every case. To ensure a terrible mistake is not made, these procedures must be adhered to, regardless of how good a first impression a potential adopter has made on you. In the end, no matter how careful you are, you're making a decision that will affect the rest of the cat's life based on relatively little information from someone who is often a total stranger. Following the basic steps outlined here will greatly enhance your ability to make the right choice.

First, ask lots of questions and don't be afraid to get personal. You owe it to the cat and the right person will understand that and appreciate it, not be put off. Here's a list you could follow:

1. Is the cat for you or is the animal a gift? If a gift, you'll want to speak directly to the person due to receive the cat – who may end up not wanting her.
2. Do you have a cat now? If so, ask about his/her health (FIV/FeLV negative), age, spayed/neutered, personality, diet, etc. Get a veterinary reference and call.
3. Have you had cats in the past? If so, what happened? Don't accept "died of old age." Ask specific questions. Again, get a veterinary reference and check on it.
4. If you don't have a cat now and never had one, how do you plan on learning how to properly take care of one?
5. What would you do if your cat scratched the furniture? This question is designed to see if a person would immediately think to declaw the cat. At Neighborhood Cats, we strongly recommend cats NOT be declawed. The procedure involves amputating bones and cutting ligaments and tendons, and can cause permanent physical and psychological damage. Often people don't realize how extensive the surgery is, so if someone mentions declawing, explain why it's such a risk and see how they react.
6. Do you have roommates? Children? Is anyone allergic to cats? If there are roommates, who will have ultimate responsibility for the cat? Avoid "shared" situations unless the adopters are in a long-term intimate relationship. Otherwise, trouble inevitably looms down the road when roommates part ways. If there are other household members, you'll want to meet them.
7. Are there screens on all the windows, terrace, balcony? (Yes!) Will the cat be allowed on the fire escape? (No!)
8. Pets are a lifetime commitment. Cats can live to be 20 years old! Are you prepared to care for the cat for her lifetime? What if your situation changes (a baby, boyfriend/girlfriend, move, etc.)?
9. Will the cat go outside? Under what circumstances? Closely supervised/fenced-in or not?
10. Are you employed? Occupation? How long?
11. References (job, personal, veterinary)?

If you're satisfied with the answers you get, then explain the next steps in the adoption process: (1) The person comes over to meet the cat; (2) if that goes well, then you will pay a visit to their home (preferably without the cat – too much pressure otherwise), and (3) there will be an adoption fee, which you should make at least \$75.

Having the person come see the cat for the first time, instead of you bringing the cat to them, shows if they have enough interest to take the trouble to come and meet their new friend. The subsequent home visit allows you to confirm that your evaluation of the person as a good placement is correct. There is little more revealing than a person's home. Is it pleasant, clean, has a sense of warmth, screens on the windows like they said, etc.? If you go and get a bad feeling, don't give them the cat, but say you need more time to think about it. Doing a home visit also helps ensure you are not dealing with an unsavory character who doesn't actually live where he claimed.

Charging a fee is essential. This is the only way to guarantee you are not being fooled by a professional buncher who intends to sell the cat. These people are very smooth and practiced at saying exactly what you want to hear. Charging a fee eliminates this danger because then they cannot profit by selling to a lab. Furthermore, anyone adopting an animal should be able to afford a modest fee. If they can't, how will they pay the next veterinary bill? Cats do cost something to keep in good health.

All this may seem like a lot, but a good home will appreciate your thoroughness and understand you're doing it because you deeply care for the cat. If someone objects and says you're making it too hard, that's a red flag and a sign that you should keep looking.

Whenever possible, especially with feral cats and kittens, try to place them in a home with another feline. Ferals are cats' cats. They usually get along with other cats extremely well, including domestics, but can languish if left alone. If you have multiple kittens and want to adopt them out in pairs, which is always ideal for them, then ask right away before going into the other questions whether the potential adopter is willing to take two. Some people won't, but in the end, if you stick to adopting in pairs, you'll only need to find half as many good placements.

In order to attract that great home (which will come along if you're patient), post flyers in veterinarians' offices, pet stores, your gym and your workplace. Include a good photo of the cat on the flyer – pictures make all the difference. Check your local paper to see if they offer free ads for adoptable animals. Finally, post your cat on Petfinder ([www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com)), the largest Internet-based adoption service.

## 16. Feral Cat Resources

### Neighborhood Cats educational materials

- The Neighborhood Cats TNR Kit (includes handbook and video described below; \$25.00 plus \$3.95 shipping & handling)**

**The Neighborhood Cats TNR Handbook: A Guide to Trap-Neuter-Return for the Feral Cat Caretaker (printed manual, 108 pp.)**

The first of its kind, the handbook covers all aspects of practicing Trap-Neuter-Return and working with feral cats. Written in clear, practical, how-to-do-it language, the manual includes chapters, among others, on trapping (including special cases and hard-to-catch cats), caring for cats while they're confined, arranging and utilizing spay/neuter services, food, shelter, community relations, socializing feral kittens, socializing adults, relocation, and adoption. Techniques are demonstrated with photos and all information conveyed is derived from actual hands-on experience.



**"How to Perform a Mass Trapping" (VHS video, 32 min.)**

Using footage from actual Neighborhood Cats TNR projects, this instructional video takes the viewer step-by-step through the process of trapping and neutering an entire feral cat colony at once. Topics include preparing for the trapping, community relations, preparing a space for holding trapped cats, trapping, caring for cats while they're being held before and after surgery, the spay/neuter day, stages of anesthetic withdrawal for cats, recovery and release.

**TO ORDER THE NEIGHBORHOOD CATS TNR KIT:**

Checks made out to "ASPCA" can be sent to: ASPCA, National Shelter Outreach, 424 East 92<sup>nd</sup> St., 10128-6804, or order online at: [www.aspca.org/catalog](http://www.aspca.org/catalog).

Contact ASPCA National Shelter Outreach at email: [outreach@aspca.org](mailto:outreach@aspca.org) or phone: 212-876-7700, ext. 4403.

- "The Nuts & Bolts of Implementing a Community-Wide TNR Program," (written guide, 18 pp. plus appendices; to receive a free copy, email [outreach@aspca.org](mailto:outreach@aspca.org) or mail written request to ASPCA, National Shelter Outreach, 424 East 92<sup>nd</sup> St., New York, NY 10128-6804.)**

Based on a lecture by Neighborhood Cats executive director Bryan Kortis at the Animal Welfare Federation of New Jersey Conference 2004, this guide focuses on setting up a successful community TNR program, including dealing with local laws, liability issues, field strategy, workshops, colony registration systems, equipment, and more.

- Sample TNR Policy Presentation (written article, 23 pp.; to receive a free copy, email [outreach@aspca.org](mailto:outreach@aspca.org) or mail written request to ASPCA, National Shelter Outreach, 424 East 92<sup>nd</sup> St., New York, NY 10128-6804.)**

This exhaustively researched article (contains 133 footnotes) is a template for presentations on TNR to municipal or animal control officials considering whether to allow implementation of TNR. The article covers all angles of TNR from a policy perspective, including why it works, the benefits on both colony and community levels, why other alternatives fail, wildlife and bird concerns, and public health issues. The article is formatted to allow for easy insertion of local data and information.

- Sample TNR Workshop Outline (written outline, 5 pp.; to receive a free copy, email [outreach@aspca.org](mailto:outreach@aspca.org) or mail written request to ASPCA, National Shelter Outreach, 424 East 92<sup>nd</sup> St., New York, NY 10128-6804.)**

A detailed sample three to four hour TNR workshop is outlined topic by topic with references to the applicable sections of the Neighborhood Cats TNR Handbook. Formatted to allow insertion of information on local resources.

## Websites

- Neighborhood Cats** ([www.neighborhoodcats.org](http://www.neighborhoodcats.org))
- Alley Cat Allies** ([www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org))
- Feral Cat Coalition (of San Diego)** ([www.feralcat.com](http://www.feralcat.com))
- Castaway Critters** ([www.castawaycritters.org](http://www.castawaycritters.org)) – see their “Feral Cats” page
- American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals** ([www.aspca.org/tnr](http://www.aspca.org/tnr))
- San Francisco SPCA** ([www.sfsPCA.org](http://www.sfsPCA.org))
- Petfinder** ([www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com)) – for cat adoptions and see their Library

## Books

- Community Approaches to Feral Cats: Problems, Alternatives, & Recommendations** by Dr. Margaret R. Slater, DVM (Humane Society of US Press, 2002).
- Maverick Cats: Encounters with Feral Cats** by Ellen Perry Berkeley (The New England Press, 2001)
- The Wild Life of the Domestic Cat** by Roger Tabor (Arrow Books, 1987)
- Shadow Cats: Tales from New York City's Animal Underground** by Janet Jensen (Adams Media Corp., 2002)
- Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff** (Blackwell Publishers, 2004) – see Chapter 23: “Feral Cat Management,” by Dr. Julie Levy, DVM

# **POISONING CATS IN NEW YORK STATE IS A FELONY**

# **\$1000 REWARD**

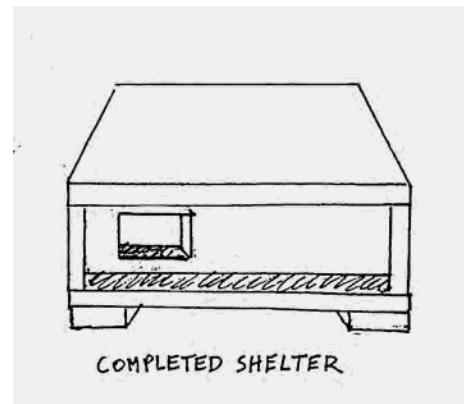
**For information leading to the arrest  
and conviction of the person or  
persons responsible for the  
POISONING OF CATS  
in this neighborhood.**

**Punishment for this crime is two years  
in prison and/or a \$5000 fine**

### **Contact:**

**Humane Law Enforcement Division of the ASPCA  
(212) 876-7700  
Neighborhood Cats, Inc.  
(212) 662-5761**

# THE NEIGHBORHOOD CATS WINTER SHELTER



## Materials

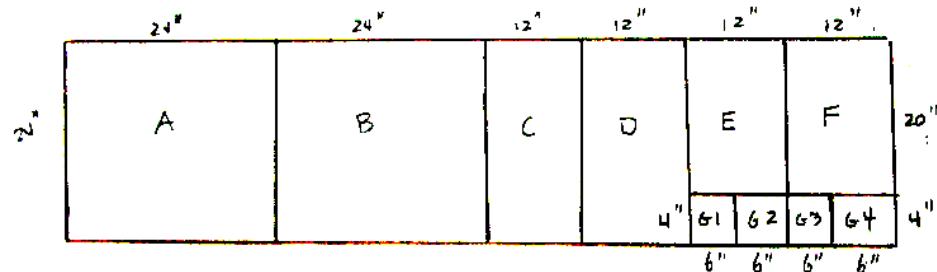
- hard Styrofoam sheet, 2 ft. wide, 8 ft. long, 2 inches thick
- one tube (that fits caulk gun) of clear silicone sealant (such as GE Window & Door Sealant) OR two smaller hand-squeezable tubes of clear silicone sealant
- vinyl remnant (18" x 20") OR three one-foot square pieces of thin linoleum tile with adhesive backing
- latex deck paint (approx. 1 quart)
- (*optional*) contact paper - 4 feet of 20-inch wide

## Tools

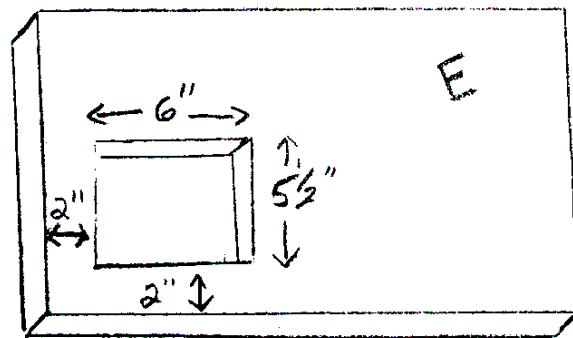
- table saw
- utility knife (with extendable blade) or jigsaw
- caulk gun
- painting equipment: brush/roller, paint tray, ground cloth
- felt tip marker
- yardstick

## Instructions

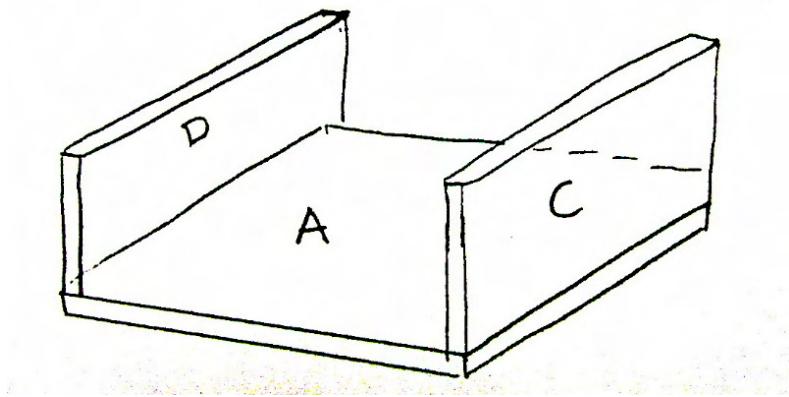
1. Using a table saw, cut the Styrofoam sheet into the following pieces:
  - two pieces of 24" x 24" (pieces A & B)
  - two pieces of 12" x 24" (pieces C & D)
  - two pieces of 12" x 20" (pieces E & F)
  - four pieces of 4" x 6" (pieces G1, G2, G3 & G4)



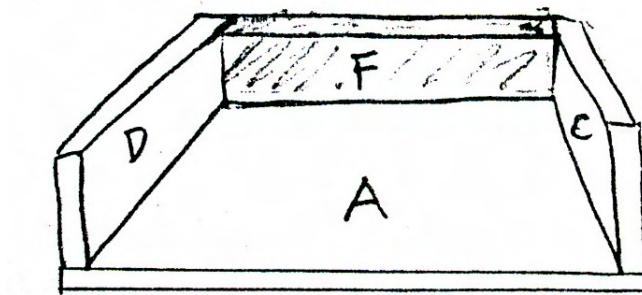
2. The first step is to cut out what will become the front door of the shelter. Take piece E (12" x 20"). Using the yardstick and felt pen, draw a rectangle that measures  $5\frac{1}{2}$ " high and 6" wide, and that is located 2" from the right or left edge of piece E and 2" from the bottom. Use the utility knife (or preferably a jig saw) to cut out the rectangle:



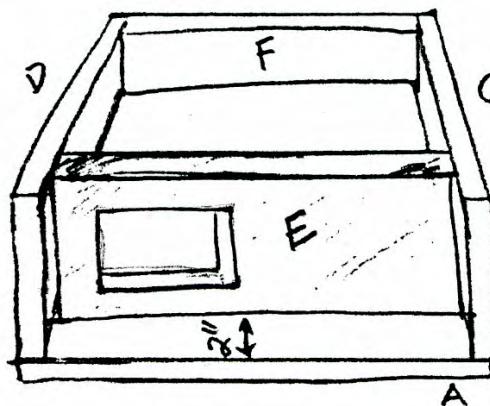
3. Next step is to line up the sides of the shelter onto the floor. First, place pieces C & D (the 12" x 24" pieces) onto the right and left outer edges of piece A (24" x 24").



4. Next, place piece F (12" x 20") onto the back edge of piece A.

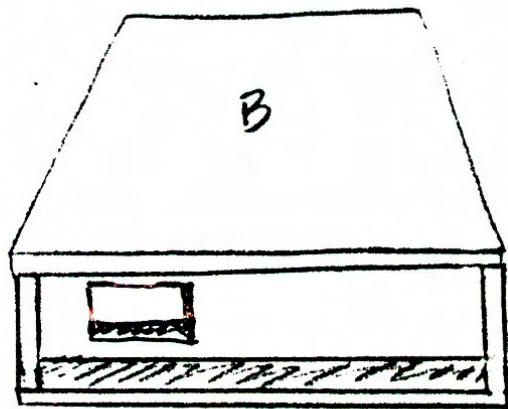


5. Finally, place piece E two inches back from the front edge of piece A, making sure the door is in the correct position:

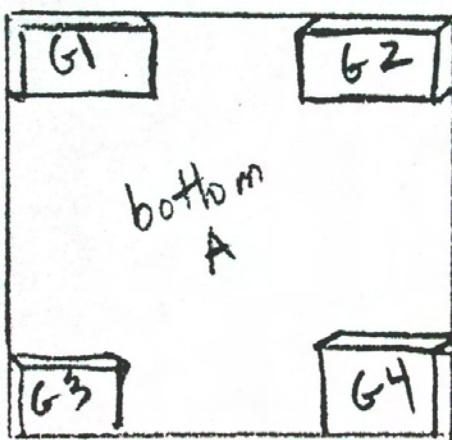


6. Once you've made sure everything lines up, use the caulk gun to apply the silicone sealant onto the bottom of pieces C, D, E & F and glue them in place, one at a time. Let the glue dry for a few minutes.

7. [Optional] To prevent the cats from scratching the walls, place contact paper onto the interior walls. Do this by cutting (with the knife and yardstick) two 12" x 20" and two 12" x 18" pieces of contact paper and apply them to the interior walls of the shelter. Cut out the paper covering the front door.
8. Take the 18" x 20" piece of vinyl remnant and glue it to the floor of the shelter, OR take the three linoleum tiles and apply them to the floor, cutting the second and three pieces to fit the open floor space.
9. Next, attach the roof. Glue piece B onto the top of pieces C, D, E & F:



10. Then attach the legs. Glue pieces G1, G2, G3 & G4 onto the corners of the bottom of piece A.



11. Seal all seams and cracks of the shelter with silicone.
12. After the silicone glue has completely dried (usually 24 hours), paint the shelter with one or two coats of latex deck paint, matching the color to the surroundings where the shelter will be placed. (NOTE: the paint will not adhere to areas covered with the sealant. You may choose to paint all the pieces of the shelter BEFORE gluing them together to avoid this. )
13. [**Optional**]: You may eventually want to add a covering to the front door that the cats can easily pull open, such as a heavy cloth or thin piece of vinyl. You can glue or tape it on above the front door, or drill holes and use plastic nuts and bolts (like the kind used to attach toilet seats). It's recommended you wait until the cats are familiar with going in and out of the shelter before adding a flap.

### **SOME OUTDOOR TIPS:**

- The shelters are very light, so it may be necessary to weigh them down with a large rock on the roof, or wooden board, etc. The roof is strong enough to hold a reasonable amount of weight.
- One way to break the wind and create more protection from rain is to place two shelters with the front doors facing each other, and then place a board on top, spanning the two roofs.
- For insulation inside the shelter, use materials the cats can burrow into, such as straw, hay or shredded newspaper. Do not use towels, blankets or folded newspaper which can actually draw away body heat when cats lie on top.
- Small bowls of food can be placed inside the shelters, BUT NEVER PUT WATER INSIDE!!!! For winter protection, it's just as important the shelter be dry as it is warm.
- Draw the cats inside the shelter with tasty food, catnip, etc.

## TNR LOG (Project/Colony \_\_\_\_\_)