

Feral Colony Care Guide

Background:

Feral cats live in all parts of the country, in about every kind of climate and habitat. They find shelter and a food source because they are opportunists. Feeding and providing shelter for feral cats allows them to peacefully co-habitate in an area. While some people welcome them for rodent control, providing nutritious food keeps them both from roaming in search of a food source and also less susceptible to disease and parasites.

All across the world, just like in Brevard and surrounding colonies, people are caring for stray and feral cats. Although roles that people choose to assume may vary, one thing remains consistent - people take great satisfaction in helping to improve the quality of life for all cats. Some people carry out trapping and ensure that the cats are vetted: they may or may not be the caregivers. Others serve as both the trapper and the colony's caregiver. In circumstances where there are several people involved who work or live in the vicinity, the cats may enjoy a team of caregivers.

If there are caregivers, they provide food and water regularly and sometimes create shelters depending on the environment and if extreme winters or summers require additional protection for the cats. The caregivers provide something else that is critical: They give the cats a voice by educating neighbors and people who work in or near the colony's territory. Education and in some cases, mediation, is an essential aspect of Trap-Neuter-Return and colony care.

Caring for a feral cat colony has tremendous benefits to caregivers, neighbors, and the cats. Though cats have been living outdoors for over 10,000 years on their own, there are steps that you as a caregiver can take to promote their well-being, make them good neighbors, and assist the people who live nearby in understanding and co-existing with the cats.

Consider sharing the following tips with other people you know who are caring for feral cats so that they too can be informed and supported. They may not be aware of all the resources that exist.

Basic colony management and care includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- I. Conducting ongoing Trap-Neuter-Return as needed.
- II. Providing food and water.
- III. Providing shelter.
- IV. Monitoring members of the colony and provide ongoing health care.
- V. Helping cats and people co-exist – what you can do.
- VI. Planning for back-up colony care.

- I. Conducting ongoing Trap-Neuter-Return.

Neuter, vaccinate, eartip, and return all feral cats in the colony, including those that only visit sporadically and newcomers as soon as they appear.

Neutering and vaccinating are the best things that can be done for stray and feral cats. They will be healthier and live longer if they are neutered. The females will not be continuously pregnant and nursing, and male cats will not fight for mates or roam in search of females with whom to mate. The number one priority when discovering an individual cat or a colony is to safely and humanely trap them and see that they are vetted. Create a plan for potential adoption of socialized cats. Kittens and cats that are friendly to humans can be adopted into homes.

II. Providing food and water.

Provide adequate food and water for the cats on a regular basis, year-round. Feed during daylight hours for your safety and so that you can easily assess the members of the colony.

Food: nutrition and seasonal considerations

The amount of food a cat needs depends on her size, the weather, and what other food sources are available. Expect an adult feral cat to eat roughly 5.5 ounces of wet (canned) cat food and 2 ounces of dry food daily (increase to a half cup if only feeding dry). Cats vary in their needs, and so some will eat considerably more food, others less.

While gauging how much to leave, observe the cats and use your discretion based on the time it takes for the food to be eaten. If the cats eat all of the food in 15 minutes or less, consider putting out a bit more. If there is consistently food remaining after a half hour, put out a bit less. Although most cats clearly enjoy canned food, feeding a colony dry food alone is fine as well. It is less expensive and just as nutritious.

In the winter, especially in colder locations, expect the colony to consume more food because they will need extra calories to maintain energy levels. In places where wet food may freeze, it is advisable to just feed dry food. If you know the colony will eat right away, and you plan to feed canned food, consider warming the food prior to arriving at the site and using insulated bags to keep the food warm during travel.

Remove uneaten food within 30 minutes. Never allow food to sit out, as it may attract insects or wildlife.

Do not expect all of the cats to eat at the same time or worry that some may not be getting their share. Within a colony, cats with seniority or stronger personalities may eat before those who are lower on the social scale. Those who eat first leave food for the others. Do not be concerned about or try to manage this social interaction. It is perfectly normal.

Keep the feeding location neat and clean, for the health of the cats and for community relations. Keep the food dishes in one place to facilitate cleanup and to provide a tidy appearance, and again, remove feeding dishes within 30 minutes.

If you notice that the cats are not using the water you provide, try moving it a short distance away from their food. Cats sometimes prefer this arrangement.

Feeding Locations and Stations:

Though it is not a requirement, building a feeding station and establishing a specific area for feeding can help camouflage where the cats eat and make colony management easier on the caregiver. The goal is for this area to not be visible to the public. Feeding stations help deter insects from the food by raising it off of the ground; having a roof protects the food from the elements. It also helps with Trap-Neuter-Return efforts, since cats are fed at the same place every day making it easy to know where to trap. Also, you can gradually and easily move the feeding stations when needed to address neighborhood concerns. In colder climates, feeding cats at a regular time and place ensures that the cats know when and where to go to be fed.

Assembly You can find a sheltered spot or build a canopy to cover the food. See examples and ideas for feeding stations below. Suitable feeding stations can easily be fashioned by someone with basic carpentry skills or with household items. It is important to camouflage the feeding station as much as possible. One way to do this is to paint the shelters with dark green or brown paint.

Examples:

Alley Cat Allies Recommended Feeding Station - For a simple, protected feeding station, try attaching a domed plastic garbage can lid to three or four wooden posts. - Cut cat-size holes in large plastic tubs or trash cans.

Location of the feeding stations is also important. Food should be situated away from high traffic areas and not too close to the cats' shelters, where they sleep, or the place where they eliminate. Some caregivers create a feeding station in their garage, shed, or car port if the colony is behind or near their home. When colonies live in a workplace environment or campus, caregivers sometimes work with maintenance or grounds departments so that cats can be fed in outbuildings, which aids in reducing visibility to colony feeding areas.

It may be obvious that a cluttered area with debris will call undue attention, but it is worth stating here to emphasize its importance. Besides any empty food containers you use for the cats, there may be other garbage and trash. Removing all of this daily or weekly will help make the feeding station sanitary and unobtrusive. Many caregivers realize that it is important to pick up the trash in the area, even garbage they did not create. This helps avoid possible health code violations and maintain positive relations with the local residents.

In addition to raising the food off the ground, other ways to deter insects from cat food include the following: - Surround the food bowl with a ring of baking soda. - Place a tray or flowerpot tray with about half an inch to an inch of water in it on the feeding station platform and then place the food bowl on the tray. - Keep your feeding areas clean, especially in hot, humid weather and always remove feeding dishes within 30 minutes. - Cut back, or completely cut out, the amount of wet food that you feed, because dry food tends to attract fewer bugs. Be sure to add more dry food to compensate. - Elevate feeding stations slightly off the ground and surround them with a line of food-grade diatomaceous earth without chemical additives

(available from some natural food stores and environmentally conscious pet-care supply companies). The diatom dust should be reapplied after rainstorms.

Resources for Obtaining Food:

There are many avenues of support for caregivers to find affordable or free food:

- Check for surplus food at your local humane society or human food bank. There is one held monthly off Dairy Road in Melbourne.
- Ask your local market or pet supply store to donate broken packages or dented cans. Some retailers will also donate out-of-date products, which are still good for a few months longer than the sell-by date.
- Ask local vet clinics if they have surplus or just-out-of-date premium pet foods that they are willing to donate.
- Announce a cat food drive in the local paper to collect donations from the public. Your place of business, local religious institutions, and civic or youth groups may be willing to help with the cat food drive as well.
- Ask local markets and pet supply shops if you may put out an attractive bin requesting cat food donations.

III. Providing shelter.

Some colonies find shelter for themselves in a shed or under a building where their safety is uncertain. You might want to consider building a shelter for the cats. It can keep them safe from the elements and help you control their location and deter them from neighbors' properties.

A good size for a shelter is at least 2x3' and at least 18" high. Larger shelters are not necessarily better, since heat disperses quickly, leaving the inside as cold as the outside. A space just big enough for three to five cats to huddle is best. Cats generally use shelters during winter months more than others. Consider size for transport in your vehicle to and from the colony site as well. Again, camouflage the shelter as much as possible using dark green or brown paint. Anything that stands out could be mistaken for trash and could bring unwanted attention to the cats.

Instructions on how to build your own inexpensive do-it-yourself wooden shelter:

- Use a camper top
- Shelters for sale
- The Feral Villa - Spay and Stay winter feral cat lodgings
- Buy pre-made shelters (such as small dog igloos) from local pet supply stores for around \$40 to \$70.

Tips - Ask for scrap lumber from building supply stores or contractors, often available at little or no cost.

- Place an ad asking for used dog houses. This can net several free shelters that, with minor improvements, can be made suitable for cats (usually insulation needs to be added and the door made smaller).

- Host a shelter building party. Get together with other caregivers and/or your local feral cat organization's supporters to build the houses together.

- Contact a local Boy or Girl Scout or other youth organization and ask interested youth to complete a service project to help build shelters.

Some things to keep in mind for your shelter

Doorway: The door should be 6-8" inches wide to keep out wildlife and larger predators. Make sure that the door is only big enough for cats. The opening should have a flap or an L-shaped entryway to keep cold air from blowing in. If neither option is possible, make sure the door faces away from prevailing winds or faces a wall. Some caregivers prefer shelters that have two doors so cats cannot be cornered.

Protection from the Elements: You can ensure that the cats are protected by making shelters waterproof, windproof (especially in cold climates), and elevated off the ground. Discarded pallets from shipping firms or hardware, farm supplies, or pet stores are a good option for elevation. The space beneath the shelters should be blocked from drafts. Insulation is a good material to use.

Bedding: Straw resists the wet and keeps a shelter warm, and is the best choice for insulation and bedding. Do NOT use blankets, carpeting, fake sheepskin, or any material that holds moisture. You can also use hardwood shavings (not cedar or pine), but keep in mind that softwood shavings are not suitable due to possible toxicity. Some caregivers in locations with long, cold winters use Mylar blankets as bedding. Mylar is a product that retains body heat. The generic term for Mylar is Polyester Film or Plastic Sheet. These sheets can be purchased from survival and outdoor stores as thermal safety blankets, or online at websites such as Amazon.com.

Camouflage: Shelters should blend in with their surroundings so that they are not obtrusive to neighbors. Cover them with leaves or other brush or paint them a dark color. Moving shelters into wooded areas away from buildings, parking lots, and other high-traffic areas is also a good idea for cat safety and to avoid neighbor complaints.

Deter Wildlife: Wildlife may decide to make their home in the shelters you provide for the cats. Reducing the shelter door to an opening 6" wide may solve this predicament. Do not use repellants because most of them will repel the cats as well. Some caregivers have resorted to providing additional shelters, accepting that some will be used by wildlife.

IV. Monitoring members of the colony and providing ongoing health care:

Keeping track of members of your colony, their health, new cats who have joined the colony who may need to be neutered and your ongoing Trap-Neuter-Return program allows you to monitor your progress and provides you with back-up evidence that may be needed someday.

Health: It is a good idea to keep an eye on the cats for general good health. Common indicators of health problems or injury include: changes in behavior, changes in eating habits, dull eyes or coat, discharge from the nose or eyes, weight loss, fur loss, changes in their gait, and listlessness.

Have a plan with your veterinarian for how to handle any health problems and for ongoing colony care. When a health problem occurs, speak with your veterinarian first and describe the symptoms so that you can decide together if a sick cat needs to be trapped and examined.

For ongoing colony care, ask your veterinarian to provide you with deworming medicine and antibiotics to have on hand to care for minor health problems. Have a financial plan in place for any cats that may need veterinary care due to injury or illness. Flea Control: Your veterinarian can apply a long-lasting topical flea control product such as Advantage when the cats are anesthetized for neutering. There are also oral flea medications (such as CAPSTAR) that can be added to the food, but monitoring the dosage can be difficult for feral cats, who share food.

Change the bedding in shelters at least twice a year. At that time, spray or dust the floor with a cat-safe flea control product. Or, sprinkle diatomaceous earth beneath the straw or hay to deter fleas. Sprinkling mint or dried pyrethrum flowers beneath the bedding may also help. Fleas are a natural part of life outdoors, so while you can try your best to control them, they are not something you need to be worried about excessively.

Tapeworms:

It is not uncommon for feral cat colonies to have tapeworms. These can be treated with dewormer when they are taken in for neutering. If you find that your colony of already neutered cats has worms, it is not something you need to worry about a lot. Tapeworms will not harm otherwise healthy cats.

Record Keeping:

You should hold on to all medical records for each cat in every colony for which you care. A medical record should contain a listing of each vaccination (especially rabies) and any other medical procedures. The record should also include documentation of the cat's neuter and, if the cat was micro-chipped, the manufacturer, and the number of the chip. Include a photo of each cat with his or her record. Make sure to update the photo occasionally as their coloring and size can change with age.

You should always be prepared for the possibility that someone such as animal control could question the status of your colony. This is why it is important to keep current, accurate health records for all of the cats.

One way to stay organized is to keep all information for a colony together in a three ring binder. Not only will you be prepared to provide documentation about your cats if needed, you will also represent yourself as well-organized and on top of the situation when conversing with neighbors about the cats.

Recommend using Alley Cat Allies Feral Cat Colony Tracking System to help keep organized records available at www.alleycatallies.com

V. Helping cats and people to co-exist – what you can do.

As the colony caregiver, you become the cats' public relations firm. These steps will help maintain their good image and their good neighbor status in your community. If neighbors do not know who "speaks for the cats," they have no one but animal control to contact with complaints or problems. Being open about caregiving can protect the cats. One way to maintain good relations is to establish and maintain a friendly dialogue with residents living in the cats' neighborhood and readily address all neighbor concerns. Make yourself available and provide them with a way to contact you.

To address concerns:

Establish a friendly, ongoing discussion and know your facts. Explain to residents living in the cats' neighborhood what Trap-Neuter-Return and colony care entails—explain that the cats are cared for and pose no health risk. Additionally, providing written information from Alley Cat Allies will lend credibility to your effort and help answer specific questions and concerns. You may find that other neighbors are feeding the cats as well and you can combine your efforts and set up a schedule. It may be a good idea to deliver copies of Why Do Cats Do That? to each of your neighbors with your contact information written on the back. This way neighbors know you are being proactive and understand their concerns.

Explain that the cats have lived at the site for a long time, that they have been (or will be) neutered, which will virtually eliminate behaviors such as roaming, fighting, yowling, and spraying, and that a managed colony will be stable and healthy. Also explain that if the present colony is removed, new, unsterilized cats are certain to move in. This is a phenomenon known as the vacuum effect. Remain calm and constructive in all of your dealings. Present information and interact with others in a reasonable, professional manner. You will give neighbors confidence that you know what you are doing and care about their interests. Should you get to the point where you feel you can no longer control your temper, put the brakes on the discussion and ask someone else—perhaps a fellow caregiver or neighbor, or a local Feral Friend—to help mediate. When dealing with a neighbor that has concerns about the cats, determine the specific problem and do your best to resolve it. Address individual complaints by listening patiently and asking questions that uncover the specific problem. Problems that may seem on the surface to be about feral cats may instead be about you or a neighbor's cat. Instead of arguing or pointing the blame elsewhere, do your best to find a solution to any problems that arise. In most cases, the problems are very easily resolved when dealt with quickly and in a calm and helpful manner.

There are some steps you can take preemptively that may help you avoid potential questions or concerns altogether.

Trap-Neuter-Return. Neighbors are often bothered by behaviors associated with breeding, such as roaming, fighting, yowling, spraying, and the birth of litters of kittens. Your Trap-Neuter-Return program will virtually eliminate these behaviors.

1. Clean feeding areas and follow feeding protocols: Keep the cats' feeding stations or areas clean and trash free. Building attractive, but inconspicuous shelters and feeding stations can help maintain cleanliness. Do not put out more food than the cats will finish in one meal. Remove what they do not eat after 30 minutes and clean up the area. Never leave food out overnight as this can attract unwanted wildlife.
2. Keep the location of feeding stations and shelters discreet. Cats can be discouraged from climbing on cars or other private property by gradually moving their shelters and feeding stations away from these areas. The cats will follow the food and shelter.
3. Provide litter box areas. To keep cats from using neighborhood gardens as litter boxes, build one or more litter boxes or place sand or peat moss in strategic areas for the cats to use as litter (do not use conventional litter, as it will be ruined by weather). Be sure that the litter area is in a quiet, sheltered space. Scoop regularly to alleviate odors and keep flies away. Be prepared to scoop more often in hot weather.
4. Use humane deterrents to keep cats away from places they are not wanted. There are many safe, low-tech methods to discourage feral cats from hanging out where they are not wanted, like neighbors' gardens, yards, porches, or vehicles. Read more about humane deterrent techniques. Always offer to provide and apply these methods for neighbors at your own expense. Consider pooling resources with other caregivers, if possible, to cover the cost of such items.
5. Address poisoning threats. While you are assessing a feral cat colony, you may encounter poisoning threats to the cats by uninformed people. There are steps you can take to put a stop to these threats and ensure the ongoing safety of the colony.
6. Maintain colony records. Though you should take every step to prevent neighbors from calling animal control, you should always be prepared for the possibility. This is why you should always maintain current, accurate health records, including vaccination data and photographs, for all of the cats in your colony.
7. Protect yourself and the cats. Draw up an agreement with the neighbor who has concerns describing them and what it is you plan to do to address them. Make a note of who is responsible for the costs and the deadline for every action. Each party should receive a copy of the agreement. You should each sign the document to indicate that everyone agrees to the proposed solution. Then each party should sign the agreement again upon completion of the plan. This document will be written proof that you addressed your neighbor's concern and she/he agrees that the situation has been resolved.

VI. Planning for substitute colony care. Who will care for your cats when you cannot?

Life is full of the unexpected. Don't wait until you are not able to take care of your colony to find a substitute or replacement caregiver. If you are the only caregiver and nobody else knows your colony's location or size, don't wait another day to find a substitute caregiver. Most caregivers are very bonded with the cats they care for. They have named them, they know their routines and behaviors and the cats recognize their car and their voice when it is feeding time.

"Nobody is going to care for them like I do," you might think, but it is better to find a sincere person who can step in when you are out of town, or as much as we don't want to think about it, if you are ill, become disabled, or pass away. The best care you can give to the feral cats you look after is the arrangement for their ongoing care. You'll feel better that another compassionate person will fill your shoes if necessary.

Start with people who may already know about your colony that you believe you can trust and who may be interested in volunteering. Locate others in your town who are caring for cats or contact your local Trap-Neuter-Return organization. (You may be able to find a local organization through various online communities. If you cannot find one, you may want to create a network of like-minded cat caregivers or possibly a grassroots group for your town.

Follow these steps to find the best person for the job:

1. Gather all records. Be sure that all of the cats have been neutered and vaccinated for rabies. Ensure that all of their records are in order. Include photos of each cat and her/his name, behaviors, and friend (s) or others cats he/she is bonded to in the colony.
2. Locate potential candidates:
 - a. Check in with neighbors, store owners, friends, and family in the area. But, don't assume your family or friends will be the best for the job.
 - b. Ask the new property owners (if you are moving).
 - c. Post ads in the newspaper with your name and phone number. DO NOT include the address of the colony or your home address.
 - d. Post flyers around town, send messages to local e-mail lists, and post notices on local online bulletin boards.
 - e. Contact veterinarians and humane organizations in your community to let them know of your situation. Be sure to tell them that all the cats are neutered and vaccinated.
 - f. Check with Alley Cat Allies Feral Friends in your area. These fellow caregivers and trappers may be able to help, or know of someone near you that can. There may be a feral cat network active in your town.
3. Educate your substitute/replacement about your normal feeding schedule and ongoing care. Once you identify a replacement caregiver, explain what you do, which could include daily food, water, shelter upkeep, neuter of any new members, and the occasional vet visit. Provide the new caregiver with copies of all medical records (neuter certificates, rabies certificates and tags, microchip information if applicable, and a description and photo of each cat), and be sure to keep a copy for yourself.

4. Decide on the details of your arrangement. Will the substitute/replacement buy the cat food when they feed? You may need to share the monthly costs of caring for the colony together. They may not be financially capable, in which case you may need to continue to buy the food and make plans to get it to your new partner. What if a cat is injured or sick, will they trap and transport to a veterinarian? Decide in advance which veterinarian(s) are suitable to take a feral cat to and who will be covering the veterinary fees. Most veterinary clinics require payment at the time of services.
5. Sign an agreement. Write up a simple agreement stating that you are transferring to or sharing care of the cats with the new caregiver. Include specific information about the colony for clear identification. You should both sign and date this document, including both of your addresses and contact information.
6. Do everything you can to avoid relocating the cats. Relocating cats is only an option in dire circumstances when the cats' lives are threatened. It is hard on the cats and rarely successful. Familiarize yourself ahead of time with what relocation involves by reading *Safe Relocation of Feral Cats*.

In Case of Emergency:

Carry information about your colony (and your companion animals at home) in your wallet. This will inform emergency workers of what to do in case something happens to you or a disaster occurs in your town or at your home. Include all contact information for your substitute caregiver, including names and phone numbers. The same kind of "Emergency Contact Card" can go in your car's glove compartment and to your back-up caregiver(s).

Post the same card on your refrigerator and other prominent places in your home. The information should be noticeable so family or emergency workers will not miss it! (Refer to *PerPETual Care: Who Will Look After Your Pets if You're Not Around?* by Lisa Rogak for more information.)