



Tree House Humane Society

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Feral Cats: Frequently Asked Questions

What are feral cats?

Feral cats look just like domesticated cats, only they are not tame: they are wild, or undomesticated. Unlike a stray cat, a totally feral cat will USUALLY not:

- let you touch her
- vocalize (purr or meow)
- come out to eat during the daylight hours, unless they are starving and foraging for food to survive
- mark objects by rubbing his nose or tail on them if you are watching
- roll around on the ground affectionately in front of you
- approach the food bowl until after you are out of sight

To further complicate things, feral cats can be classified as totally feral, semi-feral, or reverted feral. Semi-feral cats and reverted feral cats can become very bonded with their caretakers and will often eventually let you touch them, vocalize, or eat in front of you. Tree House believes that just because feral cats will not socialize completely with humans does not mean that they should not be given a chance to lead the best life they can in their known environment. Feral cats are commonly referred to as *strays*, *tom cats* or *alley cats*, although the terms are not really interchangeable.

How many feral cats are there?

There are more than 700,000 owned cats and at least 500,000 feral cats in Chicago alone. The number of feral cats in Cook County is estimated up to 800,000. There are estimates of up to 60 million feral cats nation-wide.

How many feral cats are spayed/neutered?

The sterilization rate of “owned” cats is 82-91%. But often times female cats have at least one litter prior to sterilization, especially when 50-60% of owned cats are allowed to roam freely outside. Only an estimated 2% of feral cats are spayed/neutered.

When do feral cats reproduce?

February and March are the **peak pregnancy months for feral cats**.

Feral cats have an average of 1.4 litters per year, with an average of 3.5 live births. Kitten mortality at three months is already 48%. At six months it is 67%. Two-thirds die prior to reproduction.

Let's do the math: If there are 500,000 feral cats in Chicago, and half are female, that means that there are potentially 250,000 females having 1.4 litters a year. 250,000 females having 1.4 litters a year equals potentially 350,000 litters. These 350,000 litters with an average of 3.5 live births each equal a potential 1,225,000 live births. Two-thirds die by six months = 820,000 deaths. That leaves 405,000 left over each year to continue to multiply. These numbers seem high, but even if you divide them in half, they are still staggering. **Feral kittens are the single largest population of dying or killed animals in Chicago.**

How can I tell the difference between stray cats and feral cats?

This can be very difficult to figure out. One way to start is to determine if you can pet the cat. If you can, she is either not feral, or she is feral and has bonded to you as her caretaker. The opposite is equally confusing. A cat that does not allow human contact is not necessarily feral. She may be feral, or she may be a frightened domesticated cat that has recently become lost. If you are not sure if a cat is truly feral or just shy or scared, contact our Feral Friends TNR program for help at tnr@treehouseanimals.org, or 773.784.5488, ext. 234. If you have determined that a cat is friendly, socialized and can be handled by humans, please call our adoption counselors at 773.784.5488, ext. 0, to place an admission request with Tree House and for advice on finding homes for adoptable cats.

What if I do not Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) the outdoor cats I am feeding?

In Cook County it is now illegal to feed outdoor, un-owned cats without being a registered colony caretaker with a sponsoring organization who is practicing TNR and responsible colony management. **The Cook County Managed Care of Feral Cats Ordinance**, Chapter 10 Animals, Article IV Managed Care of Feral Cats, Section 10-95 through 10-99 was passed and adopted October 16, 2007 and went into effect 30 days after that date. To learn more about this ordinance that can benefit feral cats, their human caretakers, and their human neighbors, see www.tnrchicago.org On this web site you can download a copy of the ordinance and an application to become a sponsored caretaker. There is a list of ordinance sponsors on the application and you can send the sponsor of your choice the application, obtain their consent for sponsorship. Having a sponsor does not automatically resolve all conflicts. Responsible colony management includes consideration of one's neighbors and local officials, which helps to ensure the safety of the cats.

In places that do not legally mandate TNR, there are still many compelling humane reasons to practice TNR. **Free feeding without TNR contributes to the deaths and suffering of outdoor kittens and cats.** The feral cat population swells exponentially, making it difficult or impossible to afford to feed the cats. Neighbors may become frustrated and call the police or animal control. Unpleasant behaviors associated with an unmanaged colony, such as spraying and fighting can become overwhelming. Cruel people may employ illegal, inhumane and lethal methods to eradicate the cat population. Kittens and adult cats can be killed by cars, or by other predators. Cats and kittens can die from disease, normally treatable injuries and infections, malnutrition, or starvation. You may even be issued a citation from a housing association or other neighborhood groups. Animal Control could be dispatched to trap the cats. **Feral cats are ALWAYS killed at Animal Control.** In Chicago it costs taxpayers an average of \$125 to trap, hold, kill, and dispose of each feral cat. This is why we believe that TNR is the best answer to this problem from both a humane and financial perspective.

Can feral cats live indoors?

Unfortunately, wild, undomesticated animals are not suitable for adoption. Imagine a raccoon loose in your home. He would be terrified and would try to find a way out. That is exactly what would happen if an adult feral cat were let loose indoors.

Since feral cats are not adoptable, feral cats taken to animal control facilities are generally killed within 24 hours, unless there is a law or ordinance requiring a holding period, which is usually 5-7 days.

Opinions vary in the field but we believe that feral kittens up to the age of 12 weeks can be socialized quite easily. However, if they are brought indoors without a socialization plan, they usually hide under furniture, only coming out to eat, avoiding human contact, and making most adopters very unhappy. Eventually, many will graduate to a "semi-feral" state, trusting only those who feed them.

Can I relocate the cats to a safer place, like a barn?

Many people new to the plight of feral cats believe removing the cats will solve the problem. The ineffective practice of "trap and kill" or "trap and remove" has proven over decades that new cats move in to occupy the property soon after it becomes available. This is called the "vacuum effect." Relocation also requires a willing caretaker and a two-to-four week "homing" period to get them accustomed to their new surroundings. Feral cats are territorial by nature, and without the confinement and homing phase, would immediately run away to try to find their way back home, and would likely die in the process.

Can feral cats be socialized and then adopted out to good homes?

Tree House has been a leader for decades by offering a socialization program for shy and feral cats. However, even with the best efforts of dozens of staff and volunteers, only a small percentage of very shy and/or feral cats completely get over their fears. This is why we limit our admissions of feral cats to those who are too sick or injured to go back outside.

Even if a feral is predisposed to socialization, a feral cat tends to bond with their primary caregiver. Once placed in another home or a shelter, the cat will probably revert to a feral state, making them unadoptable. **You probably should not attempt to socialize a feral cat unless you plan to keep him/her.**

It is usually nearly impossible to socialize a feral adult cat to get to the level where it is comfortable to be around humans other than his original caretaker(s). Even feral kittens younger than 12 weeks can be difficult to domesticate. It will require a commitment of a few hours per day, for months or perhaps years for older kittens or young adults.

How do I socialize kittens I found outside with their feral mother cat?

There are two ways to do this.

1. Trap the mother and kittens, and transfer them into a crate in your bathroom, storage room, bedroom or spare room, separated from human traffic and other pets, until the kittens are weaned and eating on their own. Then, the mother cat can get spayed and returned to the colony, while the kittens can be fostered and socialized for adoption or shelter placement.
2. Continue to feed the family of cats outside and then trap them when you know the kittens are weaned and coming out to eat on their own. As long as you get the kittens by the time they are eight weeks old, they should be easily socialized.

Trapping moms and kittens can be tricky but basically you use whoever you trap first as bait to get the others to come into the trap later by putting the trapped cat directly behind the other set trap and covering the trap containing the cat with a towel so the only perceived way to get to that cat is through the door of the trap in front of it.

Once a kitten is friendly, socialized and can be handled by humans, please call our adoption counselors at 773.784.5488, ext. 0, to place an admission request with Tree House and for advice on finding homes for adoptable cats.

I thought I could socialize a feral cat but he is not coming around. What should I do?

If possible, put the cat back where you trapped him and provide shelter, water, food and veterinary care on an ongoing basis. Remember, feral cats over 12 weeks of age are very difficult to tame with some exceptions. All the same, bringing a feral cat inside is risky. This is what could happen:

The cat will be traumatized while kept in captivity. Just like people, a cat under severe stress is more likely to become ill. If you decide that the cat is too wild after a few months, and return him outdoors in winter, he will not have his full winter coat to provide warmth in addition to other health problems that could develop. If you keep the cat for too long, he might become too tame to survive on his own. Also, you may be hurt. Remember, feral cats are like wild animals!

We understand that cat-lovers would prefer to see all cats in good homes or in shelters. So would we. But you should consider all of the other cats that could be helped during the time that you are spending to socialize a feral cat. Again, feral cats are not genetically pre-disposed to socialization and semi-feral cats usually bond only with the person who feeds them.

A better option would be to go through the entire TNR process, and then continue to spend time with the cat in his outdoor environment on his own terms after he's been released. He might warm up to you over time and you can reconsider whether or not it might be worth the time and effort to continue socialization work inside. Do not take it as a personal failure if it does not work out.

What about wildlife predation?

Tree House Humane Society is concerned about the welfare of all animals. While a search on the internet will lead you to differing opinions on feral cats and wildlife predation, the majority of scientific evidence points to environmental degradation such as pesticide use, depletion of natural habitats, and emergence of new diseases as the main culprit behind declining bird populations. As an example, the West Nile Virus wiped out nearly 90% of the blue jay population in Illinois in 2007. In any case, since TNR humanely reduces the number of feral cats, there will be less predation, and cats in managed colonies where they are regularly fed are less likely to prey on birds.