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Managing a Feral Cat Colony – The Steps

Information supplied by Neighborhood Cats, www.NeighborhoodCats.org

So you've decided you want to help the colony of feral cats in your neighborhood. What do you do? In our experience, the process of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) offers the greatest chance of success both for you and the cats. TNR is the most humane and effective method available to end feral cat overpopulation. TNR involves trapping the cats in a colony, getting them spay/neutered, vaccinated for rabies and marked for identification, then returning the ferals to their territory. A caregiver provides food and shelter and monitors for any newcomers or other problems.

At its essence, TNR is not about rescuing cats, it's about population control and permanently reducing the number of feral cats in an area. It's not about getting a wonderful cat a great home, it's about lowering stray intake and euthanasia rates, reducing costs for animal control, and creating better, less hostile environments for the cats. In addition, spay/neuter of the cats eliminates common nuisance behaviors such as yowling and foul odor, and vaccinating them for rabies also provides a public health benefit.

1) Educate Yourself

First thing you should do is learn all you can about TNR. "The Neighborhood Cats TNR Handbook" and instructional video are available from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) at www.asPCA.org/tnrkit. This packet contains the basics of TNR and the best practices. More extensive information can be obtained by visiting www.ProjectTNR.com, www.NeighborhoodCats.org and www.AlleyCat.org.

If you're interested in learning about practicing TNR on a large scale throughout your community, order "Implementing a Community Trap-Neuter-Return Program", authored by Bryan Kortis, Executive Director of Neighborhood Cats and published by The Humane Society of the United States see (www.humanesociety.org/feralcats).

2) Build Good Community Relations

In tackling your feral cat colony it is of paramount importance that you build good community relations. Unless the cats live in some remote setting, you must take their human neighbors into account and try to build positive, harmonious relations. A supportive, cooperative community will make your work considerably easier, while a hostile or uninvolved one will make it far more difficult.

3) Set Up Feeding Stations and Shelters

There are many benefits to beginning to manage the colony as soon as possible. Start by setting up a feeding station. By arranging a regular feeding schedule, you will train the cats to show up at a certain place at a certain time, and you'll be able to withhold food and get them hungry when you want. This will make trapping much easier. Improving the cats' nutrition by improving the quality of their food will better prepare them for the stress of trapping and neutering. Adequate shelter also promotes their health and assists in locating them.

4) Secure an adequate holding space for trapping and neutering

Depending on the size of the colony, trapping all the cats may take two or three days. A space is needed to hold the cats as the colony is being trapped, and for them to recover in for at least 48 hours following surgery. While they are confined, the cats remain in their traps – the traps are cleaned and the cats fed preferably twice a day. To learn how to do this safely, read [Caring for Cats Held in Traps*](#) below.

It's best to keep them in a secure holding space, protected from the elements and heated in cold weather. It could be a basement, a garage, an extra room, or a terrace using a tarpaulin, tent or lean-to. One word of warning, during warmer seasons fleas can be a concern in indoor holding spaces. To minimize the risk of infestation, keep the traps covered with light cloths and either flea bomb or vacuum thoroughly afterwards.

5) Decide what to do with kittens and friendly adults

It is important to decide what to do with kittens and friendly adults before you start trapping when you still have time to prepare. Ideally, adoptable cats and kittens will be removed from the colony and placed in good homes. Decide before you catch them who is going to do the fostering and how you'll go about adopting them. You can, for example, work with a traditional rescue group. If fostering or adopting resources are simply not available, don't let that stop you from getting the cats neutered and halting the reproduction cycle. You'll have accomplished a great deal of good by that alone.

6) Arrange for spay/neuter

You'll need to find a clinic or individual veterinarian, preferably one who will give you a discount off the regular rates, and set a date to spay/neuter the cats. For a listing of veterinarians who participate in the state's low-cost Animal Population Control Program, call 1-800-123-4567 or visit www.SpayNJ.com.

7) Trapping

Trapping is the last step. Too often, well-meaning people trap first and think about what to do with the cats later. That's a recipe for disaster (we know, we've tried it!) To ensure the long-term success of your project, and to minimize the problems you will need to deal with, you should ensure that everything else is in place before you put the tuna into the first trap. This is true whether you're trapping one cat at a time, or the entire colony. For the how-to's of trapping, see the enclosed [Humane Trapping Instructions for Feral Cats](#) below.

Enjoy!

A few days after being released, the cats will return to their usual routines and you to yours. Although caring for feral cats is an ongoing effort, and the dangers they face are ever present, there is a strong sense of satisfaction in knowing you've prevented a great deal of suffering and have given the cats a better chance to live in a way that suits them and is acceptable to your community.

***Caring for Cats Held in Traps**

During the trapping period and following surgery, the cats will be held in their traps - they should never be let out except while at the vet and when they're being returned to their colony. We have encountered resistance at times from well-meaning people, including animal welfare professionals, who believe it's cruel to leave a cat in a trap for more than 48 hours. Our experience is quite the contrary. Feral cats don't act like domestics. Whether they're in a large cage or a trap, they will tend to remain still in one place. They also prefer to be in tighter rather than wide open enclosures - apparently, they feel more secure. As long as the trap is long enough (at least 36 inches) for them to huddle at one end and eat at the other, and the trap is kept covered with a thin sheet, they will be fine.

The instructions here are written with multiple cats in mind, but equally apply if you're dealing with one or two cats.

Materials needed

- Traps large enough to double as cages (preferably 36" long) and with rear doors (a must!)
- Trap dividers (at least two), sometimes called trap isolators - they look like small pitchforks.
- Newspaper
- Water dishes, small with flat bottoms
- Food dishes, small
- Cotton sheets (for trap covers)
- Towels, small
- Plastic ground cloth or tarp
- Long craft tables (optional)

Preparing the holding space

Spread the plastic ground cloth or tarp on the ground. This will protect any urine or other waste from getting on the floor. If you have tables, put them on the ground cloth - using tables to rest the traps on makes it easier to clean and feed, as opposed to having to bend down to the floor. If you use tables, cover them with plastic. Place the traps several inches apart either on the ground or on the table, each one covered with a sheet. Have the rear and front doors of all the traps facing the same way.



Trap dividers keep the cat at one end while you feed and clean at the other

The holding space itself should be secure, dry, quiet and warm. (*NOTE: In the hours after surgery, a cat's body temperature will drop, so the recovery space during this time MUST be warm. Do not place post-surgery cats in a cold room.*)

Cleaning and feeding

1) Use the trap dividers to isolate the cat on one end of the trap. You do this by lowering one divider through the bars of the trap from above, then by lowering a second divider right behind it, also from above. We highly recommend you use two trap dividers until you're very comfortable with the process and know each cat. We've seen aggressive cats push aside the tongs of a single divider that wasn't perfectly inserted and escape, especially soon after they were trapped and were still wired. If you want to be even extra-safe, lower one divider from the top and insert the second one horizontally through the trap from the side.

You can get the cat to move from one end of the trap to the other usually by uncovering the sheet on the end you want to work on. The cat will seek cover at the other end. Occasionally, you might have to poke him or give the trap a little shake to get him to move.

2) While the cat is isolated on one end (we recommend the trap door end), line the bottom with newspaper and put in the small towel. The cats like lying on it, especially when it's up against the slanted trap door.

3) Go to the other end of the trap and isolate the cat against the end you just worked on. Again, line the bottom of the trap on the other end with newspaper. This will serve as "litter." If you try to use regular litter in a pan, the cat will just trash it and create even more of a mess. At the rear door end of the trap, put in the food and water in their dishes. It's best to work on the trap door end first and the rear door end last. That way, there's no chance the cat will end up sitting in the food and water after you've just put it in. (*NOTE: NO FOOD OR WATER AFTER 10 P.M. THE NIGHT BEFORE SURGERY.*)

4) Ideally, repeat this process twice a day. This will keep the traps relatively clean and the cats calm. Don't try to be perfect - the space will probably end up smelling, but when the cats are released, you just roll up all the plastic, throw it away and the smell will dissipate. While the cats are being neutered, you can replace the ground cloth with a fresh one.