

The Care and Feeding of Feral Cats

Feral cats are not socialized to people. They range from cats who have never had human contact to semi-tame cats who were once pets. Often living in loose associations known as "colonies," they become well-adapted to their territory and can live safely and contentedly in alleyways, parking lots, vacant lots, backyards, and a host of other locations—urban, suburban, and rural.

Determine if the cats are being cared for

- Veterinarians usually notch or tip one ear to show the cats have been spayed or neutered. Unless all the cats have clearly clipped ears, you should assume they are not yet altered.
- If you notice kittens, there are cats who need to be altered.
- Do you see evidence that the colony is being cared for such as food dishes, water bowls, or shelters? If someone is already feeding the cats, perhaps you can help to have the cats neutered.

Start feeding

- Feed the cats once a day. Dry food is preferable, and should be left as inconspicuously as possible. Place dishes under shrubs, behind bushes, or near walls. Don't forget fresh water!
- Stick to a regular schedule if you can. Consistent feeding will make trapping easier.

Spay/neuter

- For trapping instructions, see our "Humane Trapping" fact sheet. Spay/neuter is the single most important thing you can do to help feral cats, and is the most humane and effective way to control their populations. Not only does spay/neuter prevent more kittens from being born, it also decreases behavior like spraying, fighting, howling, and roaming. In addition, it greatly improves the cats' health.
- Spay/neuter should take precedence over socializing and adopting. Even if you do not wish to continue feeding and caring for them, you should still have the cats altered and return them to their habitat.
- Decide where you will have the cats altered. The San Francisco SPCA provides free spay/neuter for San Francisco feral cats. To find low-cost or free spay/neuter in other areas, call your local humane society or (800) 248-SPAY. The California Veterinary Medical Association website (www.cvma.org) also lists veterinarians who are participating in their free statewide Feral Cat Altering Program.

Managing the colony

- Minimize the number of feeding locations—fewer feeding stations means less work for you and less chance of someone noticing. It also makes it easier to keep an eye on the cats and to monitor the colony for newcomers.
- Feed the cats in areas as secluded as possible, away from people and centers of activity.
- If possible, do not feed at night. Conflicts with wildlife are one of the primary reasons neighbors complain about feral cat colonies, and daytime feeding reduces the chance of wild animals helping themselves to the cats' food.
- Keep feeding areas clean. Change the dishes when they get dirty, and pick up trash even if it isn't yours. Don't leave empty cans or large piles of food. Dry food is less messy than canned,

and if you only feed dry food, canned food will be a more enticing treat, making trapping much easier.

- Watch for newcomers, and have them spayed or neutered right away.
- "Out of sight, out of mind" is the motto of many feral cat caregivers. Try to be inconspicuous in your feeding and trapping activities. If someone notices and asks what you are doing, explain that altering and feeding the cats will decrease their numbers quickly and humanely. Most people are supportive of what you are doing, but if any problems develop, call The SF/SPCA Lifeline for Feral Cats at (415) 554-3071.
- Share responsibilities. Do you have friends, co-workers, family members, or other caregivers who will feed the cats one day a week or colony sit while you're on vacation? Perhaps they can socialize a kitten or keep a cat for post-surgery recovery while you continue trapping. The more people who participate in caring for a colony, the better off the cats—and you—will be.

Resources for help

- Local veterinarians: Ask if they can put you in touch with anyone else who is caring for ferals for advice and support. Do they have a humane trap you can borrow?
- Humane societies: Do they offer free or low-cost spay/neuter? Or medical care if you find a sick or injured cat? They may have humane traps to borrow or a volunteer who can teach you how to trap.
- Pet supply stores: Find out if they have humane traps to borrow, rent, or buy, or referrals to volunteers or local feral cat groups. Tell them what you are doing, and ask for cat food donations, or request permission to set up a donation bin where customers can deposit cat food they purchase at the store.
- The SF/SPCA: We have information on every aspect of caring for feral cats, and we may have referrals to groups in your area.

Some people believe that feral cats lead "short, miserable lives" and that for this reason, Trap, Alter, Return programs should not be implemented. We disagree. As most any caregiver can attest, feral cats frequently lead long, healthy lives.

And while feral and abandoned cats may face hardships, we don't think death is better than a less-than-perfect life. Many animals, such as raccoons, foxes, field mice, and others, face similar hazards and do not live extraordinarily long lives, yet we would never consider euthanizing them "for their own good."

We believe that all animals deserve compassion and protection for their entire lives—no matter how long that might be.

SF/SPCA Resources

- Fact sheets including "Humane Trapping," "Post-Surgery Recovery Care," and more.
- Feral Cat Video Series.
- Lifeline for Feral Cats (415) 554-3071. We can provide advice specific to your situation.
- The SF/SPCA Feral Fix Program provides free spay/neuter for San Francisco feral cats, no appointment necessary.