

The “Feral” Cat Population Explosion!!!

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The feral cat population is caught in the crosshairs of public opinion. What do you think? Are the cats better off dead or alive? Animal shelters nationwide receive several million unwanted cats each year. Because of a shortage of available homes, approximately 75% of these cats are euthanized, according to the Association of Feline Practitioners. [7] Many animal control pounds and shelters believe that if a cat can’t live in a human home, the most humane decision is to euthanize them. However, according to a National Survey conducted by Alley Cat Allies, 81% of Americans polled believe that “leaving a stray cat outside to live out its life is more humane than having the cat caught and killed”. [16] Dealing with the feral cat overpopulation is among the most contentious of animal welfare topics. Strong indifferences emerge from both sides of the issues concerning free-roaming cats. Some veterinarians, animal shelters, and animal organizations feel that euthanasia is the most humane thing to do, but does that give us the right to take a life? Is it really the most humane thing to do or do we have other choices?

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) reported there are approximately 70 million strays, which is about 15 percent less than the number of companion cats. Cats are coming out of the woodwork, roaming our communities, and filling the shelters across the country one after another. “We are experiencing a crisis in the United States that very few people outside of animal welfare are aware of,” says Janelle Dixon, president and CEO of the Animal Humane Society. “Cats are being born at such an incredible rate each year that all five of our facilities struggle to keep up—and we’re just one organization of thousands in this country overwhelmed by the cat overpopulation crisis.” [25] According to Brad Shear, Executive Director of the Mohawk Hudson River Humane Society (MHRHS) located in Menands, New York, “the MHRHS took in 3,766 cats in 2009; about 55% percent of the cats taken in were strays”. Furthermore, only 10% of those animals brought in were sterilized.” [11] Brad says they are on a slightly higher pace this year with approximately 2,300 strays brought in and an additional 1,600 cats turned in by their owners. He stated that a large number of cats are coming from South Troy and Colonie. He also commented that “the stray cat problem is getting worse and it hasn’t been addressed in our area.” [42] This statistic represents just one organization in the Capital District. There are many other local rescue groups such as Kitten Angels, Robin’s Nest, Hope, Whiskers, Cat Tales, Guildershaven, and, the Animal Protective Foundation (APF) who take cats/kittens (including strays) into their program. These groups are all reporting that they are inundated with cats and especially kittens. To date most of these groups/organizations are not accepting any more cats/kittens into their program. This is due either to a lack of funding to provide veterinary care to spay/neuter and vaccinate these cats/kittens or lack of space/foster homes or both. [17][32] These cats face two cumbersome hurdles—they are viewed with limited perceived value in our communities and there are thousands upon thousands of felines competing for a limited number of homes.

In a study conducted by J. Levy and P. Crawford, it was reported that 82% of all kittens born are born to feral cats.^[32] “Feral cats likely represent the single most important source of cat overpopulation; there are numerous proposals to resolve this problem, but which is the best one for feral cats?”^[29] The impact of owned and unowned free-roaming cats upon the environment is an ongoing subject of debate. Ecologists and wildlife advocates say this burgeoning population is challenging wildlife species and the resources to solve the problem. In addition, these cats pose small but important threats to human health. ^[7] So, the fight is on, and it is squarely focused on how to solve this population boom. Should legislation be drafted to address the feral cat population? How can we implement control on a local level?

First we need to define the difference between a “stray” cat and a “feral” cat. Many times people use these words interchangeably; however, there is a distinct difference. A feral cat is a domesticated species of cat that has never been socialized to people, or the offspring of lost or abandoned pet cats. A stray cat is a socialized pet cat that has been lost or abandoned.^{[36][47]} You may also hear the term “free-roaming” cat; some people use this term to describe a cat who is someone’s pet and is allowed to roam outdoors. Others use the term to describe all cats that are outdoors—ferals, lost or abandoned cats, and someone’s pet.

The term “feral” is sometimes used to refer to an animal that does not appear friendly when approached by humans. However, hissing and growling are self-defense behaviors, which over time, may change as the animal (whether feral or stray) begins to trust humans that provide food, water and care. The word feral may be a misnomer particularly when used to describe domesticated species such as dogs and cats, as it is associated with the misconception and erroneous belief that these domesticated animals cannot adapt and become a friendly house pet. ^[44] The best chance of finding a home for some of these cats is ideally when the feral kittens are caught before 12 weeks of age. Feral kittens have a pretty good chance of being socialized and becoming house pets, but they may take up to a couple of months to become socialized. Those kittens caught before 8 weeks have the highest success rate. Some of those over 12 weeks of age may never be completely socialized. ^[41]

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), 82 Million cats live in U.S. households. In addition, scientists estimate that the size of the U.S. stray and feral cat population rivals that of the pet cat population. Millions of unwanted and homeless cats are born in the U.S. each year. Scientists are of the opinion that the majority of the kittens being born in this country are born to the outdoor cat population. Research indicates that 82 % of cats in households throughout the United States are neutered. In contrast, less than 3% of stray and feral cats are neutered, according to the most comprehensive study to date.^[4] During the peak of the breeding season, which runs from late April to September, pounds and humane shelters euthanize unwanted and abandoned cats at the rate of over **one per minute**. Many cats brought to shelters have already had a litter. “Early spay/neuter (before puberty) has a dramatic effect on reducing unwanted litters.”^[12] “According to Companion Animal Demographics and Sterilization Status a study printed in “Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals,” nearly 70% of unwanted cat litters are born to a mother cat who ultimately gets sterilized—evidence that if more cats are sterilized before they are able to reproduce our communities would see a dramatic reduction of felines living as strays and in shelter facilities. ^[22]

A cat can come into heat starting as early in the year as January and continue through October. “Cats are also seasonally polyestrous, meaning they will come into heat and look to breed multiple times a season (average 2-3 times annually).” ^[12] “They are induced ovulators, so they do not go out of heat until bred. Just think about it, each female can have 2-3

litters per year; males and female kittens can start breeding as young as 4 months old. Litter size can be 4-6 kittens. The ratio of male to females in a litter is almost equal.” [11]

One irresponsible person placing a female cat, who hasn't been spayed, out on the streets or in the country is directly responsible for dozens and dozens of homeless cats, unless some caring person finds, takes in (or traps the cat if it is untamed), and has the female spayed before she can procreate. The responsibility starts the day the animal is born, but many people don't accept the responsibility.

It's important to differentiate free roaming house cats from true ferals. Ferals are often non-domesticated, self sufficient hunters who are born and live in the wild; they often form colonies of 10 or more. Feral cat colonies can be found living wherever there is shelter and a stable food source—abandoned buildings, fields and barns; in alleys behind restaurants; on waterfronts and underneath boardwalks. Many of their nuisance behaviors can be attributed to mating behaviors that would likely cease if they were sterilized. These behaviors include noise from fighting and mating, and the smell from the spraying of pheromone-laced urine. Cats may leave droppings and spray their territory which can include your front porch and shrubbery. There are people who would prefer feral cats living near their dwellings would simply disappear, including some Environmentalists and member of the Audubon Society. However, creative human intervention is needed to help resolve these problems.

Why are feral cats being removed? Are they just inconvenient, do they pose a genuine threat to wildlife or are the cats themselves unhealthy? Is the reason due to the concern for the well being of humans who live near a colony of feral cats? Feral cats can carry diseases transmittable to humans and domestic pets, including rabies, plague, ringworm, toxoplasmosis (which can damage the human nervous system, particularly in infants), mumps, feline leukemia, and distemper. Extermination is usually attempted for human convenience. Rarely is it undertaken because the cats themselves are suffering or because there is a true impact to another species of animals, aside from rodents. There are conflicting reports in the numbers of wildlife that free roaming and feral cats kill. Animalkind, Inc. reported that numerous studies have proven that wild bird declines are correlated to human intervention through the commercial and residential development of grassy fields with low desirable brush and wetland areas where these birds nest and reside, and not by feral cat hunting. [10] For a number of years the federal government has been using taxpayer dollars to kill animals that are considered a nuisance to some humans. In an article written in 2000 in Audubon, it was noted that commercial farmers of sunflower seeds complain about flocks of redwing blackbirds eating their seeds. It was suggested that, “in Minnesota and Dakotas, they say, the birds cost them between \$4 million and \$11 million a year.” But the government's approach is to not deal with the birds doing the damage; instead its approach is to wait until spring and then kill the birds in their winter roosting by setting out a poison, DRC 1339, that causes kidney and heart damage. [19] Wildlife Services—formerly known as Animal Damage Control—has poisoned nearly a million redwings since 1994. This year the agency had intended to kill 2 millions redwings by baiting small plots near their roosts. [46] The National Audubon Society's efforts had halted the killing for that year, but the agency had big plans for the future killing of blackbirds. It was not clear how many non-target birds and animals would be killed when the bait for the blackbirds was set out. On September 9, 2005, the killing report by the “Wildlife Services” Division of the USDA reported that in 2004 they killed 2.7 million animals, including 2.3 million starlings. [19]

On the other hand, in an article written by David A. Jessup, DVM,MPVM, DACZM he wrote that “free roaming and feral cats yearly kill hundreds of millions, perhaps as many as a billion, native North American birds, mammals, reptiles,

amphibians, and fish.” [14][15] However, one of the study’s co-author, Stanley Temple, who David Jessup was quoting, told the Sonoma County Independent, “The media has had a field day since we started. Those figures were from our proposal. They aren’t actual data; that was just our projection to show how bad it might be.” [27] So, even though there are some rather large discrepancies in the number of wildlife that feral cats kill, both the advocates and opponents of feral cats do agree that there is a problem with free roaming and feral cats killing wildlife. Cats are hunters by nature and even well fed cats will hunt. However, most of us would probably prefer to have a small, healthy feral cat population, rather than a larger rodent population in areas where those are the only options. [10]

According to Animalkind, Inc. throughout the world there continue to be conflicting views on feral cats. In some places they are viewed as beneficial animals, controlling rodents. Their presence may also give pleasure to people who enjoy watching them and caring for them. Elsewhere, feral cats are considered to be pests or a threat to wildlife. The information indicates that regardless of your position on feral cats, the best way to deal with them is to employ Trap/Neuter/Vaccinate/Return (TNVR) also known as TNR. Studies have proven that TNVR is the single most successful method of stabilizing and maintaining healthy feral cat colonies with the least possible cost to residents and local governments while providing the best life for the animals themselves. [10]

What is TNVR? Alley Cat Allies, a rescue group dedicated to these feral cats, describes TNVR as a “full management plan in which stray and feral cats already living outdoors in cities, towns, and rural areas are humanely trapped, then evaluated, vaccinated, and sterilized by veterinarians. [While under anesthesia, one of the cat’s ears is surgically notched to indicate the cat has been sterilized. This mark is visible from a safe distance and shows which cats in a colony have been altered and which need to be captured for surgery and vaccination]. Kittens and tame cats are adopted into good homes. Healthy adult cats too wild to be adopted are returned to their familiar habitat under the lifelong care of volunteers. It is important to note that variations of TNVR exist in many places—variations involving the extent of veterinary intervention, the range of official sanction, and the level of ongoing care. The one element that does not vary is sterilization of feral cats to break the cycle of reproduction.” [1] Studies have proven that TNVR is the single most successful method of stabilizing and maintaining healthy feral cat colonies with the least possible cost to the residents and local governments while providing the best life for the animals themselves.

There are many TNVR success stories such as the one in Orange County, Florida. They implemented a TNR program for two and a half years from 1995 through 1998. Previously, when they received a feral cat complaint, they sent an officer to trap the cats, held the animals for the mandatory waiting period, and then euthanized them. This cost \$105 per cat. By contrast, allowing volunteers to trap the cats and then provide free spay/neuter and vaccination services cost \$56 per cat, a savings of \$109,172 over the length of the study (2,228 cats). [1]

In Hamilton, New Jersey, after 5 years of TNR the township health department statistics show an 80% decline in the number of euthanized cats. The statistics reveal fewer strays are brought to the shelter each year. Township spokesperson Rich McClellan attributed the decreasing number of cats killed in shelters to the work of TNR caregivers. [1]

In New Jersey one official commented, *“It’s actually more expensive to have animal control officers go out and find these cats and have them euthanized than it is to have members of these (cat welfare) groups trap, neuter and release them.”* According to New Jersey officials, trapping and killing a cat can cost a township between \$75 and \$125 each, while TNR costs about \$50 and is paid for by volunteer organizations. [1]

The Florida and New Jersey studies are not the only documented TNR success stories, there are many. The Stanford Cat Network, A TNR program on the university campus, showed a decline in feral cats which numbers ranged from 500-1,500, to now less than 50. [1]

A TNR program on the waterfront in Newburyport, Massachusetts has proven so successful; there is now only one cat that is living there instead of the 300 that were present at the start of the program. No kittens have been born there in years. [1]

Locally in the Capital Region, we heard about the feral cat problems in the Town of Colonie this past summer and the story about the 90 plus cats on Orange Street in Albany. This is just the tip of the iceberg in the Capital Region and surrounding areas. Fortunately, for the feral cats in Colonie, the Town Board deliberated and decided to support the Trap-Neuter-Release method of feral cat control.

There are dedicated people and groups in the Capital Region who are trying to address the feral cat population. One such group is SCRUFF (Spaying Capital Region Unowned Feral Felines) Program. This program has been in existence since 2006. It is the only one in the Capital Region and is an all-volunteer program dedicated to providing low cost spay/neuter for feral cats. SCRUFF's spay/neuter clinics are held once a month at "Just Cats" located in Guilderland, NY. On average they spay/neuter 60-80 feral cats per month that come from the Capital District area and surrounding counties. They are looking to expand their program to other counties because of the vast need to spay/neuter the large number of feral cats coming not only from the Capital District area, but from other surrounding counties, e.g. Nassau, Saratoga, Washington, etc. [17] Some of the local rescue groups in the Capital Region like the Cat Care Coalition Group, Cat Tails, and other volunteers will trap feral cats and bring them through the SCRUFF program to be spayed/neutered at a cost of \$35.00 per cat. The Animal Protection Foundation (APF) in Scotia, NY offers to spay/neuter feral cats at a fee of \$70.00 that includes testing for Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV). Both of these organizations, check the cats for fleas and ear mites, vaccinate them against rabies, and ear tip them. [17] [39] If the rescue groups trap young kittens, they will try to socialize them so they can be adopted out to good homes. This year alone, Kitten Angels in Delmar, NY is one rescue group that has been very successful at socializing and adopting out 325 kittens from feral or stray mothers.

More and more state and local officials have also realized TNR not only works to reduce feral cat populations, it saves money. Increasingly, governments are recognizing the value of TNR in reducing feral or stray cat populations rather than euthanasia. [1]

Euthanasia in animal control pounds and shelters is used to make room for new ones, to manage disease, or to compensate for inadequate staff or funding. Euthanasia is the number one documented cause of death of all cats in the United States. There are simply not enough homes for all these felines. For feral cats, the kill rate in pounds and shelters rises to virtually 100%. "All unaltered cats contribute to the pool of unadopted kittens and cats euthanized in shelters every day. If we magically alter every free-roaming cat today, more would be born tomorrow. Tame cats are the original source of all free-roaming cats". [20] Therefore, spaying/neutering all cats can change the lives of all cats forever.

Advocates for feral cats believe that spaying and neutering feral cats is humane and stabilizes the population at manageable levels. It eliminates annoying behaviors and stresses associated with mating such as yowling and cat fighting. Controlling the population is less costly than repeated attempts at extermination; costs for repeatedly trapping and killing feral cats are far higher than promoting stable, non-breeding colonies in the same location. Euthanasia of feral cats to

control population is not effective, since vacated areas are soon filled by other cats that then start the breeding process all over again. This process is known as the “vacuum effect”. [22]

So while removing feral cats might seem attractive from a theoretical and short-term prospective, eradication has proven to be an elusive goal. There is something about the location that attracted the original cats there (vacuum effect), whether it is for shelter or a food source (such as a neighbor putting food out). It also has also been noted, that when cats move back into an area that has an abundance of resources, litters of kittens tend to be more frequent and large in number in order to bring the population back up. Instead, by following the TNR programs, litters of new kittens are prevented and available resources are limited by competing cats. Stabilizing the food resources available and by limiting the number of cats in the colony will cause any new acquisitions to the colony to have smaller and fewer litters and make it possible for the caretaker to intercede with prompt sterilization.

If everyone spayed and neutered their pets, and didn't just dump pets on the streets when they moved or didn't want to bother with them anymore, there would not be thousands of homeless cats on the streets. [40] However, this simply is not the reality of the world we live in today. Education is the key. People need to be educated on humane solutions such as TNVR and colony care.

There is supporting documentation on the Animal Law Coalition website at www.animallawcoalition.com that validates that TNR is the best solution for dealing with feral and stray cats. In an article that was posted on October 27, 2009, by Laura Allen, there were a number of reports on States and local governments who were previously using euthanasia to control their feral cat populations and later opted to adopt the TNR program.

One well-known study, reporting on the on the effectiveness of TNR was published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA). Julie Levy, DVM reported on her now famous study of feral cats on the University of Central Florida campus. The study was done over a period of 11 years. A program that included sterilization and an aggressive adoption program as well as TNR reduced the free roaming cat population by 66%. [1]

The study's conclusion: *“A comprehensive long-term program of neutering followed by adoption or return to the resident colony can result in reduction of free-roaming cat populations in urban areas.”* [1]

In convincing government authorities to support TNR, it is important to note despite claims to the contrary, feral and stray cats do not typically carry diseases. It has been suggested these cats should be eradicated because they spread highly contagious diseases such as rhinotrachitis, feline AIDS, and rabies. The evidence is contrary. Rabies is not commonly found in stray cats. [1]

In speaking at a hearing before the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, Dr. Julie Levy stated, “In 2002, cats represented less than 4% of the rabid animals identified in the state...Regardless, feral cat TNR programs routinely immunize against rabies.” Dr. Levy also addressed other infectious diseases such as Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) by stating that, “A report published from the University of Florida on more than 1,800 feral cats showed only 4% to be infected with feline leukemia virus or feline immunodeficiency virus, which is similar to that found in pet cats.” [1]

A study conducted by Stanford University's Department of Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) found virtually no risk to humans from feral cats. EHS, also concluded, after consultation with the Santa Clara County Health Department and Stanford's Department of Comparative Medicine, that there was a general consensus that feral cats pose virtually no health and safety risk to individuals. [1] Not so straightforward: "In New York state (sic), from 1993 to 2002, cats accounted for 2.7% of rabid terrestrial animals but accounted for a third of human exposure incidents (4,266) and postexposure prophylaxis (PEP) treatments (5,777). At Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR) feeding sites, rabies-susceptible wildlife competes for food with cats, and those cats subsequently have regular close association with humans, resulting in potential exposure." Jessup, David A., Elizabeth Stone, "Another Perspective on Feral Cat Control", JAVMA, Vol 237, No. 5, Sept. 1, 2010.

A recent report from the New York State Department of Health Rabies Laboratory, dated January 1 to October, 31, 2010, stated the number of cats that tested positive for rabies in Albany County was 2, Schenectady County was 3, and Rensselaer County was 1. For New York State as a whole, 1,155 cats were examined and 38 tested positive compared to 852 raccoons that were examined, resulting in 222 raccoons being positive for rabies.

Advocates for feral cats agree that TNR methods offer a longer-term solution, giving a well managed feral cat colony the chance of a decent life and freedom from the otherwise endless cycle of breeding. It is cost-effective and humane and has been proven to work across the country. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) considers TNR to be "the only proven humane and effective method to manage feral cat colonies." The Animal Law Coalition and the Alley Cat Allies organization support TNVR as a humane method of reducing feral or stray cat populations. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) neither endorses nor opposes appropriately managed cat colony programs. Although no single control method is suitable for all situations the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) supports humane population control methods such as "trap-neuter-return", relocation to managed colonies or appropriate sanctuaries, and where appropriate, adoption into homes.

Opponents of this practice, The American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, The American Bird Conservancy, and The New York State Humane Association (NYSHA), sometimes refer to TNR as Trap-Neuter-Abandon and feel that it is our role, as the guardians in the human-companion equation, to provide more than a tenuous existence to animals that are only in their abandoned state due to human irresponsibility and ignorance. Their lives can be brutally short and their death excruciating in upstate New York's winter. Because of the high degree of suffering that TNR produces, both in domestic and wildlife population, NYSHA cannot support this method of feral cat population control, except in rare supervised instances in which colonies are safe from environmental extremes, human cruelty and vehicular deaths, and in which the care giver staff is long-term and reliable. Dr. Julie Levy's much studied colony at the University of Florida's Veterinary School is one such special case. Such places cannot exist in the northeast, unless the animals are permanently sheltered and afforded veterinary care when necessary. [37] According to Susan McDonough, President of NYSHA, "In my experience, the vast majority of stray cats, including those who live in feral cat colonies where feeders provide food, have marginal lives at best. For a few months or even years, some may manage to exist reasonably well by hunting or on handouts from humans. Sooner or later, though, if they are not killed outright, they become ill or injured, often severely so. Then, lacking the veterinary attention owned companion animals would receive, they experience horrible suffering and misery". [38]

Nevertheless, State and local governments have seen the benefit of TNR, and many have decided to help fund it. Other state and local governments not only assist in funding spay/neuter for feral or stray cats, but also promote managed colonies.

Below are some suggested solutions that have been effective in other states and communities. These ideas were gleaned from various animal organizations and may possibly be used to start a grass roots project to address the feral cat problems in the Capital Region and surrounding areas. Some can be applied immediately and others may take longer to put in effect.

- Legislature needs to consider a bill that would allow feral and abandoned cats to live in managed colonies in areas where wildlife is not threatened.
- Involve wildlife experts from nearby colleges, parks, or state/federal agencies, community health officials, veterinarians, conservation groups, and animal shelter facilities to work together to solve cat overpopulation problems in their area.
- Local governments need to support the Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR) program in their areas by providing funding. They should embrace laws regulating and supporting managed colonies of feral and stray cats.
- In addition, state and local governments should provide volunteers with the use of loaner or rental Havahart Animal Traps.
- Municipalities need be involved with negotiating low cost veterinary services not only for the stray and feral cats, but also for household cats to encourage the spaying/neutering of pets.
- State and local governments need to increase community awareness regarding feral and stray cats. They should require rabies vaccination of all cats, require mandatory sterilization of all cats adopted from humane organizations and animal control agencies, promote sterilization of privately owned cats prior to sale or adoption, and encourage keeping owned cats indoors or in an outdoor enclosure, or on an attended leash.[7]
- Educate cat owners to spay or neuter their cats from eight weeks to four months of age, and keep them indoors.
- Owned pet cats should be microchipped for identification and wear bells on break-away collars to alert wildlife of their presence.
- Educate the public that feeding stray cats is *not* the best solution for cats, wildlife, or people.
- Veterinarians need to encourage early or pediatric spay/neuter.
- Research should be supported and funded to produce an environmentally safe, effective, nonsurgical contraceptive for cats.

To manage a successful TNR program, you need to combine joint efforts in a community with the local government; volunteers to trap, feed and manage the colonies; veterinarians who are willing to volunteer their services and/or provide low cost spay/neuter clinics; and you need to educate the public so they will “buy” into the program and make it successful.

The goal of colony management should be the eventual reduction of the colony through attrition; managed colonies are the interim solution to the problem of free-roaming abandoned and feral cats.

Strong passions emerge from both sides of the issues concerning feral cats. Myths, misunderstandings, and controversies can obstruct progress and interfere with the humane care of these cats. By learning the facts we may discover some new perspectives on some old theories. It is necessary to look at both sides of the issues and use factual information to reach an educated compromise. "Where there is a will, there is a way." Communities and their governments need to join together, look around, stay flexible, stay focused and make sure there is a cost saving, lifesaving effect with the programs they implement. The ultimate goal is to a win-win situation for everyone, especially the cats who are caught in the crosshairs!

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