

SAFE RELOCATION OF FERAL CATS

PART I: IS RELOCATION THE ANSWER?

The first recommendation for relocating a colony of feral cats is: **don't do it.** Unless the cats' lives are threatened or their environment about to be demolished, the optimum place for them is where they currently live.

Cats are territorial animals and form strong bonds with the location they inhabit. They have likely lived there for a long time, perhaps many years. A food source exists in the area and the cats are acclimated to local conditions. Relocating feral cats, whether a few or an entire colony, is a difficult, time-consuming, and problematic undertaking.

A far better course of action is to resolve the problems that are forcing the cats out of their established home. There are straightforward solutions to most problems. For example:

- If neighbors want the cats removed because of nuisance behaviors associated with breeding, such as yowling, spraying, and the birth of endless litters of kittens, humanely trap and sterilize the colony. This is the keystone of **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)**.
- If the cats are using gardens as litter boxes, build them a sheltered litter box or place sand in strategic areas for the cats to use as litter. Scoop regularly to alleviate odors and flies.
- If cats are climbing on cars or other property, gradually move their feeding stations away from the situation and the cats will usually follow.

Negotiate with neighbors and property owners. Diplomatically explain that the cats have lived at the site for a long time, that they will be sterilized, which

will cut back on annoying behaviors, and that a managed colony will be stable and healthy. Also explain that if the present colony is removed, new, unsterilized cats are likely to move in and the problems will recur. See the guides and factsheets listed in the Resources section for more strategies to keep feral cats living in their established territories.

PART II: PLANNING THE RELOCATION

Only after you have exhausted all possibilities does relocation become an option. Because cats form strong bonds with the location they inhabit, moving a colony of feral cats, and convincing them they want to stay moved, is a complex process involving specific procedures that must be followed **without shortcuts.** Otherwise, the relocated cats may not stay where you put them.

Assess the Colony

Feral cats develop strong bonds with one another as well as with their established homes. Determine how many cats are in the colony and try to find a new location that can take them all. If this is not possible, Alley Cat Allies recommends that at least two cats from the same colony always be moved together. They should be cats who have formed a bond with each other. The move will be less traumatic and adjustment to their new home easier if they have the security of one or more trusted companions.

You have two options for dealing with kittens:

- **Option One:** Remove the kittens, sterilize and tame them, then adopt them into good homes. Kittens up to the age of eight weeks usually socialize rapidly if they receive a lot of care and attention from humans. (See Resources, below:

IMPORTANT: Relocation includes humane trapping of all the cats and sterilization of any intact cats in the colony. If you are not familiar with the **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)** process, with trapping techniques, and with a veterinarian or veterinary clinic that treats feral cats, do not proceed further until you have read "The ABCs of TNR" and the other guides and factsheets cited in it.

“Taming Feral Kittens.”) If this level of care is not available, follow Option Two.

Older feral kittens can sometimes be tamed, but it is a long process with no guarantees. Older feral kittens may be better off staying with the colony, as in Option Two.

- **Option Two:** Sterilize the kittens and return them to the colony. The kittens should then be relocated at least in pairs, same as the adults.

Finding New Homes for the Cats

The colony’s new home should be located a reasonable distance from heavy traffic or other vehicular dangers, must provide shelter from inclement weather, and must come with a new caretaker who understands that he or she is assuming responsibility to feed, shelter, and care for the cats for life.

- Barns and horse stables often make excellent homes for feral cats. Ask everyone you know who lives in a rural area for leads to appropriate barn homes. Place notices in newspapers and flyers in stores, especially hardware stores, feed mills, and farm supply depots. (See Resources, below: “Barn cat flyer.”)
- A backyard or alley can become the new home if neighbors and/or property owners will assume the cats’ care. Again, posting flyers in a promising area may get results.

When you find a promising location, inspect the area carefully and talk to the prospective caretaker at length. Some people assume that a “farm home” means any rural place without supervision. A country home that is occupied only on weekends is not a good home. Cats need daily food, water, and monitoring.

Develop an adoption contract (similar to one used for domestic cat placements) in which the new caretaker will commit to providing basic needs, including veterinary care, and to having any new cats who appear in the colony spayed or neutered. (See Resources, below: “Feral Colony Adoption Contract.”)

Problems to Watch for

Be wary of homes on busy country roads. There may be fewer cars on country roads, but people tend to drive faster. City cats are accustomed to slower city traffic. City cats are sometimes killed on rural roads before they can adjust to new conditions.

Be careful of dogs at the new home. Some dogs are very aggressive toward cats. The caregivers must be willing to introduce their dog(s) to the cats slowly and not allow the cats to be frightened or chased or they will run away. In a new neighborhood, the cats can easily get lost.

Cats and horses frequently get along well, once the cats adjust to a horse’s size. Other animals such as raccoons, foxes, and opossums get along with adult cats in their own fashion. Kittens, however, are at risk because wild animals may consider them to be prey.

Coyotes will prey on both cats and kittens. In areas with coyotes, the cats stand a better chance if they have access to a shed or similar structure that has several small openings that they can run in for safety. This is safer than simple cat shelters. You may also consider building a fenced area for the feral cats. A ten-foot fence with a sharp inner angle will keep coyotes out. If the enclosure does not have a floor, sink the fence at least ten inches into the ground because coyotes can dig under fences. Always take food and water up at night, and make sure garbage cans are sturdy with tight-fitting lids. (See Resources below: “Do-It-Yourself Cat Fence.”)

PART III: RELOCATING THE CATS

This process is straightforward: Trap the cats and transport them immediately, in covered traps, to their new home. This project should move quickly, without interruption, and in as calm a fashion as possible. Refer to the ACA factsheet “Dos and Don’ts of Stress Reduction (for cats and for trappers)” for common sense ways to improve the trapping and transport process.

Confinement

Upon arrival at the new locations, the cats must be confined for two to three weeks. Confinement allows the cats to adjust to the environment in safety and to accept it as their new home. If set free upon arrival, all cats will take off and attempt to return to their former home. In addition to being dangerous for the cat, who is now lost in unfamiliar territory, it can be traumatic for a rescuer who has put a lot of energy, money, and care into the relocation.

Transfer the cats from the traps to large cages or cat playpens you have already installed in an environment with moderate temperatures—not too

hot or cold. Transfer each cat by placing the trap in the playpen, then opening the trap door. Be sure the playpen door is firmly closed when transferring the cats or they may escape.

Alert the new caretaker that during the first day or two, the cats may try to find a way out. Most cats settle down in the cage after a day or two when they realize that no harm will befall them.

While the cats are confined, they must have clean water, fresh food, and clean (or scooped) litter at least once, preferably twice, each day.

Equipment

In addition to one humane box trap per cat, you will need:

- Large cages and/or cat playpens for the initial confinement period at the new home. Cat playpens are large and require more than one person to install. (See Resources section for details on ordering playpens.)
- Adequate litter boxes, litter, food, and dishes, so you do not have to locate these items in an unfamiliar area. Feeding cats canned food during the confinement period appears to help them accept their new home. Once they are released, dry food is fine.
- An appropriate vehicle. Never transport trapped cats in the trunk of a car or other unsafe or unventilated vehicle compartment. Cover your car seats with plastic, towels, or newspapers before placing the cages/carriers in the vehicle.

Practical Details of Feral Cat Relocation

Be skeptical if you are told the new barn is escape-proof and that the cats cannot escape. Few, if any, barns are truly escape-proof and feral cats are escape artists. Always install cages/playpens for the confinement period to ensure that the cats remain in their new home.

Successful confinement periods range from two to three weeks. A much longer confinement period is unnecessary and unhealthy, and can jeopardize the relocation project. If confined for too long, the cats may run away upon release, from fear of being confined again.

Make sure the confinement area is located near a place where the cats can hide once they are released

from the playpen. They will likely run and hide when first released, but will reappear in a day or two.

Make sure the new caretaker will bond with the cats by talking to them or by playing a radio softly to get them used to human voices. People who make an effort to communicate with cats have the most successful relocations.

If a cat escapes from the playpen, the caretaker should set food and water out, then sprinkle used litter (specifically feces) around the barn. Cats often hide for a period of time but usually stay on the premises. Leave plenty of food and water out to encourage the escapee to stay close.

After the Move: You're Not Finished Yet

Plan to call or visit the new caretaker regularly to ensure that the cats are well cared for. You may be able to provide valuable support or advice. Also stay in touch so that you may have a contact for future relocations.

If you have relocated an entire colony, try to completely remove the food sources in the old location to discourage a new colony of feral cats from forming. But remember, because the original colony has been removed, new unsterilized cats are likely to move in and the problems recur.

IN CONCLUSION

A survey conducted by Alley Cat Allies revealed that relocations were most likely to succeed when four main points were adhered to:

- Several cats from the same colony were relocated together.
- Cats were confined for two to four weeks in large cages, sheds, barns, basements, or escape-proof shelters.
- Cats were fed canned food every day for a short period (two to six weeks) and then dry food.
- The new caretaker made frequent (minimum twice daily) verbal attempts to bond with them.

You have undertaken one of the most difficult tasks in working with feral cats, but if you follow the procedures and techniques outlined in this guide and in other factsheets referred to, and if you **take no shortcuts**, you have a good chance at success. Good luck.

RESOURCES

Guides, factsheets, and flyers available from www.alleycat.org or by mail from Alley Cat Allies:

1. "The ABCs of TNR"
2. "Humane Trapping Instructions for Feral Cats"
3. "Making Feral Cats Welcome in Your Community" (formerly "Community Benefits of Feral Cats")
4. "Taming Feral Kittens"
5. "Barn Cat Flyer"
6. "Feral Colony Adoption Contract"
7. "Dos and Don'ts of Stress Reduction (for cats and for trappers)"
8. "Do-It-Yourself Cat Fence"

Information about ordering playpens/confinement cages can be found at www.cdpets.com/enclosure.html or by calling 1-888-554-7387. ■