

— Relocation and Care Guidelines for Feral Cats —

Feral Cats

Feral cats are independent animals who, for the most part, do not welcome human contact — although the degree to which this is true varies from cat to cat. In most cases, they have lived their lives independent of human interaction and have not had very much human contact. In this way, they are different from your typical "barn cat." With increased positive exposure to humans, many feral cats learn to tolerate, and many times actually welcome, human attention.

The Bonds of Feral Cats

Feral cats develop strong bonds with one another as well as with their established homes. It is recommended that at least two cats from the same colony be moved together. These are 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 companion.

Relocation Home Setting

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

Housing

Housing that provides adequate shelter from the weather is needed for the feral cats. Barns and horse stables make excellent homes for these cats. A garage with a cat door allowing easy access into and out of the garage is another choice. If these options are not available, a feral cat shelter could be built. Please see some construction designs at <http://wicatinfo.weebly.com/trap-neuter-return-and-outdoor-cats-and-kittens.html> for links to many easy to make feral cat shelter designs. In Madison, there are Styrofoam shelters that you can get at Nutzy Mutz, 330 W. Lakeside in Madison, 608 256 3647. They keep cats warm during our harsh Wisconsin winters. Always line any shelter with **straw, NOT hay or blankets**. These absorb moisture and make the shelter damp.

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. You have to commit to providing the adopted cats with proper food, water, shelter, exercise, and veterinary care. In addition, it is highly recommended that any new cats who appear in the colony be spayed or neutered.

Confinement/Aclimation period

It is essential that the cats be confined in their new home for a period of 3 - 4 weeks (4 weeks is preferred). This is needed in order to familiarize the cats with their new environment so that they will remain on the premises when released from confinement. This is a necessary part of a successful relocation: the cats need to regard their new home as a permanent feeding station before being permitted to roam freely. Not confining the cats and having them run off could mean a far worse fate for the cats.

A small building like a milk house is ideal for this confinement period. If this type of arrangement is not available, large dog crates can be used. During the acclimation period, food, water, and a litter box must be provided. On a daily basis, provide fresh food and water and clean the litter box.

Acclimating feral cats to humans

During the confinement period, it is recommended that regular, at least daily, visits be made to ensure the bonding essential to relocation. Speaking to the cats in a soft tone of voice helps them to overcome their ingrained fear of humans. Also, placing a radio tuned into a talk show in the area where the cats are confined is helpful. The important point to remember is to keep the interactions, during and after the acclimation period, as positive as possible.

Feeding

The cats need to be provided fresh food and water on a daily basis during the confinement period as well as afterwards. Establish a regular schedule and the cats will anticipate feeding time. To deter other critters (possums, raccoons, skunks, etc), feed in the morning vs. at night when these animals are more active and can get into the food. During the winter, increase the cats' food by about 20%, as they need more energy during cold weather. So for example, if you are feeding

them 2 cups a day, feed them about 2.5 cups a day. Even though they may supplement their diet through "organic rodent control," fresh food and water on a daily basis is essential for their health. You may need to invest in a heated bowl in the winter, so that the water does not freeze. Farm supply and pet stores sell these.

The presence of dogs

If dogs are present at the new home, their interaction with the feral cats will need to be monitored at the beginning. Although it may not be a problem, the dogs should be introduced to the cats slowly while the dog(s) are under leash control. Do not allow the dogs to chase the cats because this may cause the cats to run away.

Rodents

If you have a rodent issue, we hope that the cats will take care of it for you. Please **DO NOT** lay out poison for the mice and rats. These poisoned rodents may be eaten by the cats as well as raptors, such as owls and hawks, and cause serious illness or even death through secondary poisoning. Snap or live traps are a much better alternative.

Summary

The majority of the effort required of the caregiver of feral cats at a new home is at the beginning — during the confinement period. Once the feral cats are released from confinement, the only regular work that the caregiver needs to do is provide the cats with fresh food and water on a daily basis, as well as monitoring the cats' health.

If you are interested in learning more about the care of feral cats visit the Alley Cat Allies website at www.alleycat.org They have a wealth of information, including how to build an inexpensive feral cat shelter. In Madison, please check Madison Cat Project <https://www.madisoncatproject.org/outdoor-adoptions/>