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Tricks of the Trade

Essential Feral Cat Care

Okay. So you've successfully trapped 18 cats, sterilized them all, eartipped them for identification, and returned them to the alley behind your house. Great! You have prolonged their lives and definitely improved their health. So now what? Although a lot of caring for a colony is just common sense, here are a few tips to make your life as a caregiver a little easier.

Food and Water

The amount of food needed by the cats depends on the weather, other sources of food, and the size of the individual cats. You can expect an adult feral cat to eat roughly 5.5 ounces of wet (canned) cat food and 2 ounces of dry food. Some cats will eat considerably more food, others less.

Monitor the amount of food the cats leave behind to determine the proper portion. If the food is all gone in 15 minutes, you may want to put out a little more. If there's still food remaining after an hour on a consistent basis, try putting out a little less. In winter you may want to provide proportionally more dry food, as the wet food, if not eaten quickly, will freeze. And remember that while most cats clearly enjoy canned food, you can feed a colony on dry food alone.

Remember to always keep the feeding station neat and clean. This is vital, not only for the health of the cats, but also for community relations. Remove uneaten food—do not allow food to sit out overnight, as it could attract other wildlife. Keep the food dishes in one space to facilitate cleanup and to provide a neater appearance. Your neighbors and the cats will appreciate your efforts!

Automatic feeders can help keep a feeding station orderly. Some have a flap that the cats must push open to get to the food, making it less vulnerable to the elements and some birds. These feeders also help if you cannot get to the colony every day; however, they do make cats harder to trap, as they are not fed at a regular time. A good example is Nasco Farm and Ranch's pest-free dog feeder. Call 1-800-558-9595 for ordering information.

To protect the food from birds and the weather, it's advisable to find a sheltered spot or build a canopy to cover the food. Suitable

feeding stations can easily be fashioned by someone with basic carpentry skills or made out of large plastic tubs or trash cans cut to permit access by the cats. For a simple, protected feeding station, try attaching a domed plastic garbage can lid to three or four wooden posts. Place the food and water underneath.

Location of the feeding stations is also important. They should not be put too close to the cats' sleeping spots (shelters) or too near the place where they eliminate.

OBTAINING FOOD—You may want to call your local humane society or human food bank to see if they ever have a surplus of cat food that they are willing to give you.

You can ask at the local market and pet supply store to see if they'll make broken packages or dented cans available to you. You can also try asking local vet clinics, as they may have surplus or just-out-of-date premium pet foods that they are willing to donate. Another idea is to advertise a cat food drive in the local paper. Your office, local religious institution, or civic or youth group might be willing to help out with such a drive. The local market may be willing to allow you to put out an attractive bin requesting pet food donations.

While many of these suggestions will work better if you're part of an organized group, some may still be workable for an individual.

WATER—Keeping water clean and plentiful can be difficult at times. In the winter in colder climates, freezing can be a problem. There are electrically powered, heated water bowls on the market; unfortunately, these work only if you feed close to an electrical outlet. Otherwise, try keeping the water in the sun. There is also a product on the market called Solar Sipper, which claims to help prevent the water from freezing. However, this works only at temperatures of 30 degrees Fahrenheit or higher and must be kept in the sun. Check water frequently during winter months.

If you notice that the cats are not using the water you provide, you might want to try moving it a short distance from their food, because cats sometimes prefer this arrangement.

INSECTS—Cut down on insects by keeping your feeding areas clean, especially in hot, humid weather. Removing feeding dishes completely between feedings can also help. You can also cut back, or cut out completely, the amount of wet food that you feed because dry food tends to attract fewer bugs. Just be sure that you add more dry food to compensate.

Feeding stations that are elevated slightly off the ground and surrounded with a line of diatomaceous earth, available from some natural food stores and environmentally conscious pet-care supply companies, can also help. Be sure to use food-grade diatomaceous earth without any chemical additives. The diatom dust will need to be reapplied after rainstorms, but it effectively keeps crawling insects away from the food.

A less expensive and easy solution involves applying cooking oil to the outside of the food bowl. Bugs and ants will not walk on oil. Another solution includes placing the food bowls on a tray or cookie sheet with a 1-inch-high lip, and filling the tray with a layer of water. The cats can reach over the water to get the food, but crawling bugs cannot cross it. Ten-inch plastic flowerpot trays also work well. They are available in a camouflaged shade of green, and the lip for the flowerpot holds the food bowl to prevent it from sliding. Besides being durable and inexpensive, the two-inch-deep trays can hold enough water to be used as a water source for the cats.

Housing

Some colonies have already found shelter for themselves—in a shed or under a building where they are safely permitted to reside. If not, you should consider building a shelter for them. Contact ACA for plans for a wooden shelter. Make sure that the door is big enough only for cats. Also make sure that the shelter is waterproof (and windproof for colder climates) and elevated off the ground. The space beneath the shelters should be blocked from drafts. Use straw or hay for bedding, not blankets or carpeting, because these can hold moisture. You can also use hardwood shavings, but softwood shavings are not suitable due to possible toxicity.

Scrap lumber for building feral cat houses may be obtained from building supply stores or contractors at very modest cost; some might even be willing to donate it. Putting ads in the paper requesting used dog houses for feral cats will usually net several shelters, free of charge, that can often be made suitable for cats with minor improvements (usually insulation needs to be added and the door needs to be made smaller).

FLEA CONTROL—Consider having the veterinarian apply a long-lasting topical flea control product that is safe for cats, such as Advantage, when the cats are anaesthetized for sterilization. There are also oral flea medications (such as Program) that can be added to the food once a month, but for feral cats monitoring the dosage can be difficult.

Bedding in the shelters should be changed twice a year. At that time the floor surface of the shelter can be sprayed or dusted with a cat-safe flea control product. Diatomaceous earth can be sprinkled beneath the straw or hay to deter fleas. There are also sprays that contain a flea growth inhibitor that is harmless to the cats (once dry), but prevents flea eggs from maturing.

LITTER—To prevent cats from using neighbors' gardens or other unacceptable spots to eliminate, you should consider supplying litter for them. Although you cannot use conventional litter outside because it gets ruined by weather, sand is a good, inexpensive alternative. You might want to build a simple wooden frame to keep all the sand in one area. Another idea is to build a covered area to keep conventional litter boxes dry. Make sure to clean any litter that you put out on a regular basis.

Be sure that the litter area is in a quiet, sheltered space. The cats will reject it if it's too busy or too near their feeding station or sleeping spots. By taking these steps, you can help resolve potential problems with cats using the neighbors' yards or kids' sandboxes.

Health

You'll want to keep an eye on the cats for general good health. Some common indicators of health problems are changes in behavior, changes in eating habits, inability to eat, dull eyes or coat, discharge from nose or eyes, or listlessness. If you feel that a feral cat is ill, you might want to re-trap him and take him to your veterinarian for a checkup. Call your vet first and describe the symptoms.

Try to work out a plan with your veterinarian to provide you with deworming medicine or antibiotics to medicate your colony cats for minor health problems. Setting up a plan with your vet before a health problem strikes will make any situation that occurs much easier to handle. Make sure to keep all your colony's health records handy for future reference. Use the Feral Cat Colony Tracking System, available from ACA.

Community Relations

Tell your neighbors who you are and what you are doing. It helps to provide written information from ACA to lend credibility to your efforts and for them to refer to if they have questions later.

It's also advisable to provide your phone number, so they can contact you if there is a problem with your colony. If, for example, one of the cats is bothering them on their property, or one of the cats is ill, you can intervene to solve the problem. Request ACA's factsheet "Making Feral Cats Welcome" for more ideas.

Once people know what you are doing and how it benefits the neighborhood, they often become more tolerant of the cats and may even want to help. Be sure to make it clear that you are not bringing cats into the neighborhood, but are humanely managing an existing situation and reducing the population over the longterm. ■