

No More Homeless Pets Forum

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Topic: Trapping the Untrappable



Having trouble getting that last cat in the feral colony in to the vet? Or what if you only see that one wary stray every three days? Meredith Weiss, field director for NYC Feral Cat Initiative, offers tips on humanely trapping the untrappable!

Introduction from Meredith Weiss

I admit it: I was a feeder. Like so many people who get involved with feral cats, one day I just came upon them, on my way to work, and at that time work was only a few minutes' walk from my apartment. When I saw them, there were five (or so I thought) and my first impulse was to run back home and get some food. I quickly established a routine, feeding them morning and night, and this went on (with some nagging pangs) for almost three months.

Then the feisty little black one, Stella, showed up with five kittens prancing behind her, in single file like ducklings. Four tiny black ones and a long-haired calico! Of course, that's when it struck me what those pangs were about: I had to do more than feed them – I had to get them fixed!

Neighborhood Cats was in its infancy then, so I was very fortunate to find out about the grassroots organization and to get hands-on help from Bryan Kortis, a co-founder. We've come a long way since then and many more people around the country are doing TNR and maintaining feral cat colonies. Join me this week as we talk about how to successfully trap feral cats, particularly the elusive ones.

Bio for Meredith Weiss

Meredith Weiss joined Neighborhood Cats in February of 2000 after learning the basics of trap/neuter/return (TNR) and successfully implementing the method in the many colonies in her lower Manhattan neighborhood. In addition to her role as feral cat coordinator for New York City, Meredith has been widely recognized for her compelling photography of feral cats. Her work has appeared in *Cat Fancy*, the *New York Times* and *Newsday*, among others. She recently received a Certificate of Excellence and a Muse Medallion from the Cat Writers Association for her color photography series that appeared in the fall 2003 issue of ASPCA's *Animal Watch*.

Since childhood, animals have been an important part of Meredith's life. With the implementation of TNR, Meredith has participated in improving hundreds of feline lives and depicts that, too, in her photographs. Feral cats, often found in unlikely, challenging habitats, make very poignant subjects. She is currently working on a book based on interviews with committed feral colony caretakers, comparing the similarities and differences in their experiences.

Meredith shares her Brooklyn apartment with seven cats: siblings Duluth and Wendy, Tabbio, Topaz, and siblings Sabine, Bluebell and Audio.

Tips for trapping success

Question from Taliah: What are some very basic tips that will increase my trapping success? Do you have any tricks that you've invented that we wouldn't know about?

Response from Meredith Weiss: If you're not having any luck, you might have to "train" the cats to eat out of the trap. To be effective, you'd want to do this for a minimum of several days, optimally for a week or two. You would secure the front end of the trap so it is set open (and cannot be tripped). Put a stick or rod through both sides of the trap, just below the open front door, or secure it open with a twist tie or wire.

Set the trap near the feeding station, the place you usually feed. If necessary (if this area is accessible to strangers), either lock the trap to a fence or take the rear (removable) door with you so your cats cannot be trapped inadvertently, or by someone other than you. If you do take the rear door, tape that opening closed with clear tape. This will force the cats to enter from the front, as they will have to do, and also will allow a cat to escape (by breaking through the plastic tape) if something untoward happens.

Start by putting the food into the trap from the front, just a few inches from the door opening. Check to see that the food has been eaten, then gradually move the food back so that after several days it is positioned behind the trip plate, where it will be during an actual trapping. When the cats eat the food positioned at that point, you are ready to trap.

One easy hint that is sometimes overlooked is to drizzle a trail, in zigzag manner, with juice from tuna or sardines, tiny bits of food or crumbled cat treats, leading up to and into the trap. Another simple trick is to take a 6" x 9" piece of cardboard, tape it onto the trip plate facing forward horizontally (toward the opening of the trap). The cardboard serves to lengthen the trip plate, which is often too short. This foils some cats' attempt to avoid the trip plate by leaning over it, eating the bait and then backing out of the trap, untrapped!

Finally, make sure the cats are hungry! Food should be withheld for a minimum of 24 hours; frequently 48 hours or longer is necessary. While using their regular canned food as bait can work, it is better to have something extra enticing as well, such as tuna, sardines or salmon. For the rare cat who doesn't care for fish, roast beef or turkey are good choices.

To cover or not to cover: that is the question

Question from Rob: How do you feel about covering a set trap with a blanket or black garbage sack?

Response from Meredith Weiss: Generally when we set the traps we leave them uncovered, but with the cover (usually a sheet) rolled and tucked into the handles of the trap, so there's no chance it won't be right there and ready when the cat is trapped. Many cats will flail about when initially trapped but calm down almost immediately when covered, so it is essential that you have a sheet for each trap, otherwise a cat could hurt himself if left uncovered for any length of time. These injuries, usually in the form of torn nail beds, bloody noses, or even broken incisor teeth, are referred to as cage trauma.

You might want to pre-cover the traps if:

- You've had the traps set for a while and no one is going in.
- The traps are set in a protected area but you have to leave them unmonitored for a period of time (even as little as 20 minutes).
- The weather is bad – if it's raining or snowing or very cold.

When you cover the traps, make sure you cover only the top and sides; leave the back uncovered so the cat can see out/through. This gives the cat the illusion that there is an exit he can get out of, and also doesn't mask the sight and smell of the bait. You want to go for a tunnel effect. The exception would be extreme cold; in that case, you would also cover the back, especially if the trap may not be picked up right away.

You can cover the traps with any material – sheets, blankets or heavy trash bags. Just make sure that you place a weight (some stones or rocks) on top of the traps and also along the sides to secure any overhang and to prevent the covering from blowing off, or blowing in the breeze.

Another way of covering traps is camouflage. For example, if your trapping environment is woody, place twigs, branches, leaves, etc., over the trap to make it conform to the general scenery. Just be careful that nothing interferes with the trapping mechanism. You can even lay a piece of burlap on the floor of the trap and toss some leaves and twigs on top of that.

If you're trapping in an urban environment, place the traps adjacent to the typical objects found in such an environment, such as a plank of wood, a trash can, fence, etc. The point is, no matter where you trap, always place the traps against something, even a curb or small bush; don't set them out in the open. And for an urban trap liner, some trappers favor a few layers of newspaper.

Mass trapping vs. onesies and twosies

Question from Patrick: Is it better to trap all the cats at once, or one or two at a time?

Response from Meredith Weiss: Mass trapping, which is trapping all the cats in a colony at once (whether two or twenty-two), is recommended over the one-at-a-time approach. Often when you come upon an unmanaged (unneutered) colony, there is a kind of chaos – many cats, kittens, bad smells, complaining neighbors, etc.

By trapping all the cats at once, you make a significant, positive and fast change in the situation. Kittens can be rescued, noise from mating or from fighting male cats will subside, and of course the females will be spayed and will no longer get pregnant. Also, when you do a mass trapping, all the cats are in the same boat, so to speak, and you are more likely to catch them all when none of them has been trapped.

If you employ the one-at-a-time method, you'll do okay for a while but as more and more cats are trapped and neutered, you'll have a harder and harder time picking out the ones you haven't caught yet. And of course, each time you trap you have to withhold food from everyone, even those you're not targeting. But during a mass trapping (which typically takes place over 2-3 days), the ones who are trapped last have been getting

increasingly hungry, while the already trapped cats are able to be fed. While people may think a mass trapping is a lot of work, essentially the process is the same as trapping one or two cats; the beauty of mass trapping is you only have to do it once!

However, there may be valid practical reasons why everyone cannot undertake a mass trapping. You have to have, or be able to borrow, all the traps you need. And you have to have a space large enough to accommodate the trapped cats before and after neutering. If there are no free or low-cost spay/neuter services available, you will have to bring them to a private vet, someone experienced in working with ferals, and most private vets can't accept a large number of cats for surgery at one time.

So, because logistics may sometimes dictate that not all cats are brought in the very same day, a commitment to take care of the colony in a week, or no more than two weeks at the most, is imperative. The goal is for not even one more litter to be born.

Silly bugs: kibble is for cats!

Question from Louise: It's almost summer and with summer come bugs! How do I keep them away from the cats' food? Do you have any other feeding advice?

Response from Meredith Weiss: Typical bugs attracted to cat food are ants, flies and slugs. Ants can be kept out of the food by building a small moat. Take a plastic tray or Tupperware container – something flat and fairly wide with raised sides – and fill it with a quarter to a half inch of water. Then put the food in a separate bowl and place that in the middle of the tray with the water. The water will prevent the ants from reaching the food, while the cats can easily lean over and eat.

Slugs: Well, strange as it sounds, the way I solved this problem was to feed the slugs separately! Just take a little bit of dry or wet food and put it on the ground, at least several inches away from the cat food bowls. The slugs will be happy to not have to climb into the bowls.

Flies become a problem when the food is left out uneaten in warm weather. They are more of a problem with canned food than with dry. If your colony isn't trained to eat at a scheduled time, don't leave out wet food on hot days. Feed in the evening or at night instead. Or leave out dry food only.

In the case of a sudden rainstorm, it's recommended that you have a covered feeding station for your colony. If this isn't possible and you have to put food out unprotected from the elements, you can try this method to keep it dry: Again, take a Tupperware container, or a typical styrofoam take-out container from a restaurant, usually about nine inches wide. Fill it with dry food. Place the matching lid on the container upside down so it is covering the food but not snapped on. Put a few pieces of food on top of the turned-over lid. Even in this position, the lid will keep the rain out. When the rains stops and the cats come out, they'll smell the food and flip the lid off to get it.

Both pigeons and raccoons love cat food. Hopefully in your area you only have one or the other, not both! If you have pigeons, feed after dark when the pigeons are sleeping. With raccoons, do just the opposite; usually, they rarely venture out during daylight hours. And if you do have both in your neighborhood – good luck! Leave out plenty of

food. Raccoons and cats can get along and eat together if there's enough for everybody.

What to feed: Feed the best quality food you can comfortably afford. If you have a colony of three, you may be able to feed a higher quality (more expensive) food than if you have a large colony. You may find that if you switch from a low quality to a higher one you'll soon be feeding a smaller quantity, so when you average out the cost, it may not be much greater after all. And if you do switch, do it gradually, mixing in the old with the new.

Generally, canned food is more nutritious than dry, but almost all feral cats will have to be given dry food at least sometime for a variety of reasons. Check the ingredients on the label. If the first one is some kind of grain, or byproducts, it's not the best food, as it contains mostly that ingredient. Remember, cats are carnivores and actually require no carbohydrates at all.

Drop trap for wary cat

Question from kwalton: When I read your blog entry, I thought "Wow!" That's pretty much what happened to me. I was feeding stray cats until one day I saw kittens and realized I wasn't feeding, I was breeding! I've written quite a bit on my blog, "Diary of Rescued Kitties," about my cat-rescuing experiences. But there's this one big, fluffy white male cat that I can't seem to catch to save my life. He stuck his head partway into a trap one time and then pulled it back out. In doing so, he knocked the bottom of the door and it shut with him outside of it, so I know he's wary from that. Then, when I caught one kitten, the white cat was down there nosing around the trap the kitten was in.

So far, he just sniffs and sprays everything and walks away. I usually bait the traps with canned mackerel, and at the suggestion of another rescue volunteer, I tried adding catnip. She also suggested valerian, but I haven't had a chance to look for that. Someone else suggested a drop trap, but Fluffy won't come in the backyard at all if he senses anyone there. Any other suggestions would be most appreciated.

Response from Meredith Weiss: The most effective way we've found to trap hard-to-catch cats is the drop trap. You can make one yourself; instructions are at www.droptrapdesign.blogspot.com.

The drop trap is essentially a 3-foot-square box made of a wooden frame and mesh netting with a plywood flap attached to the back for anchoring. It is set by propping up one side with a stick to which a long line of cord is attached. Cats are often less wary of going under the drop trap than they are of entering the narrower metal box trap.

A large bowl of food is placed in the center at the back of the trap. The trap is propped up, the cord unwound, and the trapper moves a distance away, while maintaining a good line of vision to see when the cat is completely under the trap. It's important to wait until the cat has settled a bit and is eating before pulling the cord. The cat should be facing away from the opening; otherwise, he can see the slightest movement of the cord and may bolt out in a flash.

When the moment is right, the trapper quickly and firmly pulls the cord, causing the trap to drop (hence the name) and literally fall over the cat, securing him. (The sides or walls

of the trap are 14 inches high, tall enough not to touch or land on the back of the cat.) The trap is then covered with a large sheet and a humane box trap is quickly lined up to the guillotine-type door, incorporated into the design of the drop trap. Via this door, the cat is transferred out into the box trap.

There are several instances when the drop trap is called for. Hard-to-catch cats, of course, but it is also useful for trapping a litter of kittens, or a pregnant or injured cat; basically, for selecting any cat you want while allowing those already neutered to come and go as they please.

It is imperative to have a good amount of food in the bowl so when the desired cat arrives there will still be food left to lure him in. Sometimes, the targeted cat, by observing others eating and walking away (and facing no unwanted consequences!), may be encouraged to follow suit.

Another possibility is to set the trap against a wall, for example, and lean a large board against it so the trap itself is hidden. Frequently a cat will "go exploring" and explore his way into the trap.

Other suggestions are to continue to experiment with a variety of bait: rare roast beef, rotisserie chicken, in addition to the typical fishy offerings. Make sure all the bait is fresh. Finally, try to scout around to see if anyone else is leaving food out. Usually if a cat is really hungry, sooner or later you'll be able to trap him. But if he's secretly eating elsewhere, your plans will be foiled.

I haven't had too much success with catnip, although I've heard it works better with males than females, but I don't know why. Valerian, which is an herb or tea you can buy at a health food store, has similar properties as catnip, for some cats.

Two shy cats: see how they run ...

Question from Cat Whisperer: I am trying to trap two very trap-shy cats: a mother and her six-month-old female kitten. I set out several traps (five), baited with mackerel, put the teasers out from the cage ... and the mother wouldn't even go close to the trap. I am not sure I can use a drop trap due to space constraints in her "lair." Any suggestions on how to coax these two into cages would be greatly appreciated. Keep up the great work – trust me, it does make a difference.

Response from Meredith Weiss: Are you feeding the cats on a regular basis? Make sure they are hungry enough! I know it's hard to withhold food, but for the more stubborn cats, it's especially essential. Healthy, normal-weight cats can go several days without food without any ill effects (except hunger). Also, check to see that no one else is feeding them on the sly.

Try different baits: sardines, tuna, chicken or roast beef; Figaro brand tuna (cat food) or Fancy Feast (cat food). Put two different types in the trap. Make sure the bait is fresh. If your traps have been out for hours, you would want to freshen (replace) the bait. Bait that has flies swarming around or ants crawling in it is not going to appeal to the cats.

Place the traps against something – a wall, fence, tree, even the curb. Set a couple of

traps near the area where they normally come to eat and set them at a time when they normally come to eat. If they have no regular time, set them at dusk or later; typically, ferals are nocturnal. The longer you can safely (with monitoring or confidence that no one can harm, release or make off with the trapped cats) keep the traps set the better. If you do leave traps set for an extended period of time, they must be pre-covered.

Partially cover (top and sides) a couple of the traps with a sheet. Don't cover the back end – it should appear to the cats that they can get through. Don't linger nearby, where the cats can see you.

Did you see my earlier post about training them to eat inside a tied-open trap? The process can take a week or so, and with the warm summer months accelerating breeding, the time is now to get started. Both females are old enough to have one or more litters this year.

Kooky trick: Once I took a fake toy mouse doused with catnip and tied it by the tail at the back of the trap (beyond the trip plate). I did trap a cat this way but have no idea if it was the fake mouse that did it; obviously, cats are driven mostly by smell and knew the mouse wasn't real.

What about the idea of using a dog trap, one for at least a 40-pound dog? They're large and maybe less trap-like. They can be borrowed from animal control. If the two are really bonded, they could go in at once and get trapped together, whereas with a smaller trap there would only be room for one at a time and that could be intimidating.

There is the somewhat slight risk that one cat would be partially in when the lightweight door slammed shut, which would startle but not injure. The trip plate is generally sensitive enough for a cat, but if not (test it by putting 2 pounds or so on it and seeing if it trips), a weight can be added so that by the time a cat comes along, just a touch will send it over the edge.

I had one extra-stubborn, prolific female – a tortie (tortoiseshell calico). It took me several months to trap her. Finally, I got her! As you can imagine, it was a day for celebrating; she'd had several litters and, boy, was I glad not to have to capture and find homes for any more kittens. Sometimes ongoing persistence is required. Good luck!

Babies and mamas

Question from Stacy: I didn't get to that last breeding female in my colony in time. She just kept getting more and more pregnant and, at the same time, more and more trap-wise. She disappeared for a couple of days about two weeks ago, and reappeared looking quite a bit skinnier! When can she be spayed, when can the kittens (which are welcome to stay here) be spayed/neutered, and how do we handle the logistics of trapping the kittens?

Response from Meredith Weiss: Pregnant cats are often notoriously difficult to trap, especially as they get further along into their pregnancy, so I'm not surprised your gal went off to have her litter before you could trap her and get her spayed in time to prevent a litter.

There are several “good news” facts about your next steps, after you consider these

options. Would you like to capture the kittens for socialization and adoption? If so, you would want to take them from their mother when they are between five and six weeks old. At this age, they are old enough to eat on their own, yet still young enough to work with and socialize with a very good chance of success. If you take the kittens away at a younger age, you will have to bottle-feed them.

If you don't want the responsibility and work (and it is work) of socializing and finding good adoptive homes, you can let the kittens grow up to be feral and join the existing colony. If you go that route, I'd advise getting them fixed as soon as you can, rather than waiting until later, when they will be harder to trap. Kittens can be safely spayed or neutered at two months of age, as long as they also weigh 2 pounds, are in good overall health and the surgery is performed by a vet experienced in early spay/neuter. This way, you know it's done and don't have to keep an eye on your calendar, calculating how much time you have before they reach reproductive age. The average age of maturity is five to six months, but the safety net may be shorter than most people think: Females can (and do) reproduce as young as four months!

The mom can continue to nurse after she is spayed. A small percentage of queens will have their milk dry up after spaying, due to hormonal changes involved in a full hysterectomy (spay). Because of this, you might as well wait until the kittens are on solid food consistently. (They may be "comfort nursing" before naptime still; that's okay and even good for immune support, but wait until the main source of calories is kitten food.)

I wouldn't attempt to trap and spay her until the kittens are about four weeks old; the mom should have 48 hours of recovery time. Kittens two to four weeks of age can usually survive a day or two without their mother, especially if given supplemental kitten formula. If they're younger than that, then their chances on their own are poor.

A nursing mom can get pregnant again as soon as a few days after her delivery. Her gestation (pregnancy) is approximately 63 days – in other words, two short months. So, while you don't have to rush right away to trap and spay (if she does get pregnant again, she can still be spayed at any stage of pregnancy), don't be fooled into thinking that she can't get pregnant while she is nursing. A mom can nurse for quite awhile, depending on her nature and the kittens' persistence. Kittens are generally considered weaned at 6-8 weeks, but many will gladly continue to nurse as long as the mom will put up with them – 12-15 weeks is not unusual.

There are a couple of methods for trapping young kittens. If you have a drop trap, that is probably the easiest. Another similar approach is the bottle method. Using a regular standard-sized (36 inches long) trap, take a one-liter bottle, filled, and tie a heavy string around its base. Open the front door of the trap and prop a corner up with the top of the bottle. Unwind the string until you are a comfortable distance away, leaving very little slack. Practice pulling the string once or twice to get a feel for it.

With some patience and good luck, you're likely to get at least two, maybe three kittens in the trap at one time. Then, pull the string, closing the front door, and quickly cover the trap with a sheet. A word of caution: Don't wait too long for multiple kittens to cooperate. They are flighty, impulsive little creatures, not likely to linger, and may suddenly dart out of the trap. Get the ones you can, and then proceed again.

Kittens 6-8 weeks old can be trapped in the same manner and with the same trap that

you use for adults, but because they do tend to follow each other, there is some risk that a kitten may step on the trip plate just as another is barely into the trap. Most often, if this does happen, the kitten is barely (if at all) injured, but he will be frightened for a bit and harder to trap. That's why the bottle method is recommended. You can also use a smaller trap, sometimes called a kitten trap, which is typically 20-24 inches long.

Big tom won't share kitty "buffet"

Question from Todd: I have a colony of five cats, consisting of an old tom, an adult queen, and their last litter of three (two females, one male). Well, of course when I set to trapping, the big brave tom went in the trap right away. Now he's released back at their feeding area and whenever I set the traps again, he goes in. I let him out and reset the traps, he goes in, I let him out and reset the traps ... it's an endless cycle. In the meantime, the other cats have seen what happens and they're not budging! What can I do to break this cycle? I have to get those females before there are any more litters.

Response from Meredith Weiss: What a brave (or not too bright, or very bright, or just very hungry) tom you have! My suggestion would be to let him get re-trapped, cover the trap and move him out of the territory, out of sight of the others. Let him cool his heels and eat the bait and wait, for however long it takes (even a day or two) to trap the others. I think this would be the simplest way to solve the problem.

It is very common for people to think that once a cat gets trapped and the others in the colony witness it, they freak out, run off and resolve not to meet the same fate. While some cats may disappear and lay low for a short time, almost always they will return, and soon, if you have withheld their food for 24 to 48 hours prior to trapping. They will be hungry and hunger overrides fear and suspicion, in most cases.

You should also take note of where you've placed the trap that the tom gets trapped in. Many times, placement is crucial because there are "hot spots," or places that for some reason unknown to us, are more appealing to the cats than other spots. So when you retrap that tom and move him out of the territory, put another baited trap in that exact same spot and I think you'll have success! Remember, you will have a much better chance of trapping the more resistant cats if you start off by setting more traps than the number of cats you're after – at least seven traps for five cats. This way, when you're down to the last one or two, those cats will have a couple of trap options to choose from.

Someone else's cats

Question from Erin: I've just come upon a colony of feral cats, but they're not on my property. I've heard of trap/neuter/return (TNR) and think it's the way to go, but am uncertain about how to begin. What would be the first step?

Response from Meredith Weiss: Congratulations! TNR is the best and most humane solution for solving the feral cat overpopulation crisis. It is the only method that has been shown to work! And if you plan well, the process can go very smoothly. Perhaps contrary to impulse, the first step is not to run out and get traps; that, in fact, is nearly the last step. The first step is to pave the way.

While every situation has its unique challenges, it is always a good idea to try to

anticipate obstacles and find solutions for them before they happen. One of the first things to keep in mind, and to prepare for, is the reaction from your neighbors and the immediate community. Therefore, in most cases, the first step is to establish good community relations. This way, not only will the cats get spayed and neutered, and be healthier overall, they'll also have a safe, healthy environment to live in, a place where they are free from threats, sabotage or poisoning. The long-term well-being of the cats and the overall effectiveness of the TNR effort depend in large part on the cooperation and understanding of the cats' human neighbors. To gain their support and appreciation of the method, it is your job to educate them about this work and to listen to their concerns.

Learn all you can about TNR so you are comfortable answering questions. If someone asks, "Why can't you find homes for them?" you should have a fairly brief and easy-to-understand answer ready. You might say, "These cats are feral. They were either born outside or have been living outside with little human contact for long enough to have reverted to a wild state. That's why they're not good candidates for adoption; they're too shy, fearful of people, and that's not the kind of cat most people want to adopt." You could also explain that most no-kill shelters are already overflowing with healthy, friendly adoptable cats, still waiting for good homes.

This person might reply, "So, can't you bring them to a sanctuary?" And you would explain, "Good sanctuaries are few and far between. Almost all the good ones are full and have a waiting list, and many of them do not take the cats for free. You have to offer a sizeable donation." And his retort might be, "But it's so depressing and dirty in this parking lot or narrow alley behind an apartment building (wherever the cats are). What kind of life is that for the cats?"

You would explain, "These cats are extremely territorial. This is the environment most of them were born into, and this is what they know as home. They don't find it depressing. After I get them spayed and neutered, I plan to set up a feeding station so their food can stay clean and dry, and I'm going to put out some shelters, so they have protection from the cold and rain. After they're fixed, they will become much healthier too! The females won't have to struggle to give birth three times a year, and the males won't fight or roam as much. Also, the unpleasant odor caused by the males spraying will subside and eventually go away."

These are examples of the types of questions you might get from people who are basically "pro" cat. For those who don't like cats, you'll have to downplay the positive effects TNR has on the cats themselves, and instead emphasize the benefits to the community. By being willing to undertake the trapping and neutering of these cats, you are actually doing a service to the community. Who else is going to do it? Unless the colony is managed (80% or more spayed/neutered), their numbers will increase and their conditions will deteriorate. Play up the cats' effectiveness in providing rodent control. Explain that once they're neutered, they tend to keep a lower profile, and people will notice them less. Also, in a managed colony, the cats tend to keep newcomers away, so the size of the colony will diminish over time, not increase.

Learn about methods to keep cats out of people's gardens (a motion-activated sprinkler is a good choice) and be respectful of your neighbors' complaints and concerns. Listen to them, and if you don't know an answer to a question, try to find out. Don't argue, and if they're openly hostile, don't reply in kind. It's better to simply walk away than to get into a

shouting match; that will accomplish nothing. You can read more about the importance of community relations on the Neighborhood Cats website at this link:

<http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/info/community.htm>

The traps to use

Question from John: Our small group has incorporated, received our nonprofit status and now we want to buy some traps. What kind of trap is recommended, what else do we need and where is the best place to buy?

Response from Meredith Weiss: A wide variety of humane box traps exist and which type you buy may depend on a couple of factors. If you practice TNR with the expectation of holding the cats for a day or two prior to the surgery and then another two days afterwards for recovery (as many groups and individuals do), you will want to buy traps with a removable back door and these approximate dimensions: 36 inches long x 12 inches wide x 11 inches high. This trap is large enough to house the cat for the required amount of time, and the removable back door allows you to care for (feed and clean) the cat in the trap safely.

The make and model of the trap we recommend is Safeguard Large Raccoon Trap with Rear Door (Model SG-36D). It's available from Animal Care Equipment & Services for \$49.50, with a 10% discount if ordering two or more at a time. Call 800-338-ACES or visit www.animal-care.com/cata06a.htm.

Safeguard also makes a collapsible version of this trap that is one inch shorter and one pound heavier. The advantage is that it takes only a quarter of the storage space as the noncollapsible trap. The disadvantages are that it has several extra parts made of lighter-weight material that can easily get bent, the folding mechanism is not that simple to use, and the trap is a little more expensive. If you want to try it out, it would be wise to purchase one to see if the collapsible feature is worth it. Available from the same company as above, the Safeguard Collapsible Large Raccoon Trap with Rear Door (Model SG-35F) costs \$63, with a 10% discount if ordering two or more at a time.

Tru-catch also makes a nice trap. Positives include durability, larger trip-plate (so no adapting is required), larger interior space for the cat, door closes quietly (as opposed to the "slamming" of Safeguard traps). Negatives include more expensive, heavier and has a different type of mechanism for setting the trap, which takes a little getting used to. The Tru-catch Large Raccoon Trap with Rear Door (Model 36D) is available from ACES for \$65, with a 10% discount if ordering two or more at a time. Weight: 14 lbs. Dimensions: 36 inches long x 12 inches wide x 14 inches high.

The other important piece of equipment you'll need is trap dividers, or isolators. A divider is a pick-comb type of tool used to isolate the cat on one side of the trap or the other, giving you safe access to clean and feed without risk of injury or escape. We strongly suggest using two dividers when caring for the cats, because experience has shown that a determined cat can actually push through the bars of the divider if only one is used. We recommend the Tru-catch Trap Isolator for Large Raccoon Trap (Model TD-2), which is available from ACES for \$12, with a 10% discount if ordering two or more. We recommend the Tru-catch dividers even if you buy the Safeguard traps, because they are made from a heavier weight metal and the prongs are spaced closer together.

She got out of the trap!

Question from catsonkeys: Recently, a woman lost a feral out of the trap at the spay/neuter clinic (prior to spaying). We have put out flyers with pictures of a similar-looking cat, talked with people in the area and set traps twice, catching only a few of the local strays. No one has spotted her since she first escaped eight days ago, but I believe she is still in the area since there is a river and a large, walled highway in the direction of her original home. However, the area is still rather large with a thousand places to hide. Do you have any advice on what else we should try to catch this cat again? Thank you.

Response from Meredith Weiss: This is a very difficult situation, if the spay/neuter clinic was not located near the cat's territory. As you say, the area is quite large and I'm sure there are at least a thousand places the cat could be.

Depending on your trapping resources and the number of volunteers you can enlist, all you can do is to continue what you're doing, setting traps and posting flyers asking for info on any sightings. You can also seek info about other colonies that may be around the neighborhood; in all likelihood, this cat will eventually try to join one so she has a food source.

You don't say how the cat escaped, but your post reminds me of a similar incident in which a cat escaped from a mobile spay/neuter clinic after surgery. In this case, the cat was not anywhere near her territory and, as far as I know, was not found. At least she was spayed.

The way this cat escaped was through the rear door of the trap; it had not been securely closed. This was the type of trap with the removable rear door. Using traps with removable back doors enables caretakers to clean and feed the cats during the holding period, but due to the design of the door, people must be very conscientious about double-checking that it is secured properly. If not, the cats can raise the door from the inside (which is what this cat did) and be out in a flash.

We recommend that every time you open and close the rear door, you try to pull up on it from the outside with your fingertips to make sure it is closed properly.

Fixing someone else's cat?

Question from Kathe: Thanks so much for your advice on catching my elusive male Fluffy. I finally caught him last night; he is positively potent! He was dropped off at Anti-Cruelty this morning for his "snip 'n' clip" and a volunteer from the Chicagoland Stray Cat Coalition will recover him for me for a day or two before he is released. He most definitely is not owned by anyone!

Thanks again for all your advice – it really helped! However, I do have another question. I have been told by a neighbor that she believes there is someone in my area who is letting her cats outside. I know that if I catch a cat that has already been neutered, Anti-Cruelty will let me know so I can pick it up and begin the process of putting posters around the neighborhood, etc., to reunite the cat with its guardian. But what if it's not neutered, and I have it neutered and ear-tipped, etc.? Are there legal issues at play if the cat's guardian complains? I don't want to upset someone and

jeopardize the TNR colony I have started. But at the same time, if there is an un-neutered cat in the area, it is a problem. Also, that means that a cat who has a home is coming into my yard and taking food away from my ferals. I trap all the cats on my private property, if that makes any difference.

I have discussed the TNR in condo meetings, so it is a part of our official minutes. I also sent out a letter to my neighbors explaining what I am doing and why (I posted a copy of it on my Best Friends blog), which was very well received. I am lucky to live in a small building with lots of animal lovers.

Response from Meredith Weiss: To be safe, you should try to check your local animal laws because I'm sure they vary from state to state. Here in New York City, if a cat is outdoors and has no collar with identifying tags, we trap him. If he's not fixed, he gets fixed. If he is not obviously friendly, he gets ear-tipped, neutered and released.

If he is friendly (even if it wasn't apparent right away and he got ear-tipped), we will try to place him. At that point (when we're putting him up for adoption), we are supposed to contact Animal Care and Control here and let them know a friendly cat, with description or photo, was found at such and such location. Then we wait the required amount of time (three days) to see if anyone claims him. If no one does, then he is our "problem" and we begin any further vetting/testing, socialization and advertising on Petfinder and with flyers. We don't release a friendly cat back to the street but, at the same time, most of our people concentrate on TNR and we don't have a lot of foster/adoption resources, so it is hard when we find the friendly ones.

Unfortunately, many friendly cats around here are dumped. They may have had a home at some point, but in 99% of the cases it's not a home we'd want to return him to and nobody claims the cat anyway. Basically, I'm against pet cats being let outdoors in a city environment, even if neutered – there are too many dangers. Unneutered is totally irresponsible!

Here's what I'd recommend that you do: A few days in advance of your trapping, post flyers in your neighborhood making people aware of your trapping plans. You could even say on the flyer: "If you have pet cats who are let out, or are indoor/outdoor cats, please keep them in from ___ date to ___ date during our TNR project." Then at least people are forewarned! Also, walk around and talk to people about TNR and why you're doing it.

If you are trapping on private property and have the property owners' permission, I would think you're safe, but do you have that permission in writing?

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