



Community Cat Relocation

By Shelly Kotter

It is best to leave community* (a.k.a. feral) cat colonies at their original locations, but colonies are sometimes found in areas where they cannot remain either because the area is unsafe or because a caregiver is simply not available. Moving cats to another permanent outdoor location is a viable alternative to trapping and killing. With careful planning and selection of the new premises and caregivers, and strict confinement of the cats before release, relocation can be successful. Of course, moving a whole colony out of its territory may cause the same problem as trapping and killing: Strays will fill the void and form a new colony.



Understanding Your Colony

There are several things to consider when you're faced with capturing and relocating a feral cat colony. Primary among these is an understanding of all that is implied by the term "feral." A feral cat is one that has reverted to being wild; he/she is no longer domesticated like our feline pets. Since direct contact with human beings can alarm any wild animal, dealing with feral cats must include provisions for their overall well-being.

Within an un-neutered feral cat colony, there are often animals of several age groups. Very young cats can often be socialized to enjoy living with people. While kittens ranging from eight to ten weeks are the most easily tamed, cats up to four months of age, with varying degrees of difficulty, can be socialized and placed in home environments. Adult cats living in an unsafe area should be considered candidates for relocation to a more rural, outdoor environment where they are less prone to urban or suburban hazards.

Finding Safe Relocation Spots and Homes

If you're going to relocate a colony, find a suitable new home for the cats before trapping them. First, contact relatives and friends living in less populated areas. Placing cats with someone you know provides greater assurance that the colony will be well-maintained. If those inquiries don't prove fruitful, ask everyone you know for recommendations of individuals who would be reliable caregivers.

Another option is to place ads in newspapers that cover rural areas. Place ads in as many news-

** Best Friends believes that it is inaccurate to describe all free-roaming cats who aren't family pets as feral, since many of these cats are former house cats and can be socialized to be comfortable living with people again. Renaming stray cats as community cats helps people consider them part of the community and, therefore, everyone's responsibility.*

papers as you can. You can also post flyers in feed and farm-supply stores. For help in creating flyers, go to this page on the Best Friends website:

www.bestfriends.org/nomorehomelesspets/resourcelibrary/flyermaker/flyermaker.cfm

We suggest attempting to relocate cat colonies to rural areas because ranches and farms of all kinds make some of the best relocation sites. It's a win-win situation for both the cats and the new caregivers. For the cats, a rural setting is a safer environment for them than city life. They live on private property, where barns, stables, tack sheds, garages and unused chicken coops make great shelters and places to escape if the cats are threatened by wildlife. The caregivers get a group of healthy, neutered and vaccinated cats who will provide rodent control at low cost.

Screen respondents to your ads and flyers by asking if they will commit to providing daily feeding, shelter and medical care for the cats. People who agree to keep cats on their property must be willing to fulfill such basic needs to safeguard the animals' health. Establish an agreement with potential caregivers regarding follow-up contact. Tell them you would like to call and/or visit to check on the cats' progress for the first few months. Anyone unwilling to comply with this request should not be considered as a candidate for your relocation project.

Trapping

Humane traps are widely available from local humane societies, and shelter staff will explain how to use them. They sometimes will also know the names and phone numbers of local non-profit groups that may be able to help you with trapping and locating low-cost spay/neuter clinics. You can also buy humane traps at www.livetraps.com. If you need help getting funding to buy traps and do spay/neuter, check out this resource on the Best Friends website:

www.bestfriends.org/nomorehomelesspets/pdf/fundraisingforferals.pdf

While humane traps cause no pain or injury to the cat, the experience of being trapped is traumatic. Make sure that the trap is completely covered while trapping, except for the front entrance. Cover the floor of the trap with newspaper or cloth so the cat's feet aren't in contact with the wire bottom. The cat should see the opening to a cozy den with the allure of tasty food inside. During transport to and from the clinic, keep traps covered to help minimize the cats' stress. For more information on trapping, see the resource called "Humane Trapping Instructions for Community Cats."

Although the cats may be transferred to carriers, I recommend that feral cats stay in traps for everyone's safety; only stray and friendly cats should be put in carriers. If you're going to use carriers, prepare the carriers in advance with litter and food, and have another person on hand to assist with the transfer from trap to carrier. Like the trap, the carrier should be covered immediately after the cat is inside.

To the Vet

If the cats haven't been neutered or vaccinated, make arrangements in advance to take the cats directly to a veterinarian after trapping. Ask about the possibility of discount rates for stray cats, since some vets are willing to offer such reductions as a community service. Tell the vet and staff that they will be dealing with feral cats so they will know what to expect. Remember, to prevent injury to the vet staff and the cats, feral cats should always be in traps when taken to the clinic; only friendly cats should be brought in carriers. The cat should be spayed or neutered, receive necessary vaccinations and undergo a general checkup. Request that dissolvable stitches be used in surgery to avoid a second visit for suture removal.

Transport to the Relocation Site

Like domestic cats, some feral cats are not upset about traveling in a vehicle, while others may howl and cry. To lessen the cats' stress during transport, cover the cage bottom with newspaper or cloth, provide a litter container and cover the cage. Do not place more than one animal in a cage and make certain that adequate ventilation exists. If the trip to the relocation site is lengthy, provide food and water, but make sure you properly secure the containers to avoid spilling. While driving, avoid sounds that are unfamiliar to the cats, such as a blaring radio, and use common sense to make the experience less traumatic. Never place cats in a vehicle trunk, truck bed, or any other potentially unsafe area.

Acclimation Period

When the cats arrive at their new location, it may be necessary to keep them caged individually for several days to allow them to recover from surgery and/or receive regular doses of medication. Then, the animals should be kept in a large enclosed or caged area for two to four weeks to orient them to their new environment. They can be released into a closed barn, shed, or other shelter, such as an unused chicken coop or covered dog pen, a place that prevents free access to the outdoors.

Cats can also be placed in enclosures like the one pictured below. These are really easy to build and use. If you put handles on the ends, one person can get it in or out of a truck or van. Put a shelter (the white box) at each end and bungee it to the pen. When you make a move to get into the pen to clean the litter boxes, the cats will naturally go into the shelter. You can then put a board down over the entrance to the shelter and clean the pen and put fresh food and water in it.

It is important that the cats come to regard this enclosure as their permanent feeding station before they are permitted to roam freely outside. Feed wet canned food at least once a day, and always at the same time; regular feedings will help them to realize they have a constant food source. Always have dry food and water available for the cats.

During the cats' confinement period, the new caregiver must regularly visit the cats to ensure the bonding that is essential for successful relocation. Speaking to the cats, even if they remain hidden, helps them to overcome their fear of humans. After this confinement period, the cats can be given access to the outdoors. A small opening should be provided so they may enter and depart from the building whenever they want.



Another thing that helps with successful relocation is to take something (such as leaves, branches, bedding) from the old place to the new place so that the cats have a sense of something familiar in the new location. If it's possible, it also helps if the previous caregiver can go to the new place to feed alternately with the new caregiver, for just a little while, so the cats can have a sense of continuity.

Ongoing Commitment

Your commitment to relocating feral cats does not end with delivering them to their new home. Build a friendly relationship with the new caregiver by making phone calls (and visiting, if possible) for the first few months. Your primary goal is to be available to the caregiver to supply information that may aid the cats in adapting to their new environment. Since you discussed your desire to maintain contact with the caregiver when you found the new home, your actions will be seen as supportive rather than intrusive. In some instances, the new caregiver will become part of your support network for future community cat relocation projects.

Shelly Kotter is the national campaign specialist for Best Friends Animal Society's Focus on Felines campaign. She advises communities across the country about humane methods of dealing with cat overpopulation.

For More Information

If you want to know more about Focus on Felines, go to the campaign community at network.bestfriends.org/campaigns/felines or e-mail shellyk@bestfriends.org.

Focus on Felines is part of Best Friends' mission to bring about a time when there are No More Homeless Pets.

