

# Feral Dogs

By Sherry Woodard

## How do dogs become feral?

A feral dog is the offspring of domestic dogs (strays) that may have been abandoned. Like feral cats, they live on the edges of human society, scavenging for food, finding shelter where they can, mating, and raising completely unsocialized feral puppies.



## How can I tell the difference between a stray and a feral dog?

Strays were once family pets. Since they were socialized in the past, they are usually willing to accept handling fairly soon after being trapped. They may need to be trapped if they have been living on their own for a period of time, during which they may have learned to be wary of some people. After eating a few meals, and making some new human and dog friends, most strays will become pets again.

A feral may never be able to enjoy human touch and companionship. When people take ferals into their homes, the dogs often have good social skills with other dogs and are willing to be part of a dog group living in a home. Some are even willing to use a dog door to eliminate outside. But, they often hide if a human enters the room. Most ferals can be handled for necessary medical needs such as sedation for surgeries, blood draws for tests or sedation for grooming.

## Where do feral dogs live?

Like feral cats, feral dogs live wherever there is habitat and a food source. Most commonly, they live in parks, under abandoned buildings, in rural wooded areas, beneath freeways, etc. They live in hiding, and are often seen only at a distance. They generally move about during the times when humans are indoors – in the evening, night and early morning hours. The adult dogs are primarily silent, since drawing attention to themselves often brings danger. Many ferals are seen by the general public as either dangerous or diseased.

## How can I help the adult dogs?

In general, feral dogs should remain in their original outdoor environment. You can help the dogs by setting up and maintaining feeding stations, and by providing shelter, such as dog houses, for them. You can also improve their lives by doing trap/neuter/return (TNR). TNR involves trapping the dogs; transporting them to a veterinarian to be vaccinated, treated for parasites, and spayed or neutered; and returning them to their home environment. Spay/neuter prevents the dogs from breeding, and it also reduces wandering and fighting.

To capture the dogs, you'll need a trap, thick gloves, a vehicle large enough to carry the trap, and old blankets to cover the trap. Your local animal control may lend out traps or you can purchase them from [www.livetrapped.com](http://www.livetrapped.com) or [www.havahart.com](http://www.havahart.com). The Havahart

website has instructions for how to use traps, depending on the type of trap you buy. If you decide to do TNR, you will need to find a veterinarian who will work with you and a secure place to keep dogs recovering from spay/neuter.

If you find that you have trapped a stray, you can foster him or her until the perfect home is found. During your time as a foster parent, you can teach the dog basic commands and house manners, which will improve your foster dog's prospects for adoption.

If an adult feral dog does not have a safe place to return to, one option is to find someone who owns property that is fenced and who is willing to allow you to set up a station for food, water and shelter.

The other option is to take the feral dog home. But, be aware that a feral dog may never become a sociable, cuddly pet. You have to decide if you can live with the limitations of a feral dog. She may jump and freeze every time you touch her for months, years, maybe forever. She may want to live in hiding, under furniture or in a closet. The dog will be more comfortable if your home is quiet, and you have a dog door that she can use without walking past you. To prevent escape, your yard should be securely fenced. It might also be helpful if you have another dog. Most ferals are not dog aggressive, so a very social, playful dog can be a good role model.

### **How can I help feral puppies?**

It is best to take the puppies away from their mother when they are two to three weeks of age. They will not be able to run from you or bite you, and they will have the best chance of being socialized if they are young. At two to three weeks, their mom has not yet taught them her fearful behavior. At two weeks old or younger, the puppies will need help eating.

If puppies are over five weeks old, they may bite as you handle them, so wear gloves. You may also need to use a trap to capture them. They are still young enough to socialize and place as family pets, but the older the puppies are, the more work they will need to be comfortable in human society.

If feral puppies are older than 12 weeks, they will probably remain shy and fearful of new situations for life. This doesn't mean that good homes cannot be found. Many people are willing to adopt shy dogs and continue to socialize them throughout their lives. Other dogs can be very helpful when you are socializing older puppies, since they learn by watching happy, relaxed dogs interact with people.

Finally, the puppies will need to visit the veterinarian for a physical, fecal check for parasites and, depending on their age, vaccines, tests for diseases and spay/neuter surgery.

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See also: Neonatal Care for Orphaned Puppies