



Providing Feral Cats Sanctuary: Questions & Answers

Q: Since there are so many friendly cats that remain homeless in shelters, rescue groups, or on the streets, why give homes to feral cats?

A: The NCPPSP estimates that there are 70 million stray cats in the United States; 57% to 86% of these strays are feral, unadoptable, and/or unsocial cats (www.petpopulation.org). For years, the common way of coping with the feral cat problem was to either leave them alone or to trap and euthanize them, since these unsocial cats were unwanted by potential pet owners. Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR) was introduced in the late 1970s as a way to “end the cycle of suffering,” in that by spaying and neutering and then returning the cat to its original location, additional kittens/cats would be spared the horrible life and death brought by homelessness. FFRI believes that trapping, neutering, and providing indoor sanctuary with protected outside access when feasible is the most logical and humane solution for feral cats. Feral cats are domestic cats, and just like friendly cats, they benefit from having an indoor home or sanctuary.

People who adopt friendly cats normally intend to give themselves a companion or a sweet dependent pet. Typically in this situation, when adopting an additional friendly cat down the road, special precautions need to be taken for a smooth transition, since there may be territorial or jealousy issues from the original house cat.

Providing sanctuary for feral cats is altruistic: the goal is to get the cats off the streets and into an indoor, protected environment. Normally at minimum, a small handful of cats are rescued at a time. Typically feral cats are not loners, but rather are part of a group, or colony of cats. These cats will socialize on their own schedule and will then act similarly to cats that are adopted as friendly cats, except generally there will not be jealousy or territorial issues with the feral cats. Even after they become social, they find great comfort in the company of cats, including new cats that join the group.

Feral cats will not appeal to the person who wants an instantly companionable pet, but rather to the person who has the desire and the means to provide sanctuary. Rescuers of feral cats will generally light up with stories of how funny their feral cats are and how they have become loving companions in time. Also, feral cats that have a home will generally stay clear of the outside door when it's opened, as they clearly want to remain indoors. Friendly cats, on the other hand, are more likely to show curiosity or a desire to go outside. Feral cats know better.

Q: Since feral cats are wild animals, shouldn't they be left outdoors?

A: Feral cats are not wild animals. Rather, they are domestic animals that have taken on wild behaviors, apparently as an instinctive defense mechanism to aid in their survival. In contrast to wild animals such as squirrels, raccoons, and skunks, they are ill-equipped to survive on their own. Feral cats do not thrive in the woods where there is no human existence. Stray and feral cats form colonies around human food sources, such as open trash cans or dumpsters. Truly wild animals will den-up or hibernate during harsh winter weather, while feral cats typically search for relief in precarious places. Feral cats prefer a comfortable, safe indoor life to a lifelong experience of homeless perils.

In a 1992 article from “Shelter Sense,” titled Should Feral Cats Be Euthanized?, R. Donald writes:

In her book, Maverick Cats, Ellen Perry Berkeley quotes Roy Robinson, a specialist in cat genetics, who explains how we have domesticated the cat over thousands of years and why the cat has become dependent on humans. First, he points out, cats retain juvenile characteristics that encourage dependency into adulthood. Second, they have a reduced adrenal response that requires them to be protected. Third, cats have undergone a reduction in brain size. “These changes are the changes of many generations and are not undone overnight,” Berkeley says. “We may say that the feral cat has ‘gone wild’ or ‘returned to the wild,’ but this is not the same as being a wild animal.”

Q: Is it true that after 6 weeks, a feral cat can no longer be socialized?

A: No, that is not true. While kittens six weeks and younger will typically socialize rather quickly and easily, there are three primary factors that influence how quickly an adult feral cat will become social:

- The individual nature of each cat. Some feral cats come around faster than others, even when they are from the same family and same litter of kittens. Each cat has a unique and individual personality, just like humans.
- How many generations the feral cat is away from a social mother cat. Kittens born in the wild from a tame cat will be semi-feral, while kittens born in the wild from a semi-feral cat will be feral. As each generation progresses, the more feral

FFRI's approach: Trap/Neuter/Provide Sanctuary (TNPS)

the kittens will be and the more difficult it will be to socialize them. However, there are countless exceptions to this rule, and this factor seems to be less relevant than other factors.

- The cat's past and current associations with people. After a friendly, trusting cat has been abandoned or lost in the streets, particularly if he encounters a tough life, his behavior will often gradually become feral as an instinctive defense or survival mechanism. Generally these cats will come around rather quickly with some kindness and effort, and these cats make good adoption candidates into new homes.

Cats that were born in the wild and were given kind attention from their caregivers will generally socialize more easily than feral cats that either had no caregiver or were treated indifferently by their caregiver.

As an example, FFRI did TNPS for three feral cat colonies from three different restaurants. Each colony had multi-generational roots at their respective restaurant. The two restaurant colonies that provided pleasant, caring attention to the cats at feeding time had the greatest number of cats that socialized quickly and were able to be adopted into new homes. The third restaurant had a policy to scare the cats by making loud noises to keep the cats at a good distance from the restaurant, though they also fed the cats regularly to keep them around as mousers. After four years in an indoor sanctuary, those cats are still afraid of people, although they appear very content to be living together and among other cats in comfort and safety.

Q: Will feral cats be content with an indoor life?

A: Yes, as long as they feel safe in your home, they will prefer an indoor life. To feel safe, the cats will need a room of their own to serve as a quiet retreat, food and water at all times, and plenty of comfortable beds. Furthermore, having access to windows, cat toys to play with, cardboard scratching pads, and cat trees will greatly enhance their life. Most importantly, a feral cat needs the company of other feral cats to feel comfortable, so a TNPS rescuer should be prepared to house multiple feral cats. Finally, though this would be difficult to prove scientifically, FFRI believes that cats sense it when they are wanted and loved by their caretakers, and that this also plays a positive factor in their long term contentment with indoor living, whether or not the cats are social with their caretakers.

Q: How do I acclimate a feral cat(s) into my home?

A: In the area where you want them to live or start their lives with you (i.e., your basement or a quiet room dedicated to their needs), put them in a cat playpen (one or two cats per playpen), which is typically a 24x36x48 (WxDxH) cage. You may want to check out local pet stores (not chain stores) and ask if they will give you a rescuer discount. Also research the web for deals on cat playpens. Websites you may want

to consider are www.cagesdirect.com, www.carealotpets.com, or www.rivivalanimal.com. FFRI has purchased several of the Midwest Collapsible Cat Playpen, Deluxe Model, and we have noticed a great disparity of prices when shopping for them.



Set up the playpen with multiple levels of shelves (additional shelves can be purchased to allow for additional levels and wider platforms). A soft blanket and litter pan should be placed at the bottom, and a cat bed, water, dry food and canned food should be provided at the upper levels.

If you have an extra TV, try playing a DVD made for cats on continuous play, which may offer some enjoyment.

After roughly two weeks (only after their spay/neuter surgeries and their de-wormings, etc.), allow the cats free roam of the room they are in, so they can become fully accustomed to their start-up or permanent area. Keep the door closed for another week or two, which will help give the cats a sense of security. Ideally the room would be thinly furnished in the beginning. A heavily furnished room might offer the cats obscure, tight hiding places from which they are either unable or too fearful to leave. Furthermore, you will want to spot the cats easily when entering the room. If you are going to give them free roam of the house after their initiation period, it will be fine to do so, as long as the cats can return to their "safe room" at will.

Q: How do I make my home a sanctuary?

A: The cats will need at least one room of their own (such as their initiation/safe room) and it should have plenty of food, water, litter pans, and cat beds. Cats also enjoy sleeping on regular human beds, such as twin beds, bunk beds, or larger beds; however, just make sure you protect every mattress with a waterproof cover. Cats also enjoy climbing, scratching, and sleeping on cat trees. The more sleeping options you offer your cats, the more peace you will have in your home. More than offering a room/house with large square footage, cats require the space they have to have plenty of varied sleeping options.

Another thing to keep in mind is that after experiencing hunger on the streets, the cats may panic when their food runs out, and if you have a number of cats, it may turn into group panic, where they become grumpy with each other. It's best to keep at least dry food and water available at all times, and it is healthy to offer canned food twice a day as well.

Finally, because feral cats have somewhat fragile nerves from having been on guard throughout their entire lives on the streets, they do best in a peaceful home. A house with active children or aggressive dogs is not the best sanctuary for a feral cat.

Q: What should I know upon bringing a feral cat into my home?

A: No Meows. Feral cats will generally not meow in front of you until they feel comfortable in your presence.

No eating in front of you. Cats, especially feral cats, typically need to feel comfortable in their surroundings before they will eat. A feral cat may go for several days eating barely a thing after it is brought into your home, and even then it may only eat after you have gone to the office or gone to bed. When a feral cat will eat in front of you, it is usually a sign of trust.

Hiding. A feral cat may hide after you put it in a taming cage (cat playpen) or after you first release it from the playpen. This is symptomatic of its lifestyle in the wild. In the outdoors, feral cats typically hide unless it is feeding time or near feeding time. A feral cat will slowly break that habit after it feels safe in your home. For example, in the beginning stages, if you are out of the room, the cat may bravely enjoy the comfort of your sofa and then run to hide as you enter the room.

There are several ways to make your feral cat feel safe. Bringing a sense of safety to your feral cat during its first weeks with you is important. Just like covering the trapped cat with a towel or sheet will calm the cat down while still in the trap, covering the taming cage during the first few days will calm down a stressed feral cat. This may or may not be necessary, depending on how stressed the cat appears. If the

cat should get loose in a room, covering it with a towel and then putting a pillow case over its head and body will calm it down so that you can get it back into its taming cage.

A small space works better than a large space. If given free range of a large room or rooms too quickly, the feral cat will revert to hiding, and you will likely lose all control of the situation, in that you will not be able to find the cat or work with it. A feral cat does better starting its life with you in a taming cage and then moving into a small, lightly furnished room. This situation appears to make the cat feel safer, as long as food, water, and comfortable bedding are provided.

Do not make long eye contact. This will make the feral cat feel threatened and fearful. If you want to look at the cat's eyes, then make sure that you give long blinks and move your eyes away from the cat periodically so that the cat does not sense threatening behavior from you.

No interest in cat toys for a time. Generally, because the life of a feral cat is primarily about survival rather than about fun, they do not know how to play with cat toys. Do not lose heart. They will learn to play in time. You may want to provide catnip toys, ping pong balls, and corrugated cardboard scratchers.

Litter pans. Generally, feral cats will take to the litter pan instinctively. Its first introduction to the litter pan will be while in its taming cage, and though rare, he may have an accident or two on his bed before understanding the purpose of the litter pan. Thereafter, feral cats normally are just as good or better at using the litter pan as friendly cats. Normally, people will say that their feral cats are well behaved and cause no problems.

Once comfortable indoors with their cat buddies, they may see you as an intruder. Feral cats will grow to fully enjoy the indoor life, especially if they are in the company of other feral cats, and if you interrupt their quiet / group time when they are all resting together, they will likely give you "the look"; as though you are intruding. It is guaranteed to make you laugh.

After the cat becomes social, it may temporarily revert to skittish behavior when somebody new comes into your home or if you put the cat into a new environment.

Q: Is it difficult to introduce additional feral cats to an indoor sanctuary?

A: Unlike friendly cats, feral cats typically don't see each other as threatening. Rather, they view humans as threats to their safety. In contrast to the problems you may experience when you introduce a new friendly cat to your long time house cat, it is extremely easy to bring in a new addition to a feral cat sanctuary. At FFRI, many of the cats actually welcome newcomers, because FFRI cats know that there are enough

beds and food for everyone, so they do not feel threatened by new cats. Often they will greet new cats with friendly sniffs and sometimes with licks on the forehead. The feral cats coming in likewise find immediate comfort with the other cats, and they bond with them whether they are feral or friendly.

Q: How many cats are appropriate for a sanctuary?

A: There is a hyper-sensitivity in our society to “animal collectors” due to instances in which people have taken in more animals than they could afford or properly care for, and we’ve all seen the media stories in which the animals were found in tragic living conditions. The appropriate number is as many as you can afford to properly care for and is legal for your municipality. Feral cats do best with a lot of cat friends and there are a lot of feral cats that need homes.

Nonetheless, take in no more cats into your sanctuary than the number for which you can be responsible. It is important that the cats you accept have a permanent home with you, that they receive veterinary care when needed, that you provide them with clean water and healthy cat food, and that you keep their living quarters clean.

Q: Will they fight, since they are feral?

A: No. Altered feral cats, especially when there is sufficient food, will bond with each other. Even feral cats from different colonies will normally bond together quickly. The tightest bonds, however, are among the cats they lived with in their own colony, such as between male and female cats that mated, or especially among cats from the same family.

Q: Will my friendly cats be safe around the feral cats?

A: Yes. As long as they are all spayed and neutered, the feral cats will be very accepting of your friendly cats, and your friendly cats will in turn sense that they are not in competition for anything with the feral cats. There tends to be great harmony between spayed and neutered feral and friendly cats in an indoor environment.

A possible exception may be if you rescue a feral cat that is not from a colony of cats but is a loner. This situation is not common but does occur, and sometimes these cats will be intimidated by other cats. Your friendly cats may feel their anxiety, which could cause some initial conflicts. In this case, we recommend you slowly introduce the feral loner to your other cats.

Q: Will kittens be safe around male feral cats? What should I know about the dynamics of feral cat families?

A: Yes, as long as the cats are neutered and are provided comfort and safety, cats and kittens will live peacefully with each other.

Feral Family Dynamics

When FFRI traps a colony, we trap every cat. Therefore, we have experienced the pleasure of observing feral family dynamics. In general, male feral cats tend to socialize more easily than female feral cats. Some say this is because females typically have the responsibility to feed and protect the kittens, which makes them act more anxious than the male cats. Furthermore, we have noticed that the father cats are often more nurturing to the kittens than the mother cats. The mothers tend to be aloof after the kittens can eat on their own, while the father cats continue to show devotion and develop a lasting bond with their kittens. In ideal circumstances, with a constant source of good food and comfort, neutered male cats are naturally more relaxed and carefree than female cats.

Q: How do I socialize a feral cat?

A: If you are providing permanent sanctuary, then time is no longer of the essence. This situation works out very well for the cat and for you. Begin your efforts after the cat has been in the playpen for at least a couple weeks, and preferably after spay or neuter surgery (hormones gradually dissipate after surgery over the period of two weeks, which helps the cat calm down).

To remove the cat’s fear of the human touch, begin touching the cat via another object. This will also protect you, because if the cat lashes out, it will lash out at the object and not your hand. For example, using a strong tape, you can tape a couple straws together, and then tape a soft dental sponge, which you can purchase through a pet supply store, to one end of the straw for a softer feel. This works well because you are using a pliable object that is soft to the touch. Other things can be used as an alternative, such as a feather wand. Reach through the spokes of the cage to pet the cat with the object, approaching the cat from the side or from the back. Do not approach from the front, as the cat may interpret that as an attack move.

After the cat shows enjoyment of being petted with another object, simply allow the cat to sniff your hand through the cage. If the cat shows no sign of fear or aggression, if it feels safe, you may try putting your hand in the cage and allow him to sniff your hand, palm side up. Later, try putting enticing food in your hand as a way to build trust. If the cat will eat from your hand, that is a positive sign.

After some level of trust is shown, the fastest method of socialization is to hold the cat. Work with a towel and a pillowcase to take the cat out of the cage. Put a pillowcase over the cat, head first, until his body is fully in the pillowcase. Use a towel as an added buffer for your protection. Once in the pillowcase, you can safely remove the cat from the cage. Grip the pillowcase from the top as you would a sack of potatoes and bring the cat into your bathroom, and close the door. The cat can breathe through the pillow case, and he will calm down because his head is covered. Put a towel around

him, while still in the pillowcase, and begin to hold and pet the cat. When you notice that the cat is relaxed, allow its head out of the pillowcase. The longer you can spend with the cat in this manner, without any distractions like the radio or the TV, the quicker the cat will relax and bond with you. It may take several sessions, however, before the cat shows progress

If you get bit or scratched, make sure to take the same precautions as you would any time you get a wound. The tips listed above are suggestions that have worked well for FFRI; however, we also provide the following disclaimer that FFRI assumes no responsibility or liability regarding the use of the information provided.

Q: If a cat gets outside, how do I get him back?

A: Feral cats will rarely want to go outside after they are brought into your home. If it does happen, it is normally soon after you bring it inside, before it has had the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of an indoor life. Should it get outside, set a humane box trap in your yard immediately and keep it set with fresh food every day until you get him back. Use the normal precautions when trapping. It is important that you know when an animal enters your trap so that you can minimize the stress of the trapped animal. If a neighbor's cat or a wild animal enters your trap, you will want to release it right away. When your cat enters your trap, you will want to bring it back inside immediately. Never allow a trapped animal to be vulnerable to passersby who may have ill intentions.

Q: What health issues can I expect with a feral cat?

A: Health, in part, is due to a cat's individual constitution. However, when you first take in a feral cat, besides being spayed or neutered, it must be checked and treated for fleas, ear mites, and worms, and given rabies and FVCRP vaccinations. The cat should also be tested for Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and feline leukemia (FeLV), so that you can make an informed decision about how to properly care for the cat or whether to euthanize the cat, if you are unable to care for a cat that tests positive.

Feral cats generally exist off a nutritionally deficient diet when they are living on the streets. They typically eat food out of the trash. If they have a regular caretaker, they are often given the most economical (usually poor quality) store bought cat food available. Dental work is often the largest medical expense with feral cats, due to a life of poor nutrition in the wild. However, restaurant cats that are fed left over restaurant meals tend to have the best teeth of all the ferals, given that they were fed human quality food.

Q: What do I do if my feral cat gets sick?

A: You will need to get the cat into a cat playpen. If you cannot handle the cat, you will need to corner him into a small area so that you can slip the cat into a pillowcase, which calms the

cat down and allows you to carry him into the cage. Make his cage as comfortable as possible. When in the cage, he will be confined, which will make it easier to get him into a cat carrier to see the vet as well as to administer medication to him. You may need to secure him with towels for medication and slip him into a pillow case to get him into a carrier.

If the cat is partially tame, you may want to simply scruff the back of its neck when you administer liquid medicine or put it into a carrier. When you scruff the back of a cat's neck, it generally becomes more docile and cooperative, presumably because mother cats carry their young by the scruff of their necks. If you do not know how to properly scruff, get instruction from a vet tech for your protection and for the cat's protection.

Q: How can I better afford to do this work?

A: Shelters with spay/neuter services typically offer greatly reduced rates. Sometimes, the smaller pet stores will work with rescue people for bulk purchases of food and litter. Or you can find a nonprofit group that will work with you, in offering tips and sharing their good rates on food, litter, and veterinary care. You may also consider becoming a nonprofit group yourself.

Q: I enjoy affectionate cats; will I be lonely with feral cats in my home?

A: Make sure you have at least one friendly cat to bond with and keep you company, and don't take it personally when your feral cats run in the opposite direction of you. It can feel disheartening when a cat you rescued hisses at you when you reach out to pet it; however, keep in mind that the cat hisses as a defense mechanism when it believes it is in danger. The hissing is not a reflection of you; rather, it simply means that the cat still needs to learn that it can trust you. Speak to the cat in a low, soft voice to offer comfort. In time, you will likely be rewarded with the timid cat making efforts to approach you. For example, when you are sitting, it may walk toward you when in the company of a friendlier, braver cat. Reach out and pet the unsocial cat from the side or the back (not from the front) when it is in close reach but isn't looking at you, which may likely be the start of a nice routine. Gaining the trust of a once feral cat is very rewarding. Be prepared for the cat to show affection to you once a bond is established; however, it still may run from strangers.

Q: Is it better to provide sanctuary or to socialize and adopt out?

A: If the cat(s) do not respond to socialization efforts within a couple months, then sanctuary would likely be the preferred option. If the cat responds and makes nice progress, yet still retains skittish personality traits after a few months, then sanctuary may still be the best option. Providing sanctuary offers many advantages, such as no time constraints to socialization, the bonds that form with you and the cat(s) will

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be permanent, and the cat will remain with its family or colony members, if all were trapped, bringing lasting contentment to the group.

From the rescuer's point of view, adopting out may work best if financial or municipality constraints prevent providing sanctuary to multiple cats. It also may be the case where you prefer to help the process of bringing feral cats indoors but prefer the revolving door to a permanent commitment to the cat.

From the point of view of what works best for the cat, it must be realized that not every cat is a good candidate for adoption, and the weak candidates should be found a reputable indoor sanctuary, where the cat will have free roam of his living quarters (i.e., he will not live out his life in a cage). The best candidates for adoption are young kittens that can be socialized quickly, formerly owned cats that became homeless and started to act wild but easily come around, or other cats that socialize quickly due to their individual nature and/or a positive association with people.

However, precautions need to be made when adopting out to make sure that the adopter understands and fully accepts the special needs that the cat may have and is willing to give patience and love during the transition time. Adoptions are not successful if the adopters lack the patience, love, and understanding required to form a bond with a formerly feral cat. On the other hand, the rewards of bonding with these cats are tremendous. When a formerly feral cat feels safe and loved in a new home, though he may remain shy around other people, he will generally follow you under foot and will make you feel a wealth of love and appreciation for providing him with a home.

Q: What kind of person is best suited to provide sanctuary to feral cats?

A: Providing a good home for feral cats stems from a merciful attitude along with a fearless, deep rooted compassion toward the most overlooked, needy and misunderstood homeless cats. It takes a real cat lover to provide love and safety to a cat who hisses at you (this person will understand that the cat is fearful and hisses in effort to protect itself from harm; it is not a personal reflection of the rescuer). A TNPS rescuer will love the cat as it is, whether it takes the cat months, many years, or possibly never gains the courage to show love in return. The joy and rewards come when the cats do show love in return and also from knowing that the cats are safe, comfortable, and cared for in your home instead of living a dangerous life on the streets. That is the true art of giving to these cats.

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