

DEALING WITH FERAL CATS

Feral cats—cats that are basically wild, fending for themselves—often live in colonies around restaurants, offices, and apartment complexes where they get food out of the dumpsters. The number of ferals in metro Atlanta is estimated to be in the *thousands*. What can you do?

Should I Get Involved?

Caring for a feral colony takes time, effort, and money. Before you begin feeding the cats, decide how much you're willing to do and for how long. Consider these factors:

- Feeding a colony is a long-term and possibly expensive commitment. Once you've begun feeding the cats, they will become accustomed to this food source. If you must stop, do so gradually so the cats will revert to finding their own food.
- A well-fed cat is more likely to breed successfully. Unless you have the cats spayed/neutered, you could be adding to the overpopulation problem.
- Getting the cats spayed/neutered, vaccinated, and tested for diseases will involve trapping them and taking them to a vet.
- After the vet visit, the cats either need to be released back to the colony or placed in a safe environment. Some ferals can be tamed; others will not adjust to being house cats. Animal shelters may be unable to take feral cats; those that do may have a policy of euthanizing them. If you return cats to the site, you must continue to provide food and water.

How Do I Care for the Colony?

Alter and Release

Once you've accepted responsibility for the colony, follow these steps.

- Get the cats used to going to a specific spot for food and water.
 - Put food and water near where you've seen the cats.
 - Select a site away from people and traffic, but one you can access easily.
 - Place the food/water containers so that they are somewhat hidden by brush.
 How much and how often you feed depends on the number of cats and your availability to get to the site. Remember that food left outdoors may be eaten by other animals such as raccoons and opossums.
- Set humane traps to catch the cats to be taken to a vet. Some animal rescue organizations, such as Good Mews, loan traps, as do most county animal control departments; also, check with other cat trappers to borrow a trap. A sturdy (metal or plastic) cat carrier can also be used.
- Keep a trapped cat in the trap until you get it to the vet. Provide food and water, and place a cloth over the trap. Put newspaper or plastic under it.
- Be prepared to face a decision when the cat is at the vet. If the cat tests positive for feline leukemia or FIV, putting it back in the colony will spread the disease. You may have to choose to euthanize the cat.
- Return the cat to the colony. (Ask the vet to notch the cat's ear to indicate the cat has been altered.)

- Continue to provide food and water for the colony. Have a backup person who can fill in for you.

Tame

Some feral cats can be tamed. Kittens are easier to tame because they haven't been on their own long. Some cats may have come from homes; they may easily return to the good life of a safe house, human companionship, and regular meals.

If you have the room, time, and patience, taming feral cats can be a rewarding experience. Don't be discouraged if you try hard but just can't get the cat to let you touch it.

Here are some steps to taming a feral cat:

- Keep it in a comfortable cage in an out-of-the-way part of your house; or put it in a room where it can't harm itself or your belongings. The cat will likely be afraid, so keep it away from noise, other animals, and people at first. Provide food, water, and a clean litter box.
- Interact with the cat frequently. Speak to it soothingly. Cautiously poke a finger through the cage (wear a glove at first, in case the cat nips) and touch the cat gently. If the cat is in a room, approach it slowly, going only as far as the cat will allow without it backing into a corner or hissing.
- When the cat accepts your presence, carefully open the cage door. Slowly reach in with one hand (you may want to wear a glove) and extend it toward the cat. If the cat backs away or hisses, slowly remove your hand. Keep trying over time, until you can touch and then pet the cat.
- Let the cat out of the cage into a controlled area such as a closed room. Place it back in the cage and let it out periodically. When it seems ready, allow it to remain out of the cage.

Proceed slowly. Given time, some cats come around and will become social enough to mix with the family and with other pets. Or the cat may not become friends with other pets or jump into your lap, but it might accept your hospitality and tolerate the other animals.

Alley Cat Allies, a national network of people who deal with ferals, is a good resource for information. Contact the organization at 202-667-3630 or at www.alleycat.org.

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