



Feral Cat FAQs

What exactly is a feral cat?

The word “feral” means wild. It refers to a cat’s disposition. Feral means that a cat is un-socialized to humans. Feral cats are typically born outside (but not always) and have had little direct interaction with human beings. In many ways, they are like other wild animals (squirrels, opossums, etc.) that run from people when approached. Not all outdoor cats are feral. There are many friendly cats on the streets. Cats can also be partly feral and partly friendly. The term community cat is less precise, but is typically used to refer to unowned, free-roaming cats regardless of their sociability. Feral cats and friendly, socialized cats do not behave any differently with each other as cats themselves do not register the difference between feral and friendly.

Can I bring a feral cat inside?

It is unwise to bring a truly feral cat indoors. If a cat is not socialized to people, he/she will be extremely stressed in captivity. As with humans, stress can lead to illness. Captive feral cats can get upper respiratory infections, diarrhea and even depression. A feral cat can thrash against windows trying to get out, get into rafters or other inaccessible places, or urinate or defecate in undesired locations. Feral cats thrive best in their familiar outdoor environment where they are comfortable and free.

How will feral cats survive the winter?

Outdoor cats are amazingly resilient to cold temperatures. They grow a very thick coat of fur in the winter and find places to seek refuge from the elements. We recommend providing insulated shelters stuffed with straw to keep cats comfortable. Outdoor heating pads are an excellent addition. Cats love them! If there is no electrical hook-up available, microwavable SnuggleSafe Disks provide warmth up to 10 hours. Dehydration is a concern in winter when the temperatures drop and puddles freeze. It is very important to provide fresh water every day. A heated water bowl is ideal.

How long will the cats live?

The lifespan of a feral cat is generally less than that of a house cat. The claim that feral cats only live about 2 years is only supported by studies of unsterilized cats living with no human support. Feral cats that are sterilized, vaccinated and well fed have been seen to live 7-10 years and longer. Caring for a feral cat colony is a long-term commitment.

Is it ok to feed them leftovers?

Cat food is nutritionally balanced for cats, contains important nutrients and is all they really need. Supplementing with meat scraps from time to time is ok, as long as all bones are removed. Chicken bones can splinter and easily become lodged in a cat’s throat. Onions, garlic, green onions, chives and grapes are all poisonous for cats.

Can we give them milk?

No. Cats, even kittens, are generally lactose intolerant to cow’s milk. It can cause digestive problems, diarrhea and dehydration. Do not feed milk, cream or any dairy products, *even if they like it*. Fresh water is all they need. Milk that is formulated especially for cats, such as Catsip and KMR (kitten milk replacer) is ok.

Will feral cats kill birds?

Cats can kill an occasional bird, but it is rare. Cats are opportunistic scavengers, meaning they go after the easiest prey first, which is usually land-based critters. Cats are rodent specialists. They kill and sometimes eat mice, rats and rabbits. Birds they do kill are typically the sickly or injured ones that won’t make it to the next breeding cycle anyway. Contrary to some reports, feral cats are NOT killing billions of birds every year and threatening them with extinction. Bird populations are more threatened by habitat loss, pollution and tall buildings. Dr. Anne E. Beall, a bird aficionado and feral cat advocate, estimated the number of birds killed each year by cats is demonstrably lower in a research study published in her book “Community Cats – A Journey into the World of Feral Cats.”



What if someone harms my cats or threatens to harm them?

In Cook County, the 2007 Managed Care of Feral Cats Ordinance states it is against the law to harm feral cats. If you find deceased cats outside that have *not* been vaccinated, the most likely culprit is a virus, not your angry neighbor. We recommend communicating with neighbors to let them know you have cats, and that they are spayed/neutered, vaccinated and fed regularly. The ordinance also stipulates that you will make a good-faith effort to address any nuisance issues that arise. For the cats' sake, *acknowledge* neighbors' concerns and work with them to address any issues. Undesired elimination is the most common complaint, which is why we encourage people to use an outdoor litter box or sand box if possible. If someone is truly harming your cats, try to set up a camera to record any undesired activity. Police are unlikely to intervene without evidence. If you find a dead cat that you believe has been poisoned or otherwise harmed by someone, do not place the body in the freezer. You can ask a local vet to perform a necropsy on the cat to potentially identify the cause of death, but only if the body is not frozen or decomposed. Outside of Cook County, refer to your local village code and contact local authorities.

What should I do if I find kittens?

If the kittens are tiny (4 weeks or under), the first thing you should do is determine if there is a mama. Leave the kittens exactly where you found them and observe from a distance, such as from inside the house or in your car, so you don't scare Mama away. Mama may not come back to them if she sees you. If you have not seen a mama cat in 4-6 hours, get the kittens to safety and seek assistance. The most important thing in rescuing newborn kittens is to keep them warm. You may have to bottle feed them. Also know that they can't urinate/defecate on their own, so you need to take a cotton ball with warm water and stimulate their behind, so they can urinate and defecate. If they are more than 4-5 weeks old, you will likely need to use humane traps to trap them. If there is a mama cat, you will need to trap her also, at the same time as the kittens. If you remove the kittens without trapping mama, she is likely to disappear and have many additional litters. *Do not remove kittens without trapping mama!*

Will the cats bother my allergies?

No. We have clients with cat allergies who enjoy their outdoor colonies without issue. Because the cats are afraid of humans, you and your family are unlikely to get close to them.

Are the cats a danger to my kids?

No. Feral cats are not "vicious." They typically run from humans, so children are unlikely to get close to them. It is important to explain to children that although feral cats look just like friendly pet cats, they are wild animals that are very afraid of them, and they should not try to pet or chase them.

Will the cats spread disease?

No. Most viruses affecting cats are species specific and will not affect humans or dogs. Feral cats are vaccinated against rabies at the time of spay/neuter. Other parasites such as fleas, ear mites or intestinal parasites can transfer to other cats.

What is toxoplasmosis and can I get it from the cats?

Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by a microscopic parasite. Cats can get the Toxoplasma infection by eating infected rodents, birds or other small animals, or from infected soil. People can get toxoplasmosis by eating raw or undercooked meat and by ingesting contaminated soil, water or cat feces. You cannot become infected by casual contact with cat feces. After a cat has been infected, it can release the parasite oocysts in its feces for up to two weeks. In a healthy cat, the infection will go away on its own. A cat sheds the oocysts from the toxoplasma only *one time* in its entire life, so the chances of your cat becoming infected and you ingesting infected cat feces are between slim and none. We have never had a reported case of a person contracting toxoplasmosis from an outdoor cat. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has further information on their website.

Will our dog be a problem for the cats?



Usually not. Cats are fairly good at staying away from dogs. They can jump over fences and get to areas the dog can't reach. If your dog is small-animal aggressive, it's entirely possible that he/she could kill a feral cat, so you would have to assure they don't meet. Cats typically sleep during the day and are more active at dawn and dusk when your dog is likely inside the house.

We have a high fence. Is that a problem?

Cats can climb fences, but typically seek out the easiest path. It's best to make it easy for them by installing a pet door in tall fences, or by placing something to jump on. Otherwise, they could avoid your yard. Cats can also become injured by catching a limb in a wooden or chain-link fence.

Will cats cross major streets?

Yes, sometimes. Cats are more active after dusk and they are most likely to cross major streets in the wee hours of the morning when traffic is light. However, cats can cross streets at any time. To deter them from crossing streets, create a quiet environment with lots of hidey places, and if possible, green spaces.

What do I do if the cat becomes injured or sick?

Upper respiratory infections, conjunctivitis (eye infections) and fleas are common in outdoor cats. Brewer's yeast in food can help to keep the fleas at bay. If you notice excessive discharge coming from the nose or eyes, or if a cat is limping or walking on only three legs, trap the cat and get him/her to a local vet. We can provide a list of vets who see feral cats in traps.

What should I do if one of the cats stops eating?

If a cat goes more than 48 hours without eating, their liver can become damaged. This is a very serious situation. The cat needs to get to a vet quickly. A vet should be able to give the cat an injectable appetite stimulant. It may also be wise to crate the cat to administer additional medication.

What do I do if a new cat joins the colony?

Trap the cat immediately and get him/her to a spay/neuter clinic, and then re-release the cat. The clinic will always scan for a microchip, so if you suspect the cat is friendly, you may be able to identify the owner.

What do I do if another animal such as a raccoon or possum starts eating the cat food?

Usually these types of animals come out late at night. Place the cats on a strict feeding schedule and remove any food before you go to bed. If other wildlife continues to be a nuisance, you can call a trapping service to remove them, but know that they will charge you and will likely euthanize anything they catch. Trapping wildlife (other than feral cats) is unlawful without a license, so we do not recommend relocating animals yourself. There are also platforms you can buy or build, which only cats can access. Possums are not aggressive to cats or humans, do not carry rabies, and only have a 2-year lifespan. They love cat food and will occasionally attempt to move into cat shelters you have in your yard. Inspect your shelters regularly. Cat shelters should have a single entry hole no more than 6" in diameter to prevent nosy raccoons.

Will feral cats become friendlier over time?

Cats can warm up to their caretakers over time. They may watch you at a "safe" distance while you are placing food out for them, then eventually allow petting on their back while eating. Some feral cats have become very friendly after some time, but this is rare.

Why do my colony cats disappear now and then?

Female colony cats tend to roam no further than a block or two, whereas males have much larger roaming ranges, even after being neutered. It is not uncommon for males to goon walk about up to 8-10 blocks away, where they tend to "cat business" such as marking territory with their scent glands, scouting for territorial threats, and stopping off at places they've found food before.