

Best Practices for Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) of Feral Cats

PLANNING -- Before you do any trapping, you will need to think through the project from beginning to end and make a plan.

Get on a feeding schedule – If cats congregate and eat at a regular time(s), they will be much easier to trap. If you are leaving food out for extended periods of time, stop doing this. Put food out at the same time every day. Remove any uneaten food after no more than one hour. Don't worry if some cats miss a meal. They will learn and adjust. Never leave food out overnight as this will attract wildlife and also hinder your chances of trapping them.

Communicate with other feeders – Cats often have more than one feeder. It is well worth your while to talk to neighbors, ask dog walkers and the mail carrier and even flyer the neighborhood to find out who else is feeding. If you can get other neighbors on a feeding schedule, you will have the most success (and potentially a back-up feeder while you are out of town). It is also very important to let any other feeders know when you plan to trap, so they do not feed the cats prior to trapping. Cats that are not hungry will not go into traps.

Document the colony – Make a list of *all* of the cats you see, both regularly and irregularly, with a description and notation of any identifying features or any illness or injuries. Give each cat a name, as you'll need names to check them in at a clinic. For a tracking log template, go to catsinaction.org and search for "tracking log."

Check clinic availability – Determine which clinic(s) you will go to, if you need an appointment (usually preferred) or will walk-in the cats without an appointment. Understand what time you need to drop off cats in the morning and what time you need to pick up in the afternoon or evening. For a list of Chicago-area clinics, go to: <https://catsinaction.org/resources/spay-neuter-clinic-list/>

Get traps – If possible, get as many traps as you have cats. Trapping the entire colony at once is the most efficient way to ensure that you trap each cat. Many clinics and rescue organizations lend traps. You may need to provide a credit card number or blank check as a deposit. You may only be able to keep traps for 1-2 weeks, so make sure you have a solid plan for catching all of the cats. For a list of organizations that lend traps, go to: <https://catsinaction.org/resources/where-to-get-traps/>

Purchase supplies – You will need newspaper or cardboard to line the bottom of the traps, tape to hold it down so wind doesn't blow it around and food to use as bait. Tuna fish is a good, fragrant bait. Canned cat food works as well. Other fragrant options include mackerel, salmon, sardines or fried chicken.

Identify a holding/recovery area – If you trap cats the night before your appointment, keep them in the traps, in a dry, secure location. You will need a location that is temperature-controlled to recover cats because they can not regulate their body temperature while recovering from anesthesia.

Prepare your vehicle – Get a tarp, shower curtain or other waterproof cover, to prevent any urine from getting into your car. Place towels or newspapers over the tarp, to soak up any urine.

TRAPPING (T) –

Watch traps! Only trap when you are home or otherwise available to watch traps intently. If you are not in a position to be watching cats as they walk into traps, plan to check them every 15 minutes or so, in *any* weather. Never

leave traps unattended for hours on end and definitely never leave traps open overnight. Raccoons, possums, skunks and other wildlife are nocturnal and can be attracted to the bait. Cats can also thrash around, pull the cover off and potentially scrape their faces on the trap, pull out a claw or become otherwise injured.

Preparing Traps – Line the bottom of the traps with newspaper or cardboard and tape it down so it doesn't blow in the wind. Place food directly on paper. Do not use bowls or anything hard, as it can injure the cat and can also rest on the trip plate preventing it from triggering. You can also use a small paper plate cut in half.

Choosing Bait – Canned cat food works just fine as bait. Tuna is also a good choice, as it is very fragrant. For hard to trap cats, you can try mackerel, salmon, sardines or even fried chicken. Place about a tablespoon of bait directly on the newspaper at the far back of the trap, touching the back door. Bait must be at the far back of the trap in order to attract the cat in far enough to trigger the trip plate. Place some very small pieces of bait from the beginning of the trap leading up to the main bait, like a trail of bread crumbs. Don't use too much food, as we don't want the cats to fill up before they step on the trip plate. You can also place pieces of food outside the trap leading into it, to entice cats who walk by.

Covering the Trap – Keeping traps covered is important to keep cats calm and prevent thrashing around. When you set up your trap, place the cover on the trap and pull it up in the back and front, so the cat can see all the way through. You can also trap without a cover, if you are present and watching the cat walk in. Have a cover in hand, so you can run up and place it on the trap as soon as the door closes.

NEUTERING (N) – Male cats are neutered (castrated, testicles removed) and female cats are spayed (hysterectomy, uterus and ovaries removed). Male cats' testicles are removed from the inside, which does not require stitches. Female cats have internal melt-away stitches and an adhesive which seals the incision. They do not need to be brought back for removal of stitches.

Sterilizing Everyone – All cats should be spayed or neutered as soon as possible. Cats remain fertile their entire lives and are never too old to be sterilized. Kittens can and should be sterilized at 2 lbs, which is approximately 8 weeks old. It is international best practice to spay female cats even if they are pregnant. A cat is never "too pregnant" to be spayed. Spaying a pregnant cat is much safer for her than giving birth, which has many risks. An estimated 50-75% of kittens die outside before reaching 6 months old. In order to stop this cycle of suffering and mitigate overpopulation, we urge you to have confidence that this is the right decision. Spay/abort prevents unnecessary suffering and is key to stopping overpopulation both on the streets and in shelters. A female cat can be spayed even if she is nursing. Lactation is controlled by the pituitary gland in the brain, not the reproductive organs, so she can nurse her kittens after spay surgery.

Ear Tipping – Cats also receive an ear tip whereby the vet removes ¼" off the top of the left ear, making it flat on top. The purpose of ear tipping is to identify free-roaming cats that have already been sterilized, so they are not repeatedly re-trapped, transported and sedated.

Microchipping – Microchipping feral cats is very important, and many clinics do not include this in their TNR surgery package but offer it upon request for a small fee. The Cook County Managed Care of Feral Cats ordinance mandates microchips for feral cats.

VACCINATING (V)

Rabies – Vaccinating cats against rabies is typically a mandatory part of any TNR program as well as local ordinance. Rabies is extremely rare in cats, but is a potentially deadly disease not only to an affected animal, but also to anyone that animal bites. Although the rabies vaccine is most effective if an animal receives two vaccines within a year, one vaccine provides a high level of immunity, which is generally considered sufficient. The State of Illinois changed the Animal Control Act in 2019 to require only one rabies vaccine ever for free-roaming cats.

FVRCP – This is a 3-in-1 vaccine against the Feline Rhinovirus, Calici and Panleukopenia (Distemper). This vaccine may be included in a package of treatment for feral cats or may be offered optionally. It is *extremely* important for feral cats to receive an FVRCP vaccine, as these viruses are prevalent in the environment, contagious and can be deadly!

RETURNING (R) –

Recovery – Following surgery, cats recover inside the trap for 12-24 hours (both males and females). The purpose of the recovery period is to assure that anesthesia is out of the cat's system, so they don't stumble into traffic or otherwise get hurt. Feral cats are *very* stressed in captivity and recover most quickly in their natural environment. Do not hold cats longer than 24 hours, as you would do for a pet cat. Stress can trigger illness, so keeping them longer can actually hurt them. It is important to keep the trap as clean as possible during recovery. Pull out any soiled newspaper or cardboard and replace, so incisions stay clean. Use a trap divider if you can to safely isolate cats on one side of the trap while you clean the other side.

Lactation/Kittens – If you learn from the spay/neuter clinic that a female cat was lactating, you can return her later the night of surgery, so that she can find her kittens, as long as she is bright and alert and showing no signs from the anesthesia. Lactation is controlled by the pituitary gland in the brain, not the reproductive organs, so female cats can continue to nurse kittens after they are spayed. Most will make a beeline to the kittens, so pay attention to where she runs, if you don't already know where the kittens are.

Feeding – It's ok to feed cats 4-5 hours after surgery, if they appear awake and alert. Carefully slide in a paper plate with canned food. It is not necessary to provide water because the canned food contains moisture and because you are releasing the next day. Kibble usually just spills everywhere and doesn't provide much moisture.

Illness or Injury – If a cat is sick (runny eyes or nose, sneezing) or injured (limping, bite wound, etc.) and did not receive sufficient treatment at the spay/neuter clinic, you may choose to seek additional veterinary care. In this case, you can transfer the cat to a large wire dog crate for holding. Cover the crate on all sides with blankets or sheets, provide a litter box and a "hidey hole," which can be a carrier or feral transfer den. If the cat is eating regularly, you can place antibiotics in a small amount of canned food for the prescribed number of days.

Return – Bring cats back to the *exact* spot you trapped them. If you trapped in the front the house, return them to the front of the house. Do not release cats in an area that is unfamiliar to them. Dumping cats is cruel, as they will likely struggle to survive. Cats will bolt out of the traps very quickly! Make sure that there is no traffic, no one is walking dogs nearby and cats have a clear, safe path to run. All people should be standing *behind* the trap. Open the back door of the trap, point them away from any streets, then pull the trap cover up and step back.

Resume – You can get back to feeding and caretaking as usual. Understand that cats may be a bit wary following trapping and may even stay away for a while. This is normal. They typically get back into their routine after a few days.