



Tompkins County SPCA

Feral Cat Series

The Care and Feeding of Feral Cats

Feral cats are not socialized to people. They range from cats who have never had human contact to semi-tame cats who were once pets. Often living in loose associations known as "colonies," they become well-adapted to their territory and can live safely and contentedly in alleyways, parking lots, vacant lots, backyards, and a host of other locations-urban, suburban, and rural.

Determine if the cats are being cared for

- Veterinarians usually notch or tip one ear to show the cats have been spayed or neutered. Unless all the cats have clearly clipped ears, you should assume they are not yet altered.
- If you notice kittens, there are cats who need to be altered.
- Do you see evidence that the colony is being cared for such as food dishes, water bowls, or shelters? If someone is already feeding the cats, perhaps you can help to have the cats neutered.

Start feeding

- Feed the cats once a day. Dry food is preferable, and should be left as inconspicuously as possible. Place dishes under shrubs, behind bushes, or near walls. Don't forget fresh water!
- Stick to a regular schedule if you can. Consistent feeding will make trapping easier.



Spay/neuter

- For trapping instructions, see our "Humane Trapping" fact sheet. Spay/neuter is the single most important thing you can do to help feral cats, and is the most humane and effective way to control their populations. Not only does spay/neuter prevent more kittens from being born, it also decreases behavior like spraying, fighting, howling, and roaming. In addition, it greatly improves the cats' health.
- Spay/neuter should take precedence over socializing and adopting. Even if you do not wish to continue feeding and caring for them, you should still have the cats altered and return them to their habitat.
- Decide where you will have the cats altered. We may be able to provide financial assistance and/or free spay/neuter for feral cats.

Managing the colony

- Minimize the number of feeding locations-fewer feeding stations means less work for you and less chance of someone noticing. It also makes it easier to keep an eye on the cats and to monitor the colony for newcomers.
- Feed the cats in areas as secluded as possible, away from people and centers of activity.
- If possible, do not feed at night. Daytime feeding reduces the chance of wild animals helping themselves to the cats' food.
- Keep feeding areas clean. Change the dishes when they get dirty, and pick up trash even if it isn't yours. Don't leave empty cans or large piles of food. Dry food is less messy than canned, and if you only feed dry food, canned food will be a more enticing treat, making trapping much easier.
- Watch for newcomers, and have them spayed or neutered right away.
- Share responsibilities. Do you have friends, co-workers, family members, or other caregivers who will feed the cats one day a week or colony sit while you're on vacation? Perhaps they can socialize a kitten or keep a cat for post-surgery recovery while you continue trapping. The more people who participate in caring for a colony, the better off the cats-and you-will be.

