

What Homeless Cats Need Most from You, Especially Now

Just because feral cats may scamper when you approach them doesn't mean they don't need or want your help and protection, especially when temperatures take a nose dive. Doing these two things will go a long way to help make life better for homeless cats.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Community cats often need extra TLC during the winter months, including shelter from the weather, and added calories and fat in the diet
- A suitable shelter for free-roaming cats should be big enough for them to stand up and move around in, but small enough to retain body heat when the kitties snuggle up together inside
- Ideally, the shelter should also be insulated for warmth and elevated to prevent ground moisture from seeping inside. The entry should be just big enough for a cat to fit through, and protected from the elements
- Canned cat food is ideal for outdoor cats, but it may freeze. Another option in cold weather is a dry kitten food that contains more calories and nutrients than adult formulas. Feeding and watering the cats at the same time each day can prevent them from wandering off into the cold in search of food
- Trap-neuter-return programs for feral cats are designed to control the cat population, while simultaneously providing for the general health and well-being of the kitties

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If you have homeless cats in your neighborhood or around your workplace, you're probably worried about them — especially during the cold winter months. For those of us who love animals and are concerned with their health and safety, accepting that some cats don't have, and don't want a human family can be a hard pill to swallow.

The good news is that many communities these days have found ways to care for their neighborhood feral cats, including instituting trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs to help control population growth. The benefit to humans (beyond the good feeling we get from helping make life better for homeless kitties) is that a healthy feral cat colony is a very effective form of natural rodent control.

If your community already cares for feral cats, or if you'd like to start a program in your neighborhood, there are ways you can help stray cats sustain themselves during the winter months.

Create a Snug Feral Cat Shelter

A winter shelter for free-roaming cats doesn't have to be elaborate — it just needs to be a place that is safe from extreme weather, and big enough for the kitties to stand and move around in. The cats will naturally snuggle up together in their shelter to keep warm.

The structure should be placed in a spot where the cats naturally gather, or in a safe, concealed location where they will feel hidden from predators, while also able to keep an eye on their surroundings.

If you're handy, you can create a homemade shelter out of nearly any material, even a good-sized, heavy-duty cardboard box that you anchor to any available structure. The space should be large enough to accommodate several cats, but small enough to retain the cats' body heat when they gather inside.

The entry into the shelter should be just large enough for a cat to fit through. This will keep the elements outside and the inside will stay dry. Protect the entry with a makeshift awning or curtain using plastic sheeting or heavy-duty trash bags. Facing the entry to a wall or other fixed structure is another way to help keep the inside of the shelter protected from wind, rain and snow.

You can also add insulation to the interior roof and walls of the shelter, and caulk the seams to make it less drafty. It's also a good idea, if possible, to elevate the shelter so it's not in contact with ground moisture. The goal is to make the shelter snug, but also ventilated, so you'll want to put some small holes along the bottom of the structure.

For bedding, use straw rather than cloth bedding or blankets. Straw doesn't hold excess moisture, and it also helps to retain heat.

For more ideas for creating a feral cat shelter, **[look here](#)** at pre-built shelters, as well as easy, moderate and advanced do-it-yourself enclosures.

Feral Cats Need More Calories and Fat During Cold Weather

Outdoor cats need extra calories and dietary fat during cold weather. A canned cat food is ideal, but not if it's likely to freeze. An alternative is a dry kitten formula that is higher in calories than adult kibble.

Food and water stations should be sheltered from the cold and located as close to the sleeping shelter as possible so the kitties don't have to travel far to get nourishment. If the shelter is close to an outdoor outlet, using a heated water bowl will prevent water from freezing overnight, when many homeless cats utilize these shelters.

Putting food and fresh water out at the same time each day will provide the cats with a schedule they can depend on, which will hopefully prevent them from wandering off into the weather in search of food.

If you can put together a little cooperative of willing neighbors to take turns feeding and watering the cats at the specified time, it can take some of the burden off you. If they can also help with the purchase of cat food, even better.

Trap-Neuter-Return Programs

TNR programs are designed to humanely control the feral cat population, while at the same time improving the general health and well-being of the kitties. Feral cats that are part of TNR programs are healthier than cats in unmonitored colonies, with life spans that can exceed 10 years.

In TNR, the kitties are caught, transported to veterinary or spay/neuter clinics, sterilized, ear-tipped for identification purposes, vaccinated against rabies, and returned to their colonies.

Feral cats in TNR programs have colony caretakers who provide shelter, food and water, monitor their health status, rescue socialized kittens and adults from the colony for fostering and adoption, and arrange TNR services for all new feral additions to the colony.

For more information on helping feral cats where you live, **Neighborhood Cats** and **Alley Cat Allies** are wonderful resources.

Sources and References

PetMD, December 6, 2010
