

Before You Rescue – The Feral Cat Reality

They may seem to call your name, but experts suggest you stay away. They retain wild behaviors and there are far easier animals to adopt that are more likely to adjust well to domestic life. So please don't set yourself up for heartbreak with this mistake.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you have stray or feral cats in your neighborhood, you may have considered bringing them home, especially during the cold winter months
- There are important differences between stray and feral cats that anyone considering rescuing an outdoor kitty should understand
- Generally speaking, feral cats don't do well as pets — there are better ways to care for these kitties
- Stray cats can be successfully integrated into families who understand their unique needs
- Take the process of socialization one small step at a time, and repeat steps as often as necessary until your kitty is comfortable

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The sight of a cat running loose around the neighborhood probably makes your kitty-loving heart break a little, especially during these cold, wet, windy winter months.

If you're thinking of bringing the cat home with you, you're probably also wondering if a stray or possibly feral kitty can be happy living indoors with humans after running the streets for who knows how long. The first thing you need to do is determine whether the cat is stray or feral, because this will be a very important factor in how well he adapts to indoor living with humans.

Stray Cat or Feral Cat?

Stray cats have at some point lived with people. These kitties have been separated from their humans somehow and are homeless, but if they haven't been on the loose for too long, they can still be approached and handled.

Feral cats, on the other hand, are what we term "wild." Technically they are domesticated cats that have reverted to an untamed or free-living state. Most feral cats are born in the wild, though a small percentage may be strays that for whatever reason reverted to wildness over time. Unlike strays, feral cats don't trust people and will not allow you to get close to them. They won't eat if you're nearby, and their eating behavior tends to be hurried and furtive.

Feral kitties typically hide during daylight hours and roam around at night. They find out-of-the-way places to rest and sleep — hiding places where they won't be disturbed. Feral cats often live in colonies in areas that provide shelter, food and water, like around garbage dumpsters. They are also referred to as community cats.

The central difference between stray and feral cats is that as a general rule, stray cats can be re-socialized and placed in new forever homes, whereas feral cats older than about 8 weeks are considered unsuitable for adoption. According to the ASPCA:

“The fact is, most feral cats exhibit wild, shy or frightened behavior and it's impossible to predict how or if they will ever acclimate to indoor life. While a community cat might look exactly the same as a pet cat, community cats survive by avoiding close human interaction. When properly cared for, community cats are happier outdoors in their own territory.”¹

There is a bit of a grey area in that some semi-community cats are actually strays who aren't quite as shy as the majority of feral kitties. For some unknown reason, they are less fearful of humans than is typical, but many lack the ability to survive on their own, and are often rejected by established colonies. It's possible for some of these cats to be socialized, but it depends on their trust of humans.

Some stray cats have been socialized and may have been spayed or neutered and received veterinary care. Obviously, your first stop should be a veterinary clinic to have kitty checked out. Stray cats can contract serious contagious illnesses such as ringworm, feline leukemia, rabies and other diseases that can infect other pets and humans.

The health of feral cats is an even greater risk, and in fact, these kitties are more likely than not to have health issues. After all, most were born and have lived entirely outdoors and probably haven't had any veterinary care at all unless they were picked up as part of a trap-neuter-return (TNR) program (more about that shortly).

Can Feral Cats Become Pet Cats?

Generally speaking, the answer from most experts is no, which is a very difficult thing for cat lovers who are inexperienced with feral kitties to accept. It's hard to understand why a feral cat that looks identical to your pet can't be brought into your home to live just as comfortably as your own beloved kitty.

“If you adopt a feral cat, you are setting yourself up for heartbreak,” says veterinary internal medicine specialist Dr. Ann Hohenhaus. “I am not saying you shouldn't ever take a feral cat [into your home] but think carefully about it first.”²

According to organizations that work closely with feral cat populations, the survival instinct of feral kitties drives them to avoid human interaction. If their basic survival needs are met, feral cats do much better living outside on their own. Jesse Oldham, Senior Administrative Director at the ASPCA describes her own experience with feral kitties this way:

“I, like many first-time rescuers, tried to socialize a feral cat. He remained under my bed for over a year before I could even touch him. With so many adoptable domestic cats and kittens who are truly happy being indoors, socializing a feral cat should not be the goal.”³

Of course, as is the case with most animal advocacy issues, there are opposing views as to whether trying to tame a feral cat is advisable. If you'd like more information, you can review the Stanford Cat Network's list of "**Tips on Taming Feral Cats and Kittens**."

Caring for Community Cats

Trap-neuter-return programs are designed not only for humane population control, but also to improve the general health and well-being of feral cats. TNR is considered the least costly, most humane and effective method for managing feral cat populations by many organizations.

Feral cats who are part of TNR programs are healthier than cats in unmonitored colonies. Sterilized cats that live in monitored colonies can have life spans exceeding 10 years. Trap-neuter-return programs also benefit towns and neighborhoods by reducing the feral cat population and eliminating the nuisance behaviors that go along with intact felines.

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. TNR programs also have colony caretakers who provide shelter, food and water for the cats, monitor their health, remove socialized kittens and strays from the colony for fostering and adoption and arrange TNR services for all new additions to the colony.

For more information on feral cat population management or to learn how to get involved to help these kitties, **Neighborhood Cats** and the Alley Cat Allies **Feral Friends Network** are great places to start.

Alternatively, many shelters have hybrid programs for sterilized feral cats in which they are transported to barns and industrial complexes struggling to manage their rodent populations. These programs are the best option for feral cats, as they provide the kitties with semi-protected environments and food, which also reduces the number of songbirds and other wildlife killed by feral kitties.

How to Successfully Integrate a New Cat Into Your Home

Cats are very sensitive to new environments, sounds, tastes and smells, and they're easily stressed by any change in their routine. When you bring a new cat into your home, especially a homeless cat, set her up in her own little "apartment" for at least her first week. This will allow her to get adjusted on her own terms, which is the way cats prefer things. It also allows you time to test for infectious diseases prior to introducing your cat to other animals and the rest of your home.

Put your new kitty's bedding, litterbox, food and toys in a spare bedroom or bathroom, and keep noise and visitors to a minimum. Introduce other members of the household one at a time in calm, quiet and low-stress situations. Don't leave the new kitty unattended with other pets in the home until you're completely confident your new cat has acclimated to the other animals and vice versa.

All cats thrive on a daily routine they can count on, and this is especially true for a kitty who has been living on the mean streets. Feed and interact with your cat on a consistent schedule, and scoop his litterbox at least once daily. It's important to gain his trust, and caring for his basic needs on a regular timetable will help him feel more comfortable in his new home.

Each time you interact with your cat, be calm, encouraging and gentle. Talk softly, move slowly and don't stare at her because this can be perceived as threatening. Whenever possible, get down on her level to interact with her, and let her come to you. Building trust is the most important thing you can do when you bring a new cat into your home. Touch her without forcing contact, and pet her gently around the head, ears and face.

Never bring your hand directly toward your cat's face, as this may startle her. Instead, gently approach her from the side or from behind. If your cat scurries away when you walk near her, try turning your back to her as you pass.

Use delicious, wholesome food to encourage your kitty to bond with you. Feed a **fresh, nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet**. Offer yummy, healthy treats whenever you invite him to interact with you. The goal is to help him make a positive association between you and delicious food.

Many homeless cats can transition to fresh food easily if the change occurs before they become addicted to the highly processed "fast food" sold at most big box pet stores.

Never force anything on your cat. Don't pull him from his hiding spot or hold him against his will (unless there's an emergency of some kind and you need to move him). Cats are most comfortable when they feel in control of their surroundings and interactions, so keep that in mind whenever you approach your new kitty. Encourage him to come to you, and until he does, pet and interact with him on his terms.

Schedule play sessions with your kitty as often as possible, especially if she's play-motivated. Use interactive, nonthreatening toys that encourage her natural instinct to stalk prey. Bringing out the "inner hunter" in a cat can work wonders for her confidence, so also consider serving some of her meals in an indoor hunting feeder.

Remember that with a new cat, especially a stray, time and patience are your biggest allies. Take the process of socialization one small step at a time, and repeat steps as often as necessary until your kitty is comfortable. Watch his body language carefully for signs of fear, including hiding, freezing in place and hunching down to appear smaller.

Sources and References

¹ [ASPCA.org \(Archived\)](#),
² [PetMD](#)
³ [Action Volunteers for Animals \(Archived\)](#).
