



## The Care and Feeding of Community Cats – the basics

Care of a colony can involve several of the following:

- Conducting trap/neuter/return
- Providing regular food and water
- Providing shelter from the elements
- Monitoring the colony for health concerns, and new, intact cats
- Acting as a positive advocate for feral cats in your community
- Planning for substitute colony care

**Neuter, vaccinate, eartip, and return all feral cats in the colony**, including those that only visit sporadically and newcomers as soon as they appear.

Neutering and vaccinating are the best things that can be done for stray and feral cats. They will be healthier and live longer if they are neutered. The females will not be continuously pregnant and nursing and, male cats will not fight for mates or roam in search of females with whom to mate. The number one priority when discovering an individual cat or a colony is to safely and humanely trap them and see that they are seen by a veterinarian.

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.

### **Provide a regular feeding schedule.**

Ideally, a colony should be fed at least once daily at the same time, in the same location. Stick to a regular schedule if you can. Consistent feeding will make trapping easier, and help you, the caretaker, form a timed relationship with the cats.

Place dishes under shrubs, behind bushes, or near walls. Caretakers often build a shelter for food, or use a turned over container or wooden box. Don't forget fresh water. Keeping food and water dishes off the direct ground will not only make clean up easier, it will help to control insects. Other ways to deter insects, should they become a problem:

- *Place a tray or flowerpot tray with about half an inch to an inch of water in it on the feeding station platform and then place the food bowl on the tray.*
- *Surround the food bowl with a ring of baking soda*
- *Keep your feeding areas clean, especially in hot, humid weather and always remove feeding dishes within 30 minutes.*
- *Cut back, or completely cut out, the amount of wet food that you feed, because dry food tends to attract fewer bugs. Be sure to add more dry food to compensate.*
- *Elevate feeding stations slightly off the ground and surround them with a line of **food-grade diatomaceous earth** without chemical additives (available from some natural food stores and environmentally conscious pet-care supply companies). The diatom dust should be reapplied*

*after rainstorms. Note that diatomaceous earth sold for swimming pool filters is not safe to use for this purpose.*

How much food? Observe the cats and use your discretion based on the time it takes for the food to be eaten. If the cats eat all of the food in 15 minutes or less, consider putting out a bit more. If there is consistently food remaining after a half hour, put out a bit less. Although most cats clearly enjoy canned food, feeding a colony dry food alone is fine as well.

In the winter, especially in colder locations, expect the colony to consume more food because they will need extra calories to maintain energy levels. In places where wet food may freeze, it is advisable to just feed dry food.

Remove all uneaten food within 30 minutes. Never allow food to sit out, as it may attract insects or wildlife. If possible, do not feed at night. Conflicts with wildlife are one of the primary reasons neighbors complain about feral cat colonies, and daytime feeding reduces the chance of wild animals helping themselves to the cats' food.

"Out of sight, out of mind" is the motto of many feral cat caregivers. Try to be inconspicuous in your feeding and trapping activities. If someone notices and asks what you are doing, explain that altering and feeding the cats will decrease their numbers quickly and humanely.

### **Colony management.**

Keeping track of members of your colony, their health, new cats who have joined the colony who may need to be neutered, and your ongoing Trap-Neuter-Return program allows you to monitor your progress and provides you with back-up evidence that may be needed someday. Keep an eye on the cats for general good health. Common indicators of health problems or injury include: changes in behavior, changes in eating habits, dull eyes or coat, discharge from the nose or eyes, weight loss, fur loss, changes in their gait, and listlessness.

Have a plan for how to handle any health problems and for ongoing colony care. When a health problem occurs, speak with your veterinarian first and describe the symptoms so that you can decide together if a sick cat needs to be trapped and examined.

For flea and parasite control, change the bedding in shelters at least monthly. At that time, spray or dust the floor with a cat-safe flea control product. Or, sprinkle diatomaceous earth beneath the straw to deter fleas. Sprinkling mint or dried pyrethrum flowers beneath the bedding may also help. Fleas are a natural part of life outdoors, so while you can try your best to control them, they are not something you need to be worried about excessively.

Record Keeping: You should hold on to all medical records for each cat in every colony for which you care. A medical record should contain a listing of each vaccination (especially rabies) and any other medical procedures. The record should also include documentation of the cat's neuter and, if the cat was micro-chipped, the manufacturer, and the number of the chip. Include a photo of each cat with his or her record. Make sure to update the photo occasionally as their coloring and size can change with age.

You should always be prepared for the possibility that someone could question the status of your colony. This is why it is important to keep current, accurate health records for the cats.

**Share responsibilities.** Acting as the sole caretaker for a colony can be a daunting task, and lead to quick burn out and exhaustion. 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?

What if you move out of the area in the future? The more people who participate in caring for a colony, the better off the cats—and you—will be.