

How can we help?



As the leaves slowly slide from the trees and the ground starts to freeze we should spare a thought for the thousands of feral cats that cannot escape the approaching winter.

It is difficult to imagine when we are curled up under our blankets, with a steaming hot cuppa and a cat resting by our side, that there is a very different kind of cat roaming in the dark.

On a frosty winter's eve, a feral cat begins the hunt; with sharp eyes and swift reflexes he soon pounces upon his prey. His prize is food but his true victory is his ability to conquer his terrain.

The feral cat is resourceful and adaptable, but in rural areas where the land is more deeply affected by harsh weather it may be harder to find an outbuilding or structure that has not been buried by snow.

Thankfully, feral cats are not always forgotten and, in winter, Cats Protection's Helpline often sees an increase in calls from concerned members of the public who want to find out what they can do to help a feral cat survive in the cold.

"It's particularly bad when we have snow," says Helpline Supervisor, Elanna Webster. "People want to know if feral cats have any shelter or can find food as easily". It may sound as though there are not many options for the feral cat but we are here to advise people that there are always ways to help.

What you can do

There are many differences between a feral and domestic cat, and while a feral cat may not desire the company of a loving owner or a house to call their own, basic needs such as food and shelter remain the same.

If you are looking after a feral cat or one that spends most of their time outdoors, you could consider making an outdoor shelter for them. You can make a simple shelter using a box which you should fill with thermal blankets and then partially cover in plastic sheeting to keep the rain out.



Many pet stores even sell outdoor cat kennels and if you are considering this option then please ensure that you purchase one that is sturdy and waterproof.

Feral cats are often timid and do not approach people unless tempted with food. Consequently, any shelter should be located as far away from human activity as possible, such as in the far corner of a garden or next to some dense shrubbery. Placing strong-smelling food like salmon or pilchard near the entrance may encourage the cat to enter.

Putting down food for feral cats is often a good idea in general during winter as food may be scarcer or less accessible in the snow and heavy rain.

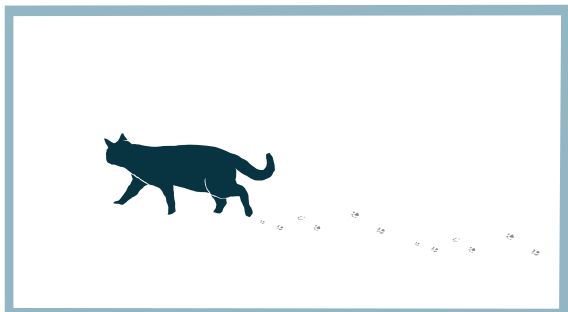
If food is not an option then you can always provide a fresh bowl of water. But remember to check regularly to make sure bowls have not frozen in the low temperatures.

The provision of basic resources such as these will help ensure that a feral cat makes it through the winter almost as comfortably as your own – and probably with a lot less fuss!

What we do

Sometimes we receive calls from people who are frustrated because rehoming organisations appear reluctant to take in feral cats. Part of our job is to help such people understand the difference between a feral cat and a domestic one.

We care deeply about all cats and while reluctance to take in a feral cat may seem harsh or uncaring, confining any wild animal to a small pen in an environment that is swamped with human activity can be overwhelming. It is far less distressing for a feral cat to allow him to remain free to roam in his own established territory.



There are occasions when returning a feral cat to their territory is not practical or safe. Instead, Cats Protection branches and adoption centres will find a suitable alternative environment, such as a farm, or a place with a large area of land eg an orchard, woodpiles, outhouses, feed stores.

If you or any one you know could offer such a place then please get in touch with your local Cats Protection or call us here on the Helpline. We'd love to hear from you and while we cannot guarantee you'll find a furry new lap warmer, they do make incredibly good groundskeepers!

Snipped and tipped

True feral cats are the offspring of stray or abandoned domestic cats and should, where possible, remain neutered in their territory.

Many people are already aware that Cats Protection can help owners on a low income neuter their cats. Responsible cat owners will have already taken their cat to the vets for a snip and chip but you may not know that there is a similar option available for feral cats.

Cats Protection branches will often go out to established feral colonies in order to trap and neuter them. After neutering, a vet will then often remove the tip of the ear to show to other vets that the cat has already been neutered. Removal of the ear tip is a safe, surgical procedure, carried out under anaesthetic. It is essential as a feral cat has no owner to speak for them and no cat wants to be neutered twice!

Unlike domestic cats, there are no owners to provide for the cost of neutering which is why we need your help. Cats Protection cannot continue to neuter feral cats without support from fellow cat lovers. Without your support, feral colonies will continue to grow and more cats will be forced to endure winter in its entirety.



We hope that reading this article has helped to increase your appreciation for the trials faced by the feral cat. Please rest assured that while you continue to support us we will help to ensure our furry feral friends continue to thrive. From all of us here on the Helpline, thanks for reading and have a perfect Christmas! ●

To contact Helpline, please phone
03000 12 12 12 or email helpline@cats.org.uk

If you see a cat, or indeed any animal, that you think is being mistreated or neglected then do call the relevant animal authority on their cruelty helplines:

England and Wales	RSPCA 0300 1234 999
Scotland	SSPCA 03000 999 999
Northern Ireland	USPCA 028 3025 1000