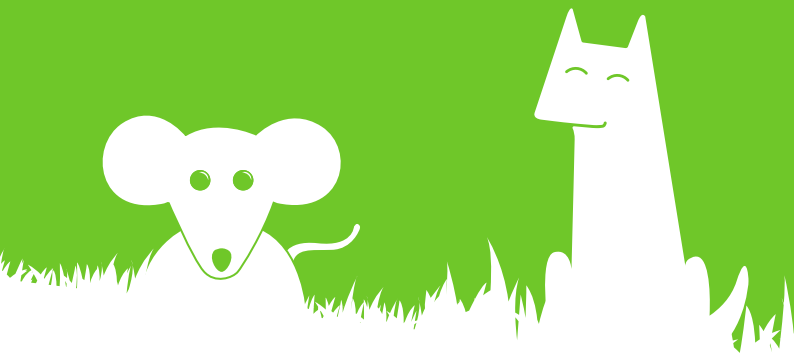


Feral cats



CATS PROTECTION
ESSENTIAL GUIDE 17



What are feral cats?

The term feral describes members of a domesticated species that have reverted to living as wild animals. Feral cats have had little or no contact with humans. They can never be tamed and this should never be attempted because they are very fearful of people and it would seriously compromise their welfare. Feral cats live alone – or in groups called colonies – and are found in towns, cities and rural areas. The best solution for feral cats is for them to be neutered and returned to their familiar environment.

What makes a cat feral?

Cats learn what is normal when they are very young kittens and their brains are developing. The point in a kitten's life when it is aged between two and eight weeks old is known as the 'socialisation period.' Young kittens which have had positive contact with people and are handled during this critical time form a bond with humans and enjoy living as pets.

Feral cats are the offspring of stray, feral or abandoned domestic cats and have missed out on these early positive experiences with people.

They should not be confused with stray cats which were raised as pets but have since been lost or abandoned. Although stray cats can be scared of people due to their experiences, they can often be rehabilitated and go on to live life as a pet again. Sometimes farm kittens will have been handled and treated well by farm workers and children – enabling them to adapt to life in the home. These kittens would also not generally be considered feral.

This means that cats that haven't become dependent on people can live well in the wild, as long as they have all the things they need. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Cats and people* for further information.

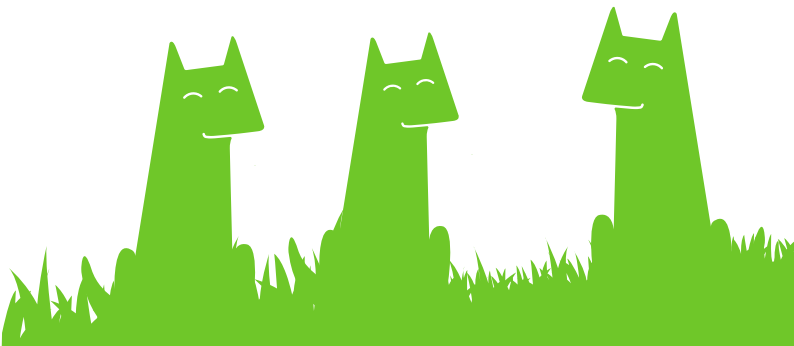
How do feral cats survive?

Cats are extremely resourceful creatures and can adapt to many different habitats.

Unlike pet cats which often don't get on with other felines, feral colonies will often naturally develop. These are usually made up of groups of related females and the size of the colony is directly related to the availability of food, water and shelter.

Cats within the colony recognise each other by sharing their scent through rubbing against each other. Although they appear close, they are not completely reliant upon each other and will hunt and eat alone. If an unfamiliar cat intrudes on their territory, they will soon see it off.

Feral cats are not always found in colonies – some will live a solitary lifestyle.



Caring for feral cats

Some people view feral cats as pests. Thankfully, many more – particularly farmers, stable owners and smallholders – value them for their role as working mousers that protect grain and feed. A healthy feral colony can really help to keep the vermin levels down.

Despite their wild nature, feral cats still benefit from a certain level of care, including:

Neutering

This has major health benefits and keeps the colony size under control. Feral cats will need to be trapped in a humane cat-trap before they are neutered because they are too wild to be handled. Once a feral cat is sedated or under anaesthetic, the vet can give it a health check and treat it for parasites. After neutering the cat is released back into its territory as quickly as possible – this is so the cat does not lose the communal scent and end up being rejected by other cats in the colony.

Regular feeding

Many feral cats are very resourceful and find adequate food, but it may be helpful to offer them extra help, especially in winter. Only offer food if the feral cats have been neutered. This is important because feeding unneutered cats increases the number of kittens that are born. It is also not in any cat's interests to become fat and this is particularly true of feral cats as it affects their agility and chance of survival – so avoid overfeeding. Contrary to popular belief, regularly fed feral cats are better hunters than hungry ones.

Observation

It is helpful to observe colonies, so that any new unneutered, sick or injured cats can be promptly trapped and taken to the vet. Only minor ailments can be treated in feral cats and sometimes they have to be euthanased on welfare grounds if they have significant illness or injury.

What about Toxoplasmosis?

Some farmers may be concerned that feral cats could be the source of a parasite called Toxoplasma, which can cause miscarriage in ewes. Although cats can catch Toxoplasmosis, they quickly become immune, just two weeks after being infected. Cats catch Toxoplasmosis from eating infected raw meat or rodents. The only way the disease can be transmitted is if the ewe takes in the infected cat's faeces in its feed or water – so the risk to sheep is very is extremely low. Vets agree that there is no risk to non-pregnant, healthy sheep.

A healthy, stable colony of neutered cats is at much lower risk of Toxoplasmosis than allowing a breeding colony which continually produces vulnerable kittens.

A further risk of Toxoplasma to sheep arises from other cats or kittens moving in. A feral colony will guard their territory so instead of maintaining a cat-free area, a healthy neutered feral colony is more likely to naturally keep such outsiders away. See Cats Protection *Veterinary Guide: Cats and pregnant women – Toxoplasmosis* for further information on this parasite.

Why not just remove feral cats?

Catching and removing feral cats may temporarily reduce the numbers, but this leads to what is known as the 'vacuum effect.' Any cats left behind will continue to breed and others will move into the area which is clearly a good source of food and shelter. The solution is to trap, neuter and return (TNR) the cats. Over a period of years this will reduce the size of the colony. A controlled, healthy and stable colony will deter other feral cats from moving in and will keep vermin levels down.

In very rare instances, relocation may be necessary but should generally be avoided. Relocation of feral cats is extremely stressful for them, as they become very dependent on the familiarity of their own environment. Feral cats should not just be released elsewhere, an appropriate habitat needs to be found and the cats need a period of adjustment while they learn where they can find food and shelter.

Remember, cats are protected by law and killing a cat constitutes an offence.

How can Cats Protection help?

Adult feral cats cannot be tamed or rehomed in the domestic environment as they are wild animals.

Cats Protection may be able to set up humane traps – similar to cages – and safely capture feral cats and take them to be neutered. This is mainly done during the evening and the traps are collected quickly to minimise stress to the cat.

The trapped cats are taken swiftly to a veterinary surgery to be neutered, a straightforward procedure which will prevent the cat from breeding. At the same time, they will also have

their ear 'tipped' – where between half and one cm of the tip of the left ear is removed under anaesthetic. This serves as a permanent visual mark from a distance to show the cat has been neutered, to prevent the same cat being trapped for neutering in future. After neutering, the cats will be returned back to their territory.

Trapping and neutering a large feral colony can take weeks and regular monitoring is needed to make sure that no cats are missed. Ideally, any breeding females are trapped and neutered first, to avoid growth in colony size while the process is taking place.

Very young feral kittens can sometimes be socialised with humans through gentle handling and positive experiences before they become too fearful of people. However, genetics also plays a role in the confidence and friendliness of cats, and it can sometimes be better for the welfare of feral kittens for them also to be neutered and returned to the wild.

Responsible ownership and timely neutering is important, as feral colonies originate as the offspring of unneutered stray or abandoned domestic pet cats. Financial assistance from Cats Protection may be available to help with neutering. For more information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Neutering – family planning for felines*.

If you are a landowner seeking advice about feral cats on your land, you are worried about the welfare of a feral colony, or you have the ideal habitat to offer a feral cat an outdoor home, please call Cats Protection's National Helpline on 03000 12 12 12 or get in touch with your local Cats Protection branch.

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

FEB-15 CODE: 84017