

Don't Let Ferals Be Forgotten

Feral cats are different from stray cats in that they are not accustomed to close contact with people. Ferals are most likely the offspring of lost or abandoned pet cats or other feral cats who are not spayed or neutered. While stray cats may be reunited with their families or adopted into new homes, most feral cats would not easily adapt to living as pets in close contact with people. They are more likely to hiss or growl at you instead of rubbing their heads against your legs. They've regressed to their wild, instinctual nature, which leads them to protect themselves from predators. Unfortunately, humans are often their number one predator. Because they are afraid of humans, you might not even realize you have a colony nearby.

These animals face so many challenges that without the help of human caregivers, many will die or suffer. Females can have their first litter as young as 5 months of age and may have up to three litters a year. For these cats who are already struggling to survive, the burden of nursing and caring for kittens takes its toll. It is estimated that more than half of feral kittens are likely to die without the intervention of caring individuals. Ferals usually have no reliable shelter or food source, and suffer from a host of ailments. The upside is that there is something you can do!

We like to use the acronym P.A.W.S. (**P**rovide Food, **A**lter, **W**ater & **S**helter) to describe each vital component to ensuring a better life for feral cats.

Provide Food:

If your budget allows, higher quality foods will give these homeless animals the nutrition they need to withstand the extreme conditions they face. The calories they expend just trying to stay warm need to be quickly replenished. We recommend dry food because it doesn't spoil as quickly. Placing the food within a shelter is a good idea, because the felines are protected while they eat. Make sure that food is elevated instead of at ground level. This way, multiple cats can

eat together. Keep a path clear to the shelter, so cats are neither snowed in or out.

Alter (Spay or Neuter):

The best way to manage a feral colony is by ensuring that no future felines will be born into to this harsh life. The benefits to spaying/neutering are endless: males are less likely to fight and roam, females will not bear the burden of nursing kittens, and, most obviously, it prevents future litters from this fate! Contact GMAD if you have questions on reduced cost spay/neuter options in Vermont or refer to the spay/neuter link on our page:

<http://www.gmad.info/spayneuter.php>.

We'd be happy to try to help you by loaning you a humane trap (Hav-A-Heart trap), or by helping you find one to borrow in order to secure these animals for their trip to the vets' office. Most vets will humanely ear tip feral cats so that any newcomers to the colony can be easily identified and spay/neutered!

Water

Finding a source of fresh, clean water is a major challenge for ferals, who can perish from dehydration without a steady supply of water. Keeping water from freezing in the winter can be tricky, but it is possible. You can slow or prevent freezing by providing larger water bowls, by putting water in a location shielded from wind, by placing water bowls in direct sunlight, or by using electrically heated water bowls. Contact us if you are maintaining a colony and need assistance with purchasing heated water bowls. Also, do not place water bowls inside the shelter, as the water may spill and freeze.

Shelter

Before temperatures plummet into the single digits, negatives, and even those severe double negatives, consider simple actions you can take to make life easier for animals in your neighborhood, specifically feral cats.

One simple step you can take is to erect an outdoor shelter. ***If you cannot commit to providing feral cats with proper shelter, then their chances of surviving the harsh winter are drastically reduced.***

Constructing a shelter is easy and takes just a few materials. Check out this link from neighborhoodcats.org for more info on how to build a simple, warm cat shelter that will keep animals safe from the elements:

http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/HOW_TO_FERAL_CAT_WINTER_SHELTER

It's amazing what a plastic tub or covered litterbox can do to keep these deserving felines protected from the harsh elements!

Some people seem annoyed by the feral cats in their neighborhood, but please remember that the cats did not ask for their harsh life. They are left to fend for themselves and without the caring hand of humane people like you, they will inevitably suffer and perish. Each step outlined above is equally vital to ensuring your colony is protected.

Please remember that caregivers must be committed for the long-run and be willing & able to make provisions for the future care of the colony if they become unable to provide care themselves. Feral cats don't require a lot, but it is important that their basic needs are not neglected and that care is consistent.

If you have any questions or need assistance, please contact us at ferals@gmad.info. Together, we can make this world a little more comfortable for these special animals.