Feral Cats

Description

Feral cats are domestic cats born and raised outdoors without any human contact or care. They are the descendants of lost or abandoned pet cats that learned to live in environments such as alleys, shopping areas, warehouses, abandoned buildings, and empty lots. Unlike stray cats, feral cats are conspicuously quiet and fearful of human contact. Thus, when approached by humans, feral cats exhibit defensive behavior such as hissing and growling.

Feral cats typically live in groups called colonies or clowders (Figure 1). These colonies often form in specific locations where food and shelter are available. Members consist of adult females, their young, and some adult males. Breeding females, the queens, usually produce two litters per year. After a gestation period of 63 to 65 days, the queen gives birth to a litter of 3 to 5 kittens. The kittens remain with their mothers until they are weaned around 6 to 8 weeks of age. Male cats typically reach sexual maturity between 5 to 7 months of age, whereas females typically attain sexual maturity between 5 to 9 months of age.

The lives of feral cats are short and usually filled with hardships. If they survive their juvenile stages, feral cats must still endure the rigors of weather and climate extremes, and face outdoor dangers such as traffic, predators, diseases, and starvation. Feral cats constantly struggle to find food. Although their diet depends on their environment, almost all feral cats eat mice and rats (Figure 2). If available, feral cats may also eat squirrels, rabbits, birds, and reptiles. Consequently, cats have been blamed for having harmful effects on native wildlife populations.

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Feral cats will also scavenge food from garbage cans and dumpsters found throughout urban and rural neighborhoods. Many kind-hearted people set out bowls of dry food for feral cats to eat. However, feeding should be done as part of a management plan to humanely and effectively control the feral cat population.

Management

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is promoted by many animal welfare organizations as the most humane and effective method for controlling the growth of feral cat populations. This method is endorsed by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), as well as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). TNR has been shown to be effective in stopping the breeding of feral cats and reducing the population over time. However, the TNR method is not without controversy. Conservation biology and wildlife ecology groups argue that TNR does not address the impact that predation by feral cats could have on individual wildlife species. Nonetheless, TNR continues to gain traction as an effective alternative to the traditional eradication methods for reducing the number of feral cats.

First, TNR involves the humane trapping of feral cats. Live animal cage traps designed especially for feral cats are commercially available at affordable prices. Most of these traps, constructed of galvanized wire mesh, have spring-loaded doors for fast and safe captures. Furthermore, these traps feature solid metal handle guards to protect users against scratches from a trapped cat during transport. Before trapping begins, a layer of newspaper should be placed on the bottom of each trap to protect the cat’s paws. Traps should be placed on flat surfaces near where the cat usually feeds, and near covered areas such as bushes, small trees, and buildings. A small amount of bait such as tuna or sardines is placed on a plastic lid or small paper plate at the very back of the trap so the cat will step on the trip pan rather than lean over it. After bait placement, each trap should be covered with a large dark-colored blanket or towel, leaving only the front end of the trap uncovered (Figure 3). Once the cat is securely trapped, the entire trap should be quickly covered and removed from the area. Covering the trap will help reduce the stress and keep the cat calm.

The next step is to take the cat while in the trap straight to a veterinary clinic to be spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and ear tipped (usually the left ear) to identify them as being sterilized (Figure 4). Appointments with a veterinarian or spay/neuter clinic with feral cat experience must be scheduled before trapping. The supervising veterinarian is ultimately responsible for all medical decisions and protocols regarding the feline patient (Figure 5). For detailed information about spaying and neutering feral cats, visit the Humane Alliance website at http://www.humanealliance.org/.

Figure 3. After bait placement, traps should be covered with a blanket or towel. Source: Photo of Set Trap by Winter-soul1, www.flickr.com/photos/aquarelowski/4752170062 / http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/

Figure 4. Trapped feral cat. Source: Photo of Trapped by Feral Indeed! www.flickr.com/photos/feralindeed/345263113 / http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/
Once the cats have been spayed or neutered, they are placed back in their traps to recover from surgery. The recovery time is usually 24 hours after surgery. However, some cats may require 48 hours of recovery depending on their circumstances. As soon as the cats are fully conscious and do not require further care, they are returned to the same location where they were trapped and released. Since feral cats are not adoptable, they should not be taken to the animal shelter. Feral cats taken to an animal control facility are likely to be euthanized right away or after a required holding period.

Once released back to their familiar habitat, the cats are allowed to live out their lives, hopefully under the watchful eyes of volunteer caretakers. These people provide food, water, and shelter to feral cats living outdoors, and ensure that all cats within their care are spayed or neutered. This improves the cats’ health and reduces their numbers over time because no more kittens are born. Many dedicated caretakers initially reduce the number of feral cats by providing adoption outlets for friendly strays and socialized kittens that have been removed from colonies. For detailed information about feral cat caretaking, visit the Feral Cat Caretakers’ Coalition website at http://www.feralcatcaretakers.org/.

Many organizations use a variation of TNR called Trap-Test-Vaccinate-Alter-Release (TTVAR). This method involves the humane trapping of feral cats, testing the cats for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), euthanizing cats that test positive, vaccinating for common feline diseases, including rabies, spaying or neutering, and releasing cats that test negative. However, some feral cat advocates are against testing for FeLV and FIV because they oppose euthanizing apparently healthy cats based on the results of one single test. It is worth mentioning that these viruses are easily transmitted from one cat to another, and once the cat is infected with FeLV or FIV, there is no cure for the infection.

Feral cats live in almost every neighborhood across the United States (US), but no one really knows how many there are. Population estimates range from 60 million to 100 million. Since feral cats breed out of control, they are a big part of the growing pet overpopulation problem. Through TNR, communities across the US are combating the problem of cat overpopulation. TNR stops reproduction by spaying or neutering feral cats, reduces the population immediately by removing and putting up for adoption friendly strays and socialized kittens, and eliminates colonies over time through attrition. Cities such as New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Houston, Salt Lake City, San Diego, and others are on board with TNR. Furthermore, many smaller cities across the country are trying to qualify for grants that provide funding for TNR programs.

References


Julio E. Correa, PhD, *Associate Professor and Extension Animal Scientist*,
Alabama A&M University

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