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Facts about Feral Cats

Basic Facts about Feral cats

- A feral cat is a wild animal, not to be confused with stray and free-roaming cats that are, or once were, someone's pet.
- Feral cats are afraid of humans. They do their very best to stay away from people.
- A feral cat cannot be safely held or picked up, and they need to be trapped in order to transport them safely. Sometimes, after a relationship is long established, caregivers can touch a feral cat, but not actually pick it up.
- Some feral cats have a notch or a small straight slice of their left or right ear missing. This is called an "ear-tip". Veterinarians use an "ear-tip" as a permanent marker to distinguish that this cat is spayed or neutered before the cat is returned outdoors.

What is the difference between a stray cat and a feral cat?

A **stray cat** is a pet cat that is lost or abandoned. Stray cats are accustomed to contact with people and are tame. A **feral cat** is the "wild" offspring of domestic cats or other feral cats. Feral cats are wild animals and do their very best to stay away from people.

Many people assume their animals will survive when they move away and leave them behind. Contrary to popular belief, **domestic animals** do not automatically return to their "natural" instincts and **cannot fend for themselves!**

Why are there feral cats? Where do they come from?

Feral cats are the offspring of lost or abandoned pet cats or other feral cats that is the result of pet owners' **abandonment** or **failure to spay and neuter** their animals, allowing them to breed uncontrolled.

Female cats can reproduce two to three times a year, and their kittens, if they survive, will become feral without early contact with people. Cats can become pregnant as early as 5 months of age, and the number of cats rapidly increases without intervention by caring people. **Example:** A pair of breeding cats, which can have two or more litters per year, can exponentially produce **420,000 offspring** over a seven-year period.

Where do feral cats live?

Feral cats typically live in a colony – a group of related cats. The colony occupies and defends a specific territory where food (restaurant dumpster or a person who feeds them) and shelter (beneath a porch, in an abandoned building) are available. Since feral cats typically fear strangers, it is very likely that people may not realize that feral cats are living nearby because the cats are rarely seen.

How do feral cats survive – find food, stay warm, etc?

Many don't survive. If they do survive, their lives aren't easy without human caretakers. Females may become pregnant as young as 5 months of age and may have two to three litters a year. Being pregnant so young and so often, and having and nursing kittens, is even more stressful on female cats who are struggling to survive.

More than half of the kittens are likely to die without human intervention. Males who roam and fight to find mates and defend their territories may be injured and transmit diseases to one another through bite wounds. Feral cats may find food in a restaurant dumpster or someone may feed them. They may find shelter from the elements beneath a porch or in an abandoned building. But often they are without a reliable source of food or shelter.

What are the problems associated with unneutered/unspayed feral cats?

A colony of unneutered/unspayed feral cats can produce a number of problems, including:

- A growing population of cats
- Frequent and loud noise from fighting and mating behavior
- Strong foul odors from unneutered male cats spraying to mark their territory
- Flea infestations
- Transmission of feline diseases/illnesses to owned cats
- Visible suffering from dying kittens and injured adults

Why doesn't simply removing feral cats from an area work to reduce their numbers and nuisance behaviors?

There are many reasons why feral cat problems are rarely solved by efforts to trap and remove them. Feral cats live at a certain location because it offers food and shelter. If a colony is removed, some feral cats from surrounding colonies may move in to take advantage of a newly available resource. The cycle of reproduction and nuisance behavior begins all over again.

If all the colony cats are not trapped, then the ones left behind tend to have more kittens. In addition, more kittens will survive because there are fewer cats competing for available food. The population will continue to increase until the level that can be supported by the available food and shelter is reached.

Other factors which usually make removing feral cats ineffective include:

- The lack of city/county resources available to accomplish this huge task
- The difficulty of catching all the cats in a colony
- The ongoing abandonment of unaltered pet cats who can also repopulate a vacated territory. Trap and remove will only result in a temporary reduction in the numbers of feral cats in a given area.

Why don't feeding bans work to eliminate feral cats?

The logic behind bans against feeding feral cats is that if there is no food available, the cats will go away. This is not true. Feral cats are territorial animals who can survive for weeks without food and will not easily or quickly leave their territory to search for new food sources. Instead, they tend to move closer to human habitations as they grow hungrier and more desperate. Their malnourished condition will make them more susceptible to parasitic infestations, such as fleas and intestinal parasites, which they will spread into work places, garages, homes, etc within their territory.

The cats will also continue to reproduce despite the effort to "starve them out" resulting in the visible death of kittens and adult cats. As a result, feeding bans, if enforced, tend to make the situation much worse instead of improving it. A second reason why feeding bans are rarely effective is that they are nearly impossible to enforce. Repeated experience has shown that people who care about cats' welfare will go to great lengths to feed starving animals. Someone determined to feed the cats will usually succeed without being detected, no matter the threatened penalties. In addition, there may be more than one person feeding feral cats and other sources of food, including dumpsters, garbage cans and other animals.

What is Trap-Neuter-Return population program?

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is a non-lethal strategy to reduce the number of feral cats and improve the quality of life for cats, birds, wildlife and people. This program helps to reduce the numbers of feral cats able to breed and reproduce. The TNR program sterilizes the cats, vaccinates them against rabies and surgically ear-tips the cat on one ear (ear-tip is the universally recognized sign of a cat who has been sterilized in a TNR program).

How does TNR programs solve common complaints associated with feral cats?

- When feral cats are trapped, neutered and returned to their territory, they no longer reproduce
- The cessation of sexual activity eliminates the noise associated with mating behavior and dramatically reduces fighting and the noise it causes
- Neutered feral cats also roam much less and become less visible and less prone to injury from cars
- Foul odors are greatly reduced as well because neutered male cats no longer produce testosterone, which, when they are unaltered, mixes with their urine and causes the strong, pungent smell of their spraying
- When the colony is then monitored by a caretaker who removes and/or TNR's any newly arrived cats, the population stabilizes and gradually declines over time.

For additional information please contact our Outreach & Education Manager, Nicole Papageorgiou, at (509) 457-6854 ext. 106 or, by email, outreach@yakimahumane.org.