



## TNR and Community Cat Colony Management Guidelines

### COMMUNITY CATS AND TNR

#### WHAT IS A FERAL CAT?

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A feral cat avoids human contact either because it has lived his/her whole life with little or no human contact or is a stray cat who was lost or abandoned and has lived away from human contact long enough to revert to a wild state. You can go years without seeing a feral cat (they are generally nocturnal), but they're there! They survive on rodents, insects and handouts. No one put the cats there – they are the generational offspring of abandoned, unsterilized neighborhood-family pets and are part of the ecosystem.

Cats are naturally territorial. Attempts at relocation rarely work and are difficult because the cats have strong homing instincts. When cats are removed from an area, other cats simply move in to replace them.

Critter Shack Rescue prefers to call feral, stray, alley, and/or otherwise ownerless free-roaming cats by the term "community cats." This is because these animals are a part of the community in which they live, and they are valued by many of the residents. We are working to change the often-negative public perception of these cats.

#### WHAT IS TNR?

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A group of community cats living together in one area is called a "colony." Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is an effective, internationally recognized program to stabilize and reduce community cat colonies.

Cats are trapped, vaccinated, spayed or neutered, and returned to their original location. Socialized kittens and friendly adults are adopted into good homes. In a TNR program, the feral cat colony caregiver continues to feed the cats on a regular basis and brings them to a veterinarian if they require medical assistance. The result, including any new cats entering the colony, is known as a managed feral cat colony.

*TNR (trap/neuter/return) respects a feral cat's wild state. The neutering of the feral cats prevents tremendous suffering and shields the cats from the hostility their behavior might otherwise draw from human neighbors. But the return of them to their own territory and the providing of adequate food and shelter gives them the opportunity to live among their own, to be free and to answer to their own unique natures.*

#### TNR HELPS OUR COMMUNITY?

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One out of 17 cats is adopted from a shelter. Approximately 100% of all feral cats that enter a shelter are killed. Stabilizing the cat population helps the community's animal-welfare resources by reducing the number of kittens and cats that would end up in the city shelter, saving taxpayer dollars and lives! One of the FIRST steps in achieving a No Kill city is to have a robust TNR city-wide program. Sterilization and vaccination provide a public health benefit to the community, too, a vast improvement over the failed trap-and-kill approach that's been used for generations.

## WHY DO CATS HAVE A TIPPED EAR?

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Ear-tipping is an effective and universally accepted method to identify a spayed/neutered and vaccinated community cat. This is done while the cat is anesthetized for spay/neuter and healing is rapid.

The ear tip helps the community quickly identify that the cat has been sterilized. It is difficult to get close to feral cats. Therefore the identification must be visible from a distance. Community cats may interact with a variety of people, so immediate identification is necessary to prevent an unnecessary second trapping and surgery. Also, an ear tip will save a cat's life should she enter the shelter. Per the San Angelo City Animal Shelter contacts Critter Shack Rescue, the sponsoring organization, when an ear tipped cat enters the shelter.



## BASICS OF TRAPPING

### SUPPLIES

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- One humane box trap per cat.
- A can of tuna in oil, sardines in oil, mackerel, or other enticing bait.
- Newspaper to line the bottom of each trap (optional).
- A large towel or cloth for each trap or transfer cage, large enough to cover the entire trap on all sides. After a cat has been trapped cover the trap to calm the cat and lessen the risk of injury.
- Lids or small containers to hold bait (optional). You may also put bait directly on the trap or newspaper.
- Flashlight. If you are trapping early in the morning or late at night, you'll need the flashlight to identify the cats you've caught.
- Pens or pencils and cage slips for each cat, and masking tape to attach cage slips to each trap (optional).
- Tracking sheet to ID cats and to record information.
- Spoons or a scoop for the bait, and a can opener if you need one.
- Extra cat food and clean water to leave after you trap for any cats you have already TNR'd or were unable to trap this time.
- Hand sanitizer, jug of water, and gloves for your protection.

### PREPARATIONS FOR TRAPPING

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- ***Make sure you have spay/neuter appointments scheduled before trapping*** and plan to trap so that you don't have to keep the cat too long before surgery. Trapping the night before is usually the best approach. Cats should not eat 12 hours prior to surgery.
- Only trap as many cats as you can safely transport and care for before and after surgery.
- If possible, get the cats used to being fed at the same place and time of day. You might try leaving the trap **unset** and covered with a large towel during routine feeding so that the animal will get used to seeing and smelling it in the area (please note this is not always an option based on the location of the feral colony). Don't feed the cats the day/night before you are going to trap so the cats will be hungry. Be sure to notify others who may feed the cats to refrain from feeding also.
- Prepare the area where you will be holding the cats before and after the clinic. A garage or other sheltered, warm, protected area is best. Lay down newspapers to catch the inevitable stool, urine and food residue. You may want to use pieces of wood to elevate the traps off the newspapers. This allows the mess to fall through the wire away from the cats. Spraying the area ahead of time with a cat-safe flea spray (like Adams or Ovitrol) will discourage ants.
- Prepare the vehicle you will use to transport them as well. Plastic may be an additional precaution. But remember that you will need to use newspapers or some other absorbent material in addition. (Urine will roll right off of the plastic and that isn't what you want)

- Plan your day of trapping carefully. Remember that if you trap an animal and release it for some reason, it is unlikely that you will be able to catch it again . . . they learn very quickly.
- If there are young kittens involved, remember that they should not be weaned from the mother before 4-6 weeks of age. If you are trapping a lactating female, you may want to wait until you have located the kittens and they are old enough to wean. If you wish to tame and foster the kittens to adopt out, they should be taken from the mother at 4-6 weeks. If you wait until the kittens are older than 8-10 weeks before trying to tame them you will find the job progressively harder with age.

## SETTING THE TRAPS

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- Plan to set traps just before or at the cats' normal feeding time.
- Don't trap in the rain or the heat of day without adequate protection for the trap. Cats are vulnerable in the traps and could drown during storms or suffer from heatstroke in the sun. Use common sense!
- Fold a piece of newspaper or cut a piece of cardboard to fit and line the bottom of the trap just covering the trip plate. Cats don't like walking on the wire surface and the paper helps to keep their feet from going through when you pick up the trap. Be sure that the paper does not extend beyond the trip plate. Too much newspaper can interfere with the trap mechanism or prevent the door from closing properly. Do not use newspaper if it is windy.
- Plan placement of traps on a level surface in the area where the cats usually feed or have been seen. Cats are less likely to enter the trap if it wobbles. If trapping in a public area, try to place traps where they will not be noticed by a passerby (who may not understand that you are not trying to harm the cat). Bushes are often places where cats hide and provide good camouflage for the trap.
- Use smelly food to bait the trap. Canned sardines are very effective and relatively inexpensive. It is best not to put any bowls inside the trap to hold food since the animal can easily hurt itself on it in a panic or while recovering from anesthetic. You can use a small paper plate – or even a section of a paper plate.
- Soak a small scrap of newspaper (2-3 inches by 3-4 inches) in the Tuna juice and place it on the ground where you plan to place the rear of the trap.
- (Tru Catch Traps) After baiting the trap, open the trap door by sliding the rings on either side of the door all the way to the top. Lift the door. When door is open, notice the bar that runs the length of the inside of the trap on the left side. Turn the bar so that the L-shaped end is turned outward and the foot plate is raised. Slightly lower the door so that the small nub on the door balances against the L-shape on the bar. This holds the bar in place. The nub holds the door in an open position which also raises the trip plate. When the cat steps on the plate it will cause the nub to turn and release the door and close the trap. Try poking the foot plate with a stick to see if the weight of the stick causes the door to close. If it does, you've done it right.



*Trap rigged open in advance to get cat(s) used to trap*



*Tru Catch trap in set position*

- After setting the trap, cover it with a large dark towel on the sides of the trap making the trap look like a tunnel. If you cover the back of the trap, cats will likely not go in because it looks as though there is no exit. You will use this towel to cover the trap after you have trapped the cat allowing the cat to settle down.

#### WAITING FOR SUCCESS

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- Never leave traps unattended in an unprotected area, but don't hang around within sight of the cat (or you will scare it off). The trapped animal is vulnerable. People that pass by may release the cat or steal the trap! Wait quietly in an area where you can still see the traps without disturbing the cats. Check traps every 15 minutes or so. You can often hear the traps trip and see the cloth cover droop down slightly over the opening from a distance. **As soon as the intended cat is trapped, completely cover the trap and remove the trap from the area if other cats are not in sight.** You may consider putting another trap in the same spot if it seems to be a "hot" one. Be sure to dispose of the food left on the ground when you pick up the trap. (You don't want to litter or give out any "freebies" and spoil any appetites!)
- When you get the captured cat to a quiet area away from the other traps lift the cover and check for signs that you have the correct animal and not a pet or previously neutered community cat. If you note that you have captured a lactating female check the area for kittens and remember that this female must be released 10-12 hours after surgery so she can care for and nurse her kittens. She will also need a Covenia injection, a 2 week long acting antibiotic. This injection will allow her to continue to feed her kittens without complications of an injection or mastitis. Cover the cat back up as soon as possible. Uncovered cats may panic and can hurt themselves thrashing around in the trap.
- In the event you catch a wild animal attracted to the food or an unintended cat, release the animal quietly as stated in the releasing procedures here.

#### HOLDING PROCEDURES

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- After you have finished trapping, you will probably have to hold the cats overnight until you can take them to the vet.
- Place cats in the prepared protected climate controlled area; it is ok to hold and recover cats in a garage or outbuilding; however, the area cannot not be too hot or too cold. Elevate the traps (you can place a brick under the trap at each end and put newspaper or puppy training pads under the traps to catch any waste. You can feed them up until about 12 hours before surgery (4 hours for kittens 3-4 months old). **Except for the above exclusion (kittens 3-4 months old), cats absolutely must not eat for 12 hours before surgery as it can cause serious complications during surgery, including death, if they have eaten.**
- It is normal for the cat to thrash around inside the trap. It is very tempting to release him but he will not hurt himself if the trap is covered. If a cat has already hurt himself, do not release him. Most injuries from traps are very minor, such as a bruised nose, scratched paw pad, or bloody nose. **Feral cats typically calm down once the trap is covered – so be sure to cover the trap to help calm the cat.**
- If you have a trap divider, after putting the trap divider in place to separate the cat from the trap door, you can safely lift the back door and give the cat food and water in small, non-breakable bowls.
- Once you have trapped as many cats as you can, transport the cats in the traps to the veterinary clinic. If you need to hold the cats overnight, keep them in their traps and make sure they are dry and warm. They can stay in a basement or isolated room if the weather is poor. It is possible for a cat to die from hypothermia when confined in a trap outside in cold weather. A simple guideline — if it is too cold outside for you, then it is too cold for the cats. Do not leave cats in traps exposed to excessive heat or sun. After surgery, allow the cat to recover overnight in the same trap, still covered.
- Keep cats covered and check periodically. They will probably be very quiet as long as they are covered. Don't stick fingers in the trap or allow children or pets near the traps. These are wild animals which scratch and bite.
- Wash and change clothes before having contact with your own pets as a precaution against spreading any contagious diseases the cats might carry.
- Always get feral kittens checked out by a vet and isolate them from your pets. Some deadly diseases can incubate without symptoms. Check with your veterinarian and use caution.

## AFTER SURGERY RECOVERY

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- After surgery, allow the cat to recover overnight in the same trap, still covered. Usually the veterinarian's staff will replace any soiled pee pads in the bottom of the trap. If they do not do this, ask them to.
- The area the cats are recovered in must not be too hot or too cold; this is extremely important as their bodies cannot regulate its temperature as they recover from surgery.
- Female cats usually need to be held for 24-48 after surgery. Male cats can be returned to the trapping site 24 hours following surgery as long as they are fully awake and do not require further medical attention. Make sure all cats are fully conscious and alert before release.
- If the cat needs further care (longer than 48 hours), you will need to transfer her into a holding recovery crate. Transfer is a small, safe area in the event the cat gets out. Recovery crates will need to be supplied with a litter box, towels or pee pads, and food dishes for food and water.



## RETURNING THE CATS

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- Release the cat in the **same place** you trapped him or her. Open the front door of the trap and pull back the cover. If the trap has a rear door, pull the door up and off, pull off the cover, then walk away. Do not be concerned if the cat hesitates a few moments before leaving. He is simply reorienting himself to his surroundings. It is not uncommon for the cat to stay away for a few days after release; he will return eventually. Keep leaving food and water out, he may eat when you are not around.
- **Never release the cat into a new area unless they are in imminent danger in their current environment. If the cat needs to be relocated, please use Alley Cat Allies Relocation Guidelines. Relocating cats without the proper steps can endanger the cat's life.** The cats will try to return to her old home, and may become lost or attempt to cross major roads. Also, feral cats form strong bonds with other cats in their colonies. Separating a cat from its colony members and leaving her alone in a new environment will cause stress, depression, and loneliness. *If you need advice on relocating cats, please contact Critter Shack Rescue. We have safely and successfully relocated hundreds of feral/semi-feral cats.*
- Make sure the spot you pick for release does not encourage the cat to run into danger (like a busy street) to get away from you. Keep the trap covered until you are ready to release. When ready, simply hold the trap with the door facing **away** from you and open the door. The cat will probably bolt immediately out of the trap. If it is confused, just tilt the trap so the back is slightly up and tap on the back of the trap to encourage it to leave. Never put your hand in the trap! If the animal still will not leave, prop the door open with a stick and leave it for a while.
- After releasing the cats, hose off traps and disinfect them with bleach. Never store traps in the "set" position (door open); animals may wander into even unbaited traps and starve to death.

## HELPFUL HINTS

- Females with kittens may be attracted by the sound of their kittens if the previously captured kittens are placed in a covered carrier just behind the trap. Similarly, kittens will be easier to trap if the previously captured mom is in the carrier.

## TRAPPING GUIDELINES: DO'S AND DON'TS

### DO

- Practice working your traps ahead of time
- Cover the trap with a dark towel or blanket
- Be creative – use every trick you can think of
- Organize a feeding schedule ahead of time.
- Always provide fresh water daily (even when you're withholding food)
- Put out enough traps at a time
- Wear thick gloves while carrying cats in traps
- Prepare traps at a distance away from the actual trapping site. Loud noises and quick motions at the trapping site will scare cats away
- Bring several large pop-top cans of tuna, mackerel, sardines or other smelly bait, preferably oil packed
- Plan your trapping session so that the cats are transported to the vet as soon as possible.
- **TNR the cats now – even if they must be relocated eventually. The more births you prevent, the easier it will be to find relocation sites.**
- Bring a flashlight with you if trapping at night. It will come in handy for checking traps from a distance and might help you avoid a twisted ankle in the dark.

### DON'T

- ***Trap cats before making a plan. Which vet will you use? How will you pay for the sterilization, vaccinations, and eartipping? Where will the cats recover?***
- Trap in extremely hot or cold weather
- Trap on a hillside.
- Withhold food for more than two days: cats can actually forget to eat if they don't eat for a few days; this can be life threatening.
- Release an unsterilized cat that you trapped involuntarily as you may never catch that cat again.
- Leave traps unattended.
- Put too much bait at the front of the trap, or the cat will get filled up before tripping the trap.
- Use dirty traps; even traps that appear clean will carry the scent of the cat previously trapped, which can deter other cats from entering.
- Attempt to touch a conscious feral cat.
- Let a feral cat run loose in your car or home;
  - DO use a transfer cage to move a feral cat from the trap to a holding cage for recovery.
- Forget to cover each trap with a towel or blanket after a cat has been trapped; this will help to calm the cat.

## COLONY MANAGEMENT

### FEEDING

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#### Feeding Stations

So the first step in managing a colony is determining where to put the feeding station -- where best to place the daily meals for the cats. This is subject to several constraints:

- It needs to be where the cats can safely and comfortably access it — in an area of minimal human activity (at least in the times surrounding your selected feeding time) and out of clear public view.
- It needs to be where you can conveniently access it — even in the winter months with heavy snow.
- It needs to be where the property owner wants it (or at least where they will allow it).
- It needs to be in the colony's territory — if there are many colonies close together this may require observing the cats for a few days to see where they eat, rest and sleep. Or experiment, pick a spot that the other constraints allow and see if it draws the cats you first saw and expected to draw. If it draws none or just an occasional random cat, it's probably in neutral territory (between colonies) and should be moved. If it draws different cats than you expected, it's probably in another colony's territory and you'll need to decide whether you want to manage that colony in addition to the one you initially targeted.

Generally, the ideal spot is as near their current predominant food source as the constraints allow -- but if a dumpster, far enough away to be shielded from the dumpster's normal daytime human activities (pickup and disposal). If you place the feeding station away from where the cats are already eating, do it gradually -- move it a few feet each feeding until you have it in the desired location.

#### Daily Feeding

With the feeding station located, start feeding -- once a day -- dry and/or wet cat food and fresh water. Pick a time that's convenient for you -- early morning, mid-day, late afternoon. Food put out after dark is more likely to draw other wildlife; however, most community cats avoid of humans are more likely to show up in the evenings. **Be consistent -- same time, same place, every day.** Find someone who will do it for you on days you can't make it. Because not all cats will come up to eat while their caretaker is there, it is a good idea to invest in a game camera to track how many cats are actually at the colony and how many more cats need to be TNR'd

Feeding stations must be kept clean and hidden from high-traffic and populated areas. Random feeding by anyone should always be discouraged.

Spay/neuter efforts depend on the cats being at a certain place at a certain time. In addition to providing a regular place to monitor the cats for optimal health, feeding programs help caretakers regulate TNR timing.

### PROVIDING SHELTER

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Cats need shelter from wind and wet. Cold is not a problem -- outdoor cats grow a heavy winter coat and will naturally huddle together (left) to share body warmth when it's especially cold. (Cats were primarily outdoor animals before kitty litter came along in the 1950s.) But they do need protection from the elements -- something to crawl into or under to stay dry. This may be something that already exists -- a porch, a utility shed, an unused doghouse.

Or you can build something -- Alley Cat Allies' web site has plans for a marvelous shelter (see snow photo below) that comfortably shields six or more cats. Or jury-rig something -- a plastic bucket, deep tray or garbage can -- turned upside down with an access hole cut in it (and anchored to the ground so it doesn't blow away) -- or a wood or perforated plastic crate with a garbage bag tied over the top to keep the inside dry.

### MONITORING THE COLONY

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All that remains is to keep a close eye on your cats at feeding time to spot newcomers or ones you may have missed. Get them sterilized quickly as they are (or have become) part of your colony. Over time, some or all will become friendly to

you -- you've become their trusted friend. Do not be tempted to take one home with you -- or bring them inside -- or attempt to adopt them out. They will not exhibit the same friendliness to others. And they will not appreciate being cooped up. Their territory is their home -- and you've made it extra special for them simply by providing food, water and shelter.

## **TRANSFER OF CARE**

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If for any reason you are unable to continue the care of the colony, make every attempt possible to find someone close by to pick up their management. Fortunately, since the cats are now all sterilized, the number of cats present will be much less -- and may have dropped more through attrition over the years.

If no one is available to care for them, you have two other possible choices: one is to move them with you to your new home and continue their management and the other is to find someone with a farm or large yard that will take the cats to manage.

Neither of these choices is optimal and, will not work, unless you move as many of the colony as possible to the same new location and confine them in a large dog crate or safe room -- that they cannot get out of -- for 14 days. And their litter box droppings must be spread around their new home, so they will recognize it as their new territory.

The territorial nature of cats dictates that if you move them, they will try to go back to their old home. The confinement keeps them in the new location long enough for them to adapt to it and think of it as their home.

## **Help Educate Others**

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Now that you know TNR is the only effective, humane method to stabilize and reduce community cat populations and helps save cats' lives, please educate others.

**Dumping a cat is illegal.** It is a violation of the State Penal code section 42.092 to abandon an animal, punishable of up to a \$4,000 fine and two years in prison. Abandoned/dumped cats and kittens can be attacked, injured, not allowed to eat or chased off of campus.

## **REFERENCES**

*Information in this document written based on 20 years of experience and the following sources:*

- Alley Cat Allies: <http://www.alleycat.org>
- Stray Pet Advocacy: <http://www.straypetadvocacy.org/>
- The No Kill Equation: <http://www.nathanwinograd.com/the-no-kill-equation/>
- Best Friends Animal Society: <https://bestfriends.org/our-work/best-friends-advocacy/protecting-community-cats>
- Alley Cats and Angels of North Carolina: <http://alleycatsandangels.org/>