



After receiving his rabies vaccine update, Sgt. Stripes is released into the area where he was caught earlier in the day in Burlington County, N.J. By Joan Fairman Kanes for USA TODAY

Feral cats: Trap, neuter and release

Compassion often eludes feral cats; groups out to save them

By [Sharon L. Peters](#), Special for USA TODAY



Two feral cats warily check out traps that have been baited with tuna and placed where the cats are normally fed by caregivers in Burlington County, New Jersey.

Feral cats — nearly invisible and often reviled — have prowled into the spotlight.

The free-roamers with an aversion to humans have grabbed headlines this spring because of a bounty on their heads in Iowa, a threatened roundup and disposal in Fairfax County, Va., and other elimination plans across the country.

Feral vs. stray

Not all outdoor cats are ferals. Nancy Peterson, feral cat expert for the Humane Society of the United States, says the population known as free-roaming cats includes:

Indoor/outdoor cats that roam neighborhoods. These are pets, and wandering does not make them "wild."

Cats that were once pets but have been abandoned or gotten lost and have learned to survive on their own or joined feral colonies. These cats, when captured, can usually be re-socialized to live with humans. But their initial reaction to being captured is often frantic, and they can be mistaken for being feral.

Feral cats, which are generally one generation or more removed from being house pets, and their offspring aren't socialized to humans and can rarely be tamed. (But their kittens, if caught young, can become pets.)

But the cats also are receiving attention of a different sort.

Grass-roots groups and animal-welfare organizations are directing money and energy toward helping the tens of millions of feral cats that skulk about college campuses, cluster around back-alley trash bins, swarm among the rocks at beach communities and colonize the nether-reaches of suburban parks, military installations and abandoned barns and fields:

•PetSmart Charities will announce in July a \$13 million spay-neuter program in Los Angeles. A clinic in Burbank, which Best Friends Animal Society in Utah also is helping fund, will sterilize 20,000 feral cats a

year. PetSmart Charities has committed \$862,000 to feral cat programs in Austin and Dallas as part of a \$5.5 million five-year grant to Texas cities.

- The Humane Society of the United States has just completed a CD/DVD. *Effectively Managing Feral Cats* will be free to 6,000 shelters, communities and feral-cat advocates through a PETCO Foundation grant. The Humane Society also holds workshops and has given thousands of dollars to a few small groups launching initiatives to protect feral cats.

- Alley Cat Allies, which advises individuals and groups on feral-colony management, is embarking on major research to collect data about ferals and the people who help them. The non-profit group also will launch a year-long educational campaign beginning Oct. 16, National Feral Cat Day, and will push for public disclosure on how many feral cats shelters take in and euthanize to "make more transparent" every community's "animal-control practices applied to feral cats, which most often rely on lethal control methods," president Becky Robinson says.

- No More Homeless Pets in Utah runs a sterilization program and works with city, county and animal control officials to develop alternatives to trapping nuisance homeless cats and depositing them at shelters — "a practice which almost guarantees euthanasia," says the group's Gregory Castle. A decrease in the number of cats in colonies and concurrent lower euthanasia rates have been "dramatic" in some locations, he says.

All major efforts involve trapping, neutering and returning the cats to their colonies. This method thwarts future litters and reduces the yowling, spraying and fighting that annoy humans. In the process, the cats usually are vaccinated, treated for minor problems and given a notch in the ear to identify they are sterile. Over time, the colony will grow smaller through attrition.

"TNR is not only the most humane, it is the most practical way of stabilizing the populations and ... reducing them," Castle says.

"Some New York neighborhoods no longer have feral colonies, or the colonies are much smaller," says the ASPCA's Aimee Hartmann, which holds workshops throughout the city, performs hundreds of sterilizations and loans traps to groups employing the method.

Scores of other groups participating in the practice report similar results.

Opponents speak out

The TNR method is not without detractors. Many veterinarians refuse to do such sterilizations because they say cats shouldn't live outdoors because they become victims of the elements, predators and vehicles. And some bird and conservation groups say feral cats can decimate bird and small-mammal populations and spread disease.

Advocates counter that ferals exist because house pets were set loose or escaped, they adapted to survive, had litters, and now, a generation or more removed from being house cats, they can't be tamed. And refusing to deal with that reality leads to more litters and more cats killed once they become public nuisances, are captured, taken to shelters and euthanized because no one will adopt them, advocates say.

Moreover, most ferals don't live short, hideously deprived lives but are quite healthy and less apt to harm wildlife than toxins and development that overtakes habitats, says Julie Levy of the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine, an expert in infectious disease and feral cats. When neutered and vaccinated, such animals live many years.

A right to roam free

"For a long time, the prevailing feeling was that these animals aren't deserving of help," Robinson says.

But attitudes are changing.

"There are people who have been taking care of these colonies for years, getting up before dawn, leaving food and water." Once regarded as odd, they're increasingly regarded as "unsung heroes."

Today, a live-and-let-live attitude is taking root, she says.

A 2007 Harris survey found that 81% believe feral cats should be allowed to live out their lives roaming free.

Still, many people have never seen a feral colony and are unaware of their numbers, which, combined with strays, could be as high as 80 million, Levy says, so these animals occupy a lower rung on the public's concern-about-creatures hierarchy.

Advocates insist the separate-and-unequal distinction is specious.

"A good proportion of these free-roaming cats were once owned, or they are one generation removed from house pets," says Susana Della Maddalena of PetSmart Charities. "We don't think it's fair to exclude them from help."