

Feral cats

cats.org.uk



Feral cats are the same domesticated species of cat as pet cats (*Felis catus*). They are usually the offspring of stray, feral or abandoned pet cats.

Cats learn what is normal and safe at a very young age, during what is known as a 'socialisation period'. Between the ages of two to seven weeks, kittens can learn to enjoy human contact, forming a bond and becoming great pets. Feral cats have missed out on this early experience, making them wary of humans. This means they behave like wild animals and have completely different needs to our pet cats.

Feral cats live alone or in groups called colonies in towns, cities and rural areas. They are very fearful of people so attempts to 'tame' them should be avoided as it would seriously compromise their wellbeing.

Sometimes farm kittens will have been handled and treated well by farm workers and children. This enables them to adapt to life in the home. These kittens would not generally be considered feral.

Cats Protection recommends the neutering of feral cats which can help reduce the size of colonies as well as limit disease and ensure the cats within the colony are as healthy as possible.

Once neutered, where possible, feral cats should be returned back to their most familiar, natural environment. They can live well as long as they have all the things they need.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/feral-cat

Feral, stray or street cat

Feral cats

- Not friendly. Unsocialised to humans, feral cats find people threatening and can be hard to spot. They won't come close, even with encouragement
- Live alone or in a colony with other feral cats
- Ear tipped. They may have their left ear 'tipped' to show they have been neutered and returned (see later in leaflet)
- Not microchipped. Most feral cats don't have a microchip
- Permanent. They are more likely to have set up a permanent home or shelter

Stray cats

- Most often pet cats who have become lost or been abandoned
- More friendly than feral cats. If they're a little shy they will often approach cautiously given time and encouragement
- Appeared recently. They might look lost or disorientated
- Appear near houses. Most likely to be found in people's gardens and trying to get into their home

- If they are a missing pet, they may have a microchip
- They won't have their ear 'tipped', even if neutered
- Found alone, not as part of a colony

Community/street cats

- Found in urban areas and adapted to free roaming, but likely to receive care from local people, such as being provided with shelter and food
- Will have varying levels of socialisation to people
- May appear friendly towards their feeder/ caretaker but will remain wary of anyone else
- May live alone or be part of a colony
- Some community cats may have been strays, others will have been born outdoors

Other lifestyles of cats

Some cats will be known to have had some early socialisation to people, but because this wasn't consistent, positive, or for other reasons, the cat struggles to cope as a pet within a home.

These cats may live a mainly outdoor life, occasionally returning for food or shelter, or some cats prefer to live in stables or other supported outdoor homes. There they can have control over their interactions with people, while still receiving food and shelter.

How feral cats survive

Cats are extremely resourceful creatures and can adapt to many different habitats.

Feral colonies will often develop around a reliable food resource in one location. Colonies are usually made up of groups of related females with males living on the periphery and more likely to wander until neutered. The size of the colony is directly related to the availability of food, water and shelter. In locations where food is available on a regular basis scattered across the area (rather than being in the same place) colonies do not tend to form as cats, where possible, will distance themselves from other cats.

Cats within the colony recognise each other by sharing their scent through rubbing against each other. Although they appear close, they are not reliant upon each other and will hunt and eat alone. If an unfamiliar cat intrudes on their territory, they will defend their territory.

Feral cats are not always found in colonies, some will live alone.

Caring for feral cats

Some people view feral cats as a problem. Thankfully, many more, particularly farmers, stable owners and smallholders, value them for their role as effective mousers. A healthy feral colony can help to keep rodent levels down in an environmentally friendly way.

Despite their wild nature, feral cats still benefit from a certain level of care, including:

- neutering

This has major health benefits and keeps the colony size under control. Feral cats will need to be trapped in a humane cat trap before they are neutered because they are too wild to be handled. Once a feral cat is sedated or under anaesthetic, the vet can give them a health check, vaccinate and treat them for parasites. After neutering, the cat is released back into their territory as quickly as possible. This is to minimise stress and so the cat does not lose the communal scent and end up being rejected by other cats in the colony.

Find out more: cats.org.uk/neutering

- regular feeding

Many feral cats are very resourceful and find adequate food, but it is helpful to offer them extra help, especially in winter. If offering food to feral cats, ensure this takes place alongside the neutering of the cats. Feeding unneutered cats increases the number of kittens that are born. Avoid overfeeding as being overweight will affect a feral cat's agility and chance of survival. Contrary to popular belief, regularly fed feral cats may be better, more patient hunters than hungry ones.

- observation

It is helpful to observe colonies, so that any sick or injured cats, or new unneutered cats, can be promptly trapped and taken to the vet. Only minor ailments can be treated in feral cats. Sometimes they have to be euthanased on welfare grounds if they have significant illness or injury.

Toxoplasmosis

Some farmers may be concerned that feral cats could be the source of a parasite called *Toxoplasma*. This can cause miscarriage in female sheep. Although cats can catch toxoplasmosis, they only catch it once in their lifetime and quickly become immune, just two weeks after being infected. Cats catch toxoplasmosis from eating

infected raw meat or rodents. The only way the disease can be transmitted is if the sheep takes in the infected cat's poo in their feed or water. The risk to sheep is very low.

A healthy, stable colony of neutered cats is at much lower risk of toxoplasmosis than allowing a breeding colony which continually produces vulnerable kittens.

A further risk of toxoplasma to sheep arises from other cats or kittens moving in. A healthy, neutered feral colony is more likely to naturally guard their territory against intruders. This is better than trying to maintain a cat-free area.

Find out more:

cats.org.uk/cats-and-toxoplasmosis

Removal of ferals

Catching and removing feral cats may temporarily reduce the numbers, but this leads to what is known as the 'vacuum effect.' Any cats left behind will continue to breed. Others will move into the area which is clearly a good source of food and shelter. The best way to manage a feral cat colony is to humanely trap, neuter, vaccinate and return (TNVR) the cats. Over a period of years this will reduce the size of the colony. A controlled, healthy and stable colony will deter other feral cats from moving in and will keep vermin levels down.

In very rare instances, relocation may be necessary but should generally be avoided. Relocation is extremely stressful for feral cats, as they become very dependent on the familiarity of their own area. If being relocated, an appropriate new area needs to be found.

Cats are protected by law and killing any cat including feral cats is an offence.

How Cats Protection can help

Feral cats cannot be tamed or rehomed in the home environment as they behave and have similar needs to wild animals.

Cats Protection may be able to set up humane traps (similar to cages) to safely capture feral cats and take them to a veterinary surgery to be neutered. The traps are collected quickly to minimise stress to the cat. Neutering feral cats is a straightforward procedure which will prevent the cat from breeding. At the same time, they will also have their ear 'tipped'. This is where between half and one centimetre of the tip of the left ear is removed under anaesthetic. This serves as a permanent visual mark from a distance to show the cat has been neutered. This prevents the same cat being trapped for neutering in future. The cat is given pain relief as part of neutering and after, the cat will be returned back to their familiar territory.

Trapping and neutering a large feral colony can take weeks. Regular monitoring is needed to make sure that no cats are missed. Ideally, any breeding females are trapped and neutered first, to avoid growth in colony size while the process is taking place.

Very young feral kittens under eight weeks of age can sometimes be socialised with humans. This is done through gentle handling and positive experiences before they become too fearful of people. Unfortunately, the closer they are to the age of eight weeks old, the less likely it is that socialisation will be successful. Genetics also plays a role in the confidence and friendliness of cats. It is often better for the wellbeing of feral kittens for them to be neutered and returned to where they were first trapped.

Feral colonies can originate as the offspring of unneutered stray or abandoned pet cats. Neutering of all cats is important to prevent stray cats becoming pregnant. Financial assistance from Cats Protection may be available to help with neutering. Find out more: cats.org.uk/neutering

Landowners!

Please call Cats Protection on **03000 12 12 12** or get in touch with your local Cats Protection at cats.org.uk/find-us if you:

- need advice about feral cats on your land
- are worried about the welfare of a feral colony
- have the ideal habitat to offer a feral cat an outdoor home

Looking for cat advice?

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to cats.org.uk



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