

## THE ABCs OF TNR

**F**ew people set out to become feral cat caretakers. Most often they come across feral cats by accident and follow their instinct to help. The first impulse is to feed the cats. Alley Cat Allies (ACA) advocates feeding because food and water are necessary for survival. Not feeding the cats and hoping they will “go away” is not realistic. They can’t go away, and they may starve, but they will continue to reproduce.

However you became involved with feral cats, your best course of action is to start feeding and, as soon as possible, begin a **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)** program to trap, vet, and sterilize all members of the colony. **Getting feral cats to a veterinarian for spaying or neutering and a general health evaluation is the single most important thing a caretaker can do for them.** This is how a caretaker turns a feral cat colony into a *managed* colony, whose members can live safe, healthy, sterile lives without the dangers and hardship of constant breeding.

### BACKGROUND

TNR evolved from nonlethal control programs practiced for decades in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Africa. In the U.S., TNR is practiced by thousands of individuals and hundreds of groups, with the help of sympathetic veterinarians. TNR is endorsed by numerous institutions and organizations, including the American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, Cat Fancier’s Association, Cornell and Tufts Universities Schools of Veterinary Medicine, Doris Day Animal League, San Francisco SPCA, and SPAY/USA.

In a growing number of communities, TNR programs are receiving official sanction and funding. The ACA factsheet “Where Does TNR Work?” lists

dozens of publicly, privately, and jointly funded programs in the U.S. and Canada, but it cannot include them all because individuals like you start new TNR programs every day.

The information needed to implement TNR may not be available to you locally, but it is easily found on the internet at [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org) and [www.pets911.com](http://www.pets911.com), or obtained by mail from Alley Cat Allies. You can rapidly learn how to manage one or more colonies of feral cats using ACA’s newsletters, factsheets, videos, and website. ACA may be able to refer you to a Feral Friend, a volunteer in your area who can help you get started. With guidance, you can overcome almost any obstacle to implementing a humane management plan.

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A strong determination to trap and sterilize is often a caretaker’s greatest asset because, although the TNR process is straightforward, it can be intimidating the first time. The idea of “trapping” conjures images of cats being hurt or traumatized, and no longer trusting the caretakers. This does not happen.

Since ACA began in 1990, hundreds of thousands of feral cats have been humanely trapped, vetted, and returned to their familiar surroundings where, after a brief adjustment, they resumed their daily routine and good relationship with their caretakers. But their lives were vastly improved.

Before you prepare to trap and sterilize the colony or colonies you care for, take time to learn exactly what TNR entails.

The most basic steps are in the name:

- “Trap” means to humanely trap every feral cat in the colony or colonies you care for.

**Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)** is a full management plan in which stray and feral cats already living outdoors in cities, towns, and rural areas are humanely trapped, then evaluated, vaccinated, and sterilized by veterinarians. Kittens and tame cats are adopted into good homes. Healthy adult cats too wild to be adopted are returned to their familiar habitat under the lifelong care of volunteers.

- “Neuter” means to take the cats in their traps to a veterinarian or veterinary clinic that works with feral cats to be spayed or neutered, evaluated, vaccinated, and treated as needed.
- “Return” means to care for the cats through recovery from surgery, then take them back to their established homes.

The unnamed fourth step in TNR is to provide the cats with long-term care and feeding; in other words, to continue what you are already doing.

There are other factors that you will hear about or encounter while practicing TNR. Familiarizing yourself with these issues now will put you way ahead of most beginning caretakers.

### **Safety**

Feral cats, like all wild animals, will strike out when frightened and unable to run away (as they are in a trap). You must learn correct safety procedures: e.g., always labeling traps, never sticking your hand into a trap. Make sure that everyone else involved learns them as well.

People who regularly work with wild animals may get pre-exposure rabies vaccinations. If you follow established safety precautions, you will never get close enough for a feral cat to bite you; therefore you would not need a pre-exposure rabies vaccination. You should, however, be aware that the vaccination is available and decide for yourself if you want it.

Two excellent sources of trapping and safety information are the Alley Cat Allies factsheet “Humane Trapping Instructions for Feral Cats” and the book, *Safe and Successful Cat Trapping*. See resources, below.

### **Stress reduction**

Learn how tension, loud noises, extremes of heat and cold, and exposure can affect the entire TNR process. Maintaining a calm, comfortable environment for the cats will reduce their stress and speed their recovery from trapping and surgery. Careful planning and a realistic timetable will enhance the process for trappers, as well. The ACA factsheet “Dos and Don’ts of Stress Reduction (for cats and for trappers)” offers practical pointers to increase your trapping success.

### **Taming feral cats**

You may hear from people who want to tame feral cats and place them in homes. This is not realistic. There are tens of millions of feral cats in North America. Shelters and animal control facilities kill more cats than any other species each year. Although many kittens and stray adult cats can be socialized and adopted into homes, it is impossible to home the feral cat population as a whole. Attempts to tame adult feral cats divert time and energy from the most important objective: sterilizing the feral cat population to end overpopulation.

### **Relocation**

The great majority of feral cat colonies should be returned after sterilization to their established locations, where you found them. The alternative, relocation, is a difficult, time-consuming, and problematic procedure. It is not necessary or recommended except under extreme circumstances. The Alley Cat Allies factsheet “Relocation: Guidelines for Safe Relocation of Feral Cats” explains why relocation is rarely the direction to take and also explains what is involved in safely relocating feral cats. Do not attempt a relocation without reading this information.

### **GETTING STARTED**

To begin implementing TNR, determine what cats you want to sterilize and line up the resources to do it. The steps are:

1. Count how many cats are in the colony or colonies you plan to TNR. Start **now** to keep records on the cats. (See resources, below: “Feral Cat Colony Tracking System.”)
2. Locate and learn how to use the equipment needed to humanely trap.
3. Establish a relationship with a veterinarian or a veterinary clinic that will work with feral cats.
4. Ask friends, neighbors, or other cat advocates to help. Determine how you (and others) will care for the cats before and after surgery, and on an ongoing basis.
5. Trap, neuter, and return the cats.

## TRAPPING EQUIPMENT

The list of equipment either needed or recommended for trapping is lengthy, but be assured, you already have most it at home: e.g., a pair of thick gloves, antibacterial hand wipes, and several large cans of tuna.

The most important equipment, however, you probably don't have at home: one or more humane box traps. Ideally, you would have one trap for each cat, although this is not always practical.

Traps are available from several sources. There may be a Feral Friend in your area who lends traps and even assists in trapping. Some large TNR programs have established "trap depots," where you can borrow traps.

You may be able to borrow traps from a humane society or animal facility, but if you do this, you could be required to return the trap AND the cat, who will most likely be killed. **Always determine a humane society or animal facility's policy toward feral cats before borrowing their traps.**

If you cannot borrow traps, you will have to purchase one or more. One benefit of owning your own trap(s) is greater flexibility in planning your trapping schedule. Humane box traps can be used for many years, so you can trap well into the future or lend your equipment to other caretakers who are just starting out. (See resources, below: "How to Choose a Trap.")

## WORKING WITH A VETERINARIAN

It is essential to find a veterinarian or a veterinary clinic that is familiar with or willing to learn how to treat feral cats. **This must be done before trapping begins.**

Start with your own veterinarian by explaining what you want to accomplish for the cats and for the benefit of your community. If your vet does not want to treat feral cats, contact every veterinarian and veterinary clinic in your area. Ask other people who want to help the cats if they know of a cooperative clinic. You can find a list of feral cat organizations in your area at [www.pets911.com](http://www.pets911.com). On the homepage, click on "Feral or Stray Cats" and enter your ZIP code. A list of feral cat groups in your area will come up. These groups can tell you which veterinarians will work with feral cats.

Explain TNR to each veterinarian you contact, emphasizing that sterilization is essential to the process. If a veterinarian is interested but has no experience with feral cats, provide him or her with one or both of ACA's training videos (see resources, below) and suggest the information about treating feral cats available at [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org).

When you find a veterinarian or veterinary clinic willing to treat feral cats, establish a protocol to ensure that everyone involved understands what to expect and that you get all the services the cats need.

- Most clinics see patients by appointment. With feral cats, appointments cannot always be kept. The clinic must be flexible.
- Find out how many cats the clinic can accommodate on a single day. This information will guide your trapping activity.
- Establish a protocol ahead of time for euthanasia of very ill cats, aborting pregnant females, and testing for FIV/FelV. If a veterinarian insists on procedures you do not want, refer him or her to information on feral cats at [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org).
- Each cat will require a spay or neuter procedure (using anesthesia that can be administered while the cat is in the trap) and eartipping, and such other general or specific treatment as each cat requires: e.g., ear cleaning, vaccinations.
- Figure out the cost of veterinary care for a male and a female cat, so that you can estimate a budget for the whole colony. Spay surgery is more expensive than neutering. The gender ratio of a typical colony is 60 females to 40 males.
- Some veterinarians will offer discounts because you are providing a community service. If they do not offer, **always ask.**
- If the cost of sterilizing the colony is too great, ask for financial help from neighbors and businesses where the colony resides. They may be happy to contribute because you are taking action from which they will benefit.
- Arrange a warm, quiet environment in which the cats, in their traps, can recover from surgery. Your only involvement at that point will be to monitor their recovery and prepare to return them. (See resources, below: "Surgery Recovery Instructions.")

## GET HELP FROM OTHERS

Working with other caretakers and sharing equipment, resources, and moral support makes the work go easier and faster. Recruit anyone you know who wants to help the cats—friends, neighbors, or a Feral Friend. Plan to trap as many cats as possible at one time. Feral cats are smart—if you trap repeatedly in the same location, they soon become trap wary. But always keep in mind, **the number of cats you can trap at one time is determined by how many cats your veterinary clinic can sterilize in one day.**

Alley Cat Allies offers several online forums (“listserves”) tailored to caretakers implementing TNR in specific environments, such as parks, military

installations, or college campuses. If you join a listserve, you can exchange e-mail with other feral cat caretakers facing similar challenges who often can answer your most complex or unusual questions. (See resources, below, for how to join a listserve.)

## IN CONCLUSION

With a well-organized plan, a TNR program can be implemented with ease. If trapping initially feels awkward, be assured that it will soon become a skill you perform readily, perfecting your technique with each experience. By then you will be ready to demonstrate trapping to others. Every time you assist in sterilizing a colony, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you have helped more feral cats live safe, healthy lives without reproducing. ■

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## RESOURCES

### **TNR video clips available to view online**

ACA's training videos can be viewed, free of charge, at [www.pets911.com/programs/national/feralcats/index.php](http://www.pets911.com/programs/national/feralcats/index.php). The available segments include:

- “What is a Feral”
- “Planning TNR”
- “5 Steps to Trapping”
- “Spay/Neuter Process”
- “Returning the Cats”
- “Rewards of TNR”

### **Videos/DVDs**

*Trap-Neuter-Return: A Humane Approach to Feral Cat Control.* This comprehensive TNR training video is educational and engaging, and contains valuable guidelines for novices and pros alike. \$13.00 VHS only.

*The Humane Solution: Reducing Feral Cat Populations with Trap-Neuter-Return.* A powerful public policy tool that outlines the benefits of TNR and demonstrates why it is by far the best method for controlling feral cat populations. \$13.00 VHS only.

*Trap-Neuter-Return/The Humane Solution: The Set.* Buy both videos as a set and save \$6. Indicate VHS or DVD.

ACA videos/DVDs are available at [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org) or by mail from Alley Cat Allies.

*On the Road to Ending Feral Cat Overpopulation in Oregon.* This Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon video follows a feral cat being trapped, going through each station at the clinic, and being released afterward. Includes clinic process and procedures. \$15.00 VHS only. Send a check to: FCCO, PO Box 82734, Portland OR 97282.

### **Guides and factsheets**

- “Where Does TNR Work?”
- “Humane Trapping Instructions for Feral Cats”
- “Feral Cat Colony Tracking System”
- “Surgery Recovery Instructions”
- “How to Choose a Trap”
- “Dos and Don'ts of Stress Reduction (for cats and trappers)”

ACA factsheets are available at [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org) and [www.pets911.com](http://www.pets911.com), or by mail from Alley Cat Allies.

### **Books**

*Safe and Successful Cat Trapping.* This highly recommended book includes basic and advanced trapping techniques and a wide range of practical trapping and safety knowledge, with contributions from experienced feral cat trappers and Alley Cat Allies staff. It also contains items such as the components of a trapping kit, how to choose a trap, and trapping tips for hard to trap cats. Available from Alley Cat Allies, \$5.

*The Stray Cat Handbook,* by Tamara Kreuz. How to care for stray and feral cats. Essential information on fostering, socializing, and finding homes for cats. Available from Alley Cat Allies, \$10.

### **Listserve**

Alley Cat Allies maintains listserve to assist feral cat caretakers working in special environments: school campuses, parks, prisons, and military installations. To join a listserve, send an e-mail request to [alleycat@alleycat.org](mailto:alleycat@alleycat.org).