



The Truth About Feral Cats

Where do feral cat colonies come from?

Feral cats are not a new phenomenon. Cats have been living among us here in the U.S. for hundreds of years. Feral cats are domestic cats. Some feral cats are offspring of unaltered, lost or abandoned house cats. Others are offspring of existing feral cats

Feral cats typically live in a colony—a group of related cats. Cats choose to live in an area for two reasons: because there is a food and water source, such as a dumpster or a feeder, and shelter, beneath a porch or in an abandoned building. The availability of these resources determines the number of cats who can live off of these resources. In 2013, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) estimated that there are as many as 50 million feral cats in the United States. It is estimated that there are over 25,000 feral cats just in Washoe County.

Do feral cats present a risk to public safety?

Many studies show that feral cats and housecats share similar health status and do not pose a risk to public health. In addition, feral cats are naturally wary of people and will not approach humans they do not know. Finally, Trap-Neuter-Return-Monitor (TNRM) involves vaccinating and neutering the cats while providing ongoing care so as to maintain a healthy population.¹

A study conducted by Stanford University's Department of Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) found virtually no risk to humans from feral cats and diseases associated with cats. EHS also concluded, after consultation with the Santa Clara County Health Department and Stanford's Department of Comparative Medicine, that there was a general consensus that feral cats pose virtually no health and safety risk to individuals.²

Can I catch a disease from a feral cat, specifically Toxoplasmosis or Rabies?

You are much more likely to catch an infectious disease from the person standing in line with you at the grocery store than from a cat.³

Toxoplasmosis - According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the overwhelming majority of toxoplasmosis cases actually result from eating undercooked meat or eating food that was contaminated by knives, utensils, cutting boards and other foods that have had contact with raw, contaminated meat.⁴ It's rare for anyone to catch toxoplasmosis from a household pet, let alone a feral cat with whom they have no contact.

Rabies – Cats are not natural carriers for rabies. According to the CDC, there has not been a single human death from rabies attributed to transmission from a cat in the United States in over three decades.⁵ In the last 10 years, there have been only 31 confirmed cases of rabies in humans in the United States; again, none were proven to have come from cats.⁶

TNRM further reduces the risk of rabies. Every cat that is part of this program is vaccinated against rabies creating a healthier cat population and providing an immune barrier between humans and wildlife.

Are feral cats diseased and unhealthy, therefore living short miserable lives?

Leaders of major humane programs all over America agree that feral cats live healthier, more peaceful lives after TNRM. There is no evidence to show that cats as part of a TNRM program are less healthy than the general population of pet cats. In fact a 2006 study found that of 103,643 stray and feral cats examined in spay/neuter clinics in six states from 1993 to 2004, less than 1% of those cats needed to be euthanized due to injury, trauma, or infectious diseases.⁷ As a result of TNRM, outdoor cats in managed colonies are living even longer than their counterparts.⁸ One study of a TNRM program found that at the end of a 10-year period, 83% of the cats in the managed colonies had been residing in those colonies for more than six years—indicating a lifespan comparable to the 7.1-year lifespan of pet cats.⁹

By feeding feral cats, aren't people just feeding wildlife?

Colony caregivers (those who feed a managed TNRM colony) are provided with specific feeding guidelines to minimize the impact on wildlife. Feral cats are fed during the day when wildlife is less active. Uneaten food is removed within 30 minutes and not allowed to sit out. Fresh water is provided daily and food dishes are slightly elevated to avoid mosquitos and other insects.

Do feral cats that are part of a TNRM program receive ongoing medical care?

Animal Welfare organizations in Washoe County such as Nevada Humane Society (NHS) and Community Cats do provide ongoing medical care for feral cats that have gone through a TNRM program. When a cat becomes injured or ill, the monitor may contact one of these organizations. That cat will be trapped and brought into the NHS veterinary clinic for care. All cats brought in through the TNRM program, regardless of health, are fully vaccinated, examined and provided any necessary treatment.

Do feral cats kill birds and other wildlife?

Feral cats are opportunistic feeders—they will eat whatever food is easiest to find that will also satisfy their nutritional needs. Today, feral cats' main source of food is almost always people's garbage.¹⁰ Decades of studies prove that when cats do hunt—which is not nearly as often as they scavenge—they much prefer a diet of rodents.¹¹

Although cats do occasionally prey on other animals, it doesn't profoundly impact the survival of the species. Cats are "compensatory predators"—preying on animals that would likely have died anyway from disease or hunger. This means the animals caught by compensatory predators are generally weaker animals that would not have lived, and so whose death does not affect overall population levels.^{12, 13}

Instead humans' own impact on the environment is without a doubt the number one cause of species loss. According to Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology, by far the largest threat to birds is loss and/or degradation of habitat.¹⁴ In a 2000 report by the World Conservation Union surveying 1,173 threatened bird species, habitat loss was the most important threat, affecting 83% of the bird species sampled.¹⁵ Millions of bird deaths occur every year due to human activities—nearly 100 million from colliding with windows, 80 million from collisions with automobiles, and about 70 million from exposure to pesticides.¹⁶

Why can't we just remove feral cats?

There are many reasons why concerns about feral cats are rarely solved by trapping and removing a colony. Feral cats live at a certain location because it offers food and shelter. If a colony is removed, cats from surrounding colonies may move in to take advantage of the newly available food and shelter. This is called the Vacuum Effect and is well documented across many species. The cycle of reproduction and behavior begins all over again.

Any cats remaining after a catch and kill effort will produce larger litters of kittens. The kittens are more likely to survive because there are fewer cats competing for food. As one study found, "populations greatly reduced by culling are likely to rebound quickly."¹⁷ Over time, the number of cats in an area where a feral cat colony has been killed or relocated will continue to increase until it reaches the number that can be supported by the available food and shelter.¹⁸

What happens when feral cats are brought to most shelters?

The idea of removing a feral cat from its home environment, in most cases is the same as killing a feral cat. There are few options for relocation outside of a shelter. Because feral cats are not socialized to people, they are unadoptable as pets. In most shelters and pounds in the US, unadoptable animals are killed. In fact, 70% of all cats who enter shelters are killed there, according to the most reliable data available. That number jumps to close to 100% for feral cats.

Washoe County is has worked hard to achieve a no-kill status. This means that NHS and Animal Services have worked together to end the needless killing. In 2014 Washoe County showed a 94% save rate for both dogs and cats. These live-saving efforts are only possible with programs like TNRM.

What are some common concerns about feral cats?

Some of the most common concerns about outdoor cats include urinating and defecating and/or digging in someone's yard or garden, jumping on someone's car, upsetting an owned cat, making a lot of noise, fighting, spraying, yowling and breeding. A variety of solutions are offered to address each issue. The solutions are most often effective when several are combined.

Much of the concerning behavior is directly related to mating. Through TNRM, cats are spayed and neutered removing the need and desire to mate. As a result, mating behaviors such as roaming, yowling, spraying and fighting are no longer a concern. In addition, a 2002 study conducted by prominent researcher Julie Levy, DVM, caregivers reported that cats tended to roam less after neutering, which is beneficial for their safety and reduces conflict with neighbors.¹⁹

Another study found that calls to animal control about cats decreased after a TNR program was implemented—even though the human and animal populations increased.²⁰

Nevada Humane Society's Animal Resource Center does provide counseling, information and resources and alternatives for anyone looking for solutions to the concerns.

What is TNRM?

The ASPCA defines Trap-Neuter-Return-Monitor as the method of humanely trapping feral cats, having them spayed or neutered and vaccinated against rabies, and then returning them to their colony to live out their lives. TNRM also involves a colony caretaker who provides food and adequate shelter and monitors the cats' health. TNRM has been shown to be the least costly, as well as the most efficient and humane way of stabilizing feral cat populations.

What are the Benefits of TNRM?

Trap-Neuter-Return, allows for the stabilization the feral cat population humanely, improve the cats' lives, address neighbors' concerns, saves taxpayer dollars, and help the entire community reach a solution that benefits everyone.

Trap-Neuter-Return-Monitor quickly stabilizes feral cat populations by instantly ending reproduction. A TNRM program at the University of Texas A&M neutered 123 cats in its first year, and found no new litters of kittens the following year. It has also been proven that colonies involved in TNRM diminish in size over time. During an 11-year study of TNR at the University of Florida, the number of cats on campus declined by 66%, with no new kittens being born after the first four years of operation.²¹

Feral cats that are part of a TNRM program live healthier lives. Trap-Neuter-Return-Monitor relieves cats of the constant stresses of mating and pregnancy. Mating behaviors cease, like roaming, yowling, spraying, and fighting. With decreased competition for mating, the cats are also less likely to suffer

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injuries. A study of a feral cat colony in London found that cats were more affectionate towards each other after neutering, spending more time in groups and fighting less.^{22, 23}

Trap-Neuter-Return Answers the Needs of the Community

Sterilizing feral cats reduces or even eliminates the behaviors that can lead to nuisance complaints. Studies confirm that once TNR stops reproduction, and therefore mating behaviors, the cats' relationship with residents improves. Colonies become quieter as behaviors like yowling or fighting stop, calls to authorities about the cats decrease significantly, and community morale improves.

TNRM proves to be much more in line with what most Americans feel and believe. According to a nationally representative survey conducted for Alley Cat Allies by Harris Interactive in April and May 2007, an overwhelming majority of Americans, 81%, believe that leaving a stray cat outside to live out his life is more humane than having him caught and put down.²⁴

Trap-Neuter-Return saves taxpayers money. While costs differ from area to area, implementing a shelter-sponsored TNR program will almost always cost less than catching, receiving, housing, feeding, killing, and then disposing of the cats.

In Jacksonville, FL, Jacksonville Animal Control and Protective Services estimates that the city's TNR program, Feral Freedom, has saved the city more than one million dollars in just over four years. According to Donna Alexander, DVM, director of Cook County Animal and Rabies Control, the average cost of trapping, transporting, holding, killing, and disposing of a feral cat is \$185. The cost of a shelter based TNRM program is much lower.²⁵

An economic study, commissioned by Best Friends Animal Society, completed by [John Dunham and Associates](#) and funded by [PetSmart Charities](#), serves as core information that can help county and local governmental entities determine the true cost of removing homeless cats by destroying them. The study shows that TNR programs are much less expensive to implement than trap and kill policies.

In California, for example, the study estimates there are more than 70 million cats, 38.5 million of which are feral. The study estimates that trap and kill programs cost the state \$250 per cat (for trapping, enforcement, sheltering, food, supplies, laboratory tests and euthanizing); while shelter based TNRM programs cost the state just \$100. If the state did away with trap and kill and replaced it with shelter based TNRM program in which volunteer caregivers trap and transport the cats, veterinarians and community volunteers offer their services, it could save California taxpayers \$5.58 billion a year.

The same study shows that nationwide, TNR results in a huge savings for taxpayers. With an estimated 87 million free-roaming, homeless cats in the United States, it would cost governmental entities about \$16 billion to trap and kill these cats as opposed to about \$7 billion for supporting trap-neuter/spay-

return (TNR) programs run by rescue organizations and individual volunteers. Replacing trap and kill with TNR could save American taxpayers almost \$9 billion a year.²⁶

What has TNR done for Washoe County?

Without a doubt TNRM has made a significant impact in Washoe County.

No-kill status

TNRM is a cornerstone to the no-kill philosophy this community has worked so hard to achieve. With programs such as TNRM, Washoe County has reached and maintained an over 90% save rate for animals entering our animal welfare services. In 2012, Maddie's Fund, a national animal welfare foundation name Washoe County as the safest place to be a homeless pet. The loss of the TNRM program will ultimately dismantle this work causing Washoe County to lose much of its support.

Fiscal support

Because of Washoe County's no-kill status, millions of dollars in grant money has been given to the community. In 2015 alone, Nevada Humane Society was awarded 1.5 million dollars by Maddie's Fund. Every penny of this grant was directed to animal care and community services such as low-cost spay/neuter, vaccinations, and medical care. None of the funding was spent on administrative costs. These grants are awarded based on life-saving efforts. With the loss of TNRM and the inevitable impact that will have on animal services, these funds will disappear.

Decrease in cats

Using combined NHS and Washoe County Regional Animal Services annual statistics of cat intake, it is easy to see the significant decrease in the number of cats enter the shelter system. In 2006, before the No-Kill initiative and the start of TNRM throughout Washoe County, 8,103 stray, feral and owned cats came to the shelter. In 2014, however, that number dropped dramatically to 4,938 showing a 39% decrease. NHS has also seen a dramatic drop in kittens with over 2,500 kittens (most a result of feral cats) entering our foster system in 2010 and 1,9 in 2014. Be know this decline is a large part due to the emphasis of spay/neuter in our community, specifically among the feral cat population.

Decrease in community complaints

Since the introduction of TNRM in Washoe County, WCRAS reports a decrease in feral cat related complaints in the community. Through programs such as NHS's Animal Resource Center and Cat Action Team, complaints are mitigated quickly with counseling, deterrents, and TNRM.

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