

# Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) and Feral Colony Management Guidelines

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**ALLEY CATS AND ANGELS**  
OF NORTH CAROLINA

*Advocates for Forgotten Felines*

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## TNR and Feral Colony Management Guidelines

### FERAL 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.

#### WHAT IS TNR?

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A group of feral cats living together in one area is called a "colony." Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is an effective, internationally recognized program to reduce, and eventually eliminate, feral cat colonies. This program is sometimes referred to as Trap-Alter-Return (TAR) in parts of the US; however TNR is the most commonly used reference.

Cats are trapped, vaccinated, spayed or neutered, and returned to their original location. 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.*

### 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 TNRed 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 to 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. We find that canned tuna is 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.
- Spoon a small amount of food onto the soaked newspaper scrap and place the trap on top of the food so the food is as far back in the trap as possible while still not accessible from outside the trap. (You want the cat to go all the way into the trap to avoid being injured when the trap door closes.) Press the trap down onto the food so that it squishes up through the wire. The idea is to make the food a little hard to get so that the cat has to go into the



trap as far as possible and has to work at getting it long enough to trip the trap. (Some cats are very good at getting in and out of traps without getting caught. We don't want to make it too easy for them to get away with that trick. Also, having the food essentially outside of the trap prevents the cat from eating it in the trap before surgery and is less messy.)

- 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.
- After setting the trap, cover it with a large towel or piece of towel-sized material. Fold the material at the front end of the trap to expose the opening while still covering the top, sides and back of the trap. The cover will help to camouflage the trap and serve to calm the cat after it is caught.

#### 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 feral. 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. Cover the cat back up as soon as possible. Uncovered, the animal may panic and hurt itself thrashing around in the trap.
- Of course, there is always the chance that you will catch some other wild animal attracted to the food or an unintended cat. Simply 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 newspaper in the bottom of the trap with fresh newspaper. If they do not do this, ask them to. Fresh newspaper will make the cats more comfortable during recovery.
- 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 pen or cat playpen.

#### **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're 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 its 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 Alley Cats and Angels ([info@alleycatsandangels.org](mailto:info@alleycatsandangels.org)), we have safely and successfully relocated 250 feral/semi-feral cats in 3 years.*
- 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. A trapped skunk or possum, which is nocturnal, may decide to sleep in the trap all day and not leave the trap until dark.
- 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. Females in heat can be placed in a carrier to attract male cats who have been eluding the traps. Never place the "bait" animal in the trap or anywhere where it may be harmed by the trapped animal. Even moms can hurt their babies if frightened enough. Be careful not to let the "bait" animal escape.

## 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 (this is ok to do if you are watching the traps and can remove the trapped cat (in the trap) as soon as trapped and have a safe and climate controlled place to hold and recover the cats.
- 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.
- Trap a nursing female for kittens under 5 weeks old. Her kittens can die from exposure and/or starvation in her absence.
- 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; 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. Pick a time in the daylight -- don't forget that those hours are shorter in the winter. Food put out after dark is more likely to draw other wildlife (unless you remain in the area while the cats are eating -- which you might be reluctant to do on cold winter nights. Be consistent -- same time, same place, every day. Find someone who'll do it for you on days you can't make it. Soon you'll have seen all the females in the colony. Some of the males might be out roaming so it may be several weeks before you've seen all of them. If there are several cats, you may wish to keep notes to help you identify them.

### 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 "Mom-cat". Don't 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 21 days.

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.

#### **REFERENCE**

*Information in this document written based on experience with some content reprinted with permission from the following:*

- *Alley Cat Allies: [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)*
- *For the Love of Cats, the Zimmer Foundation: <http://tlconline.org/art/0008.html>*
- *Forgotten Felines of Sonoma County: <http://www.forgottenfelines.com/v4/trapping.shtml>*