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Employing the TND (Trap, Neuter and Domesticate) Method for Feral Cats

by Barb Morris, *Kind to Nature*

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Sometimes the TNR (trap, neuter, release) method isn't workable for one reason or another. In many cases it is because the cats' current environment is not appropriate for re-release. It could be an unsafe location for different reasons, or because no one is available to feed and monitor the cat(s). That was the situation I encountered over five years ago. I began by feeding just one cat, but once I started putting food out, others came. By the time I caught my first kittens, I had the good part of the colony relying on me for food. Unfortunately, they were living in oleanders and sheds on horse properties across the street from my house. Crossing the street was risky and not all of them made it until I was able to catch them. I determined that those I was able to catch had to be kept inside, rather than released to live on the streets again. Since then, I have rescued and taken into my home over 20 feral cats to live inside exclusively, with other cats (and dogs). I prefer using carriers rather than traps to catch cats, but that really only works when you have established a feeding station in a "convenient" location on your own property. And even then, you might have to resort to using a trap for particularly clever and feisty cats. Most of the feral cats I have caught were kittens or young adult cats which has enabled me to successfully domesticate them. Older ones are much more difficult to adapt to living inside. Some of my guidelines follow to help those of you interested in undertaking the challenge of saving and domesticating a feral cat or kittens. It can be a difficult task, but very satisfying and heartwarming as you watch them progress from a little wild creature to a happy and content pet.

Of course, you don't just catch a feral and throw it in your house, especially if you have other pets and animals in there. That's why it is important to have a plan before you attempt to catch one or more ferals. Line up a vet that will give you a discount on spaying, neutering, vaccinating and testing, and that is somewhat flexible as to scheduling times. You do not want to catch a feral cat in a trap or carrier and have to leave it in there or have to try to move it. They will become frantic, and can injure themselves trying to get out. I do my catching early in the morning when I have the vet on notice that I may have a feral to bring in. I do not catch them the night before and let them sit inside the carrier or trap unsupervised all night (I like to sleep at night myself), but if that is the only time, then so be it, but keep it somewhere close so you can hear it if it goes beserk during the night. Also, be sure you have a large cage, suitable for living in, ready for them after their return from the vet, along with food, litter, bowls, cat pan.

I do not use traps unless it is absolutely necessary. Since I provided food regularly in the same spot (next to my kitchen door), I was able to catch most of my cats using a carrier. Part of my success was that I developed a relationship and some trust (as a food source) with the cat(s) before trying to catch them. That way, the domesticating process is a little easier since they already know me. First, I would put the food in the carrier (size depended on how many I wanted to get in there) a few nights and let them get used to eating in there. Gradually I would stay close by so they'd get used to that too. Then the really tricky part was getting them to show up and go in the carrier on a morning when I had an appointment with the vet. You must always get them tested and

if old enough, go ahead and get them spayed or neutered and vaccinated. You need to do it all at once if possible because it's going to be awfully hard to catch them again. In fact, it is harder once they are inside if they are not confined and sharing food with other cats.

I also recommend trying to catch kittens two at a time (or at least one immediately after another) so they find comfort with each other. This will help them adjust better to being in a strange environment, etc.

You want to have a large cage or cat playpen set up with water, food, scratcher, cave or bed and litter box, and set up so the food and water are not near the box. Cover most of it and keep it in a room away from children and other pets, at least initially. However, I liked exposing mine to the other cats (while in the cage) so they could get used to each other and the new cat would feel more comfortable when the other cats would hang around the cage and keep it company. You may have to use tongs or other tools to change food and water, get the box out, etc. at first. Always talk to your cat in soothing tones, start trying to stroke it from the back lightly, while it eats.

When you first let the cat out of the cage, expect it to run and hide, seeking some dark corner or high hidden spot. Keep the cage open for it to go back to if it wants. At feeding time, put the food near the cage where it ate before. However, if you have other cats already, your new one may have no qualms about approaching the general feeding area at mealtime. Play it by ear . . . make changes and teach things gradually, in more steps, i.e., move the bowl a little closer to the main feeding area each time. As I said before, you must be very patient with domesticating feral cats. If you are naturally good with animals, you can probably succeed in domesticating a feral cat by following your instincts and judgment while getting to know them. Some adapt faster than others, some don't adapt well at all. But I figure, they are alive, they are healthy, well-fed, cared for and protected.

You must be very patient and very tolerant of behavior that domestic kitties don't exhibit. Plus you must be calm and speak in moderate tones—they are generally pretty high strung. Yelling and throw cans may only serve to make them even more afraid of you, yet you must correct inappropriate behavior. You must win their trust, but not let them abuse you or your home. Squirt bottles are usually an effective correction method—if you catch them in the act. They are very clever and usually very active and athletic. Also, using "X" Mats and other non-electric training devices is very helpful, especially if you are not home all of the time. They pick up on using the litter box with no problem, unfortunately males and females are prone to marking if not spayed or neutered at a young age. If you have or have had kittens, then you know about "kitten-proofing" your home. Well, it goes double for ferals, especially if you have more than one. Keeping siblings and/or mother and kitten together greatly aids in their adjusting to being inside and feeling comfortable. Older ones may exhibit restless behavior for a few nights, but adding a mild tranquilizer (obtained from a veterinarian and following the prescribed dosage) or some natural calming liquid in its dinner for a few nights generally calms them down. Just mix a smashed up pill or the liquid in some tasty canned food and make sure that only the targeted cat will eat that food. ✦

* Recommend Good Cat or Calm Down in water - natural herbal colorless liquid. I use regularly to keep anxiety, aggressiveness under control. Only for indoors only cats - never give any tranquilizers or calmants to a cat that goes outside!

They defy being handled, much less held, even after they become tolerant of you. Eventually, they might let you pet them, but forget about combing and administering medication, training by handling (i.e., taking from furniture that is being clawed on and taking to the scratch post and showing them where to scratch – ha!), among other things you can normally do with a domestic kitten or cat.

It isn't easy. But if you have a big heart and know that this cat's lot in life was a direct result of some human's irresponsibility or cruelty, then the pleasure and satisfaction of not only saving its life but giving it a "good" life far outweighs the challenges and inconveniences.

Leukemia – I differ from most rescuers in that I do not believe in euthanizing cats or kittens just because they test positive for leukemia. If they are otherwise healthy, they can live a number of quality years, if they are fed high quality (natural) food and vitamins. They can make wonderful companions for someone who doesn't have any other cats (unless they too have it). My Coco is fat, healthy, beautiful and affectionate. Unfortunately, she has to live in a cage, built up high, so she doesn't come in contact with the other cats. I tried placing her with someone, but being a feral, she had already bonded to me and did not adjust to her new home at all. Thus, I took her back and had the cage built so I could keep her – that was over 2-1/2 years ago and she's doing great!

The following is from the Feral Cat Coalition's Website on Taming Feral Kittens. Some of these guidelines can be applied toward older cats too.

Literature

Taming Feral Kittens

Feral cats are homeless cats, many of whom were born in the wild; others are pets who were abandoned or have become lost. They are for all intents and purposes wild animals. Those adult stray cats which were once owned, or feral cats of quiet temperament, may sometimes be tamed with patience. However, the feral kitten is often easily tamed if it is captured young enough. Considering the short miserable lives that feral cats suffer, those kittens which can be tamed and adopted by humans are indeed lucky.

Feral moms usually give birth in quiet unseen spots where kittens will not be visible for several weeks. With no human contact they will be totally wild. When kittens begin to romp and play, they are first noticed by humans but are not easily captured. They may be captured in humane traps (available from the Feral Cat Coalition) and should be taken from the mother at ~~4~~ 6 weeks of age. Older kittens can also be captured and tamed but the process gets slower and less successful the longer the kittens stay in the wild. They should not be taken from the mother before they are old enough to be weaned at about 4 weeks.

Kittens taken too young are vulnerable to disease and may not survive. The mother cat should also be captured and spayed to prevent future litters. The process of taming kittens can take from 2 to 6 weeks (longer for some exceptionally skittish kittens) depending on their age and state of wildness. Individuals can differ greatly in temperament even within the same litter. Some may tame up immediately and some may take quite a long time. Any person attempting to tame kittens should be totally committed and patient. The taming process is certainly worthwhile. You are saving lives and producing affectionate loving companions.

*from Feral Cat Coalition
Separate hand-out - call if need entire instructions*