

**FERAL CATS**

**What are feral cats?**

Feral cats have had little or no contact with humans. They can never be tamed and this should never be attempted when they are very fearful of people. Feral cats live alone – or in colonies. The best solution for feral cats is for them to be neutered and returned to their familiar environment.

**What makes a cat feral**

When a kitten is aged between two and eight weeks old, this is the ‘socialisation period.’ Kittens which have had positive contact with people and are handled during this critical time form a bond and normally enjoy living as pets.

Feral cats are the offspring of stray, feral or abandoned domestic cats that have not had these early positive experiences.

Feral cats should not be confused with stray cats which were raised as pets but have since been lost or abandoned. It is true stray cats can be scared of people due negative experiences, but they can often be rehabilitated and live life as a pet again.

Cats that haven’t become dependent on people can live well in the wild, as long as they have all the things they need. Feral cats are extremely resourceful and can adapt to many different habitats. Unlike pet cats which often don’t get on with other felines, feral colonies will often naturally develop. These are usually made up of groups of related females and the size of the colony is directly related to the availability of food, water and shelter.

Cats within a colony recognise each other by sharing their scent through rubbing against each other. Although they appear close, they are not completely reliant upon each other and will hunt and eat alone. If an unfamiliar cat intrudes on their territory, they will soon see it off. Some Feral cats will live a solitary lifestyle.

**Caring for feral cats**

A healthy feral colony can really help to keep the vermin levels down and will benefit from a certain level of care:

# Neutering

This has major benefits and keeps the colony size under control. Feral cats will need to be trapped in a humane cat trap before they are neutered. Once a feral cat is sedated or under anaesthetic, the vet can give it a health check and treat it for parasites. Once neutered t can then be released back into its territory as quick as possible, so the cat doesn’t lose the communal scent, otherwise they can end up being rejected in the colony.

# Regular feeding

Most feral cats are very resourceful and find adequate food, but it is also helpful to offer them extra help, especially in the colder months. Only offer food if the feral cats have been neutered, because feeding unneutered cats increases the number of kittens that are born. Did you know that regularly fed feral cats are better hunters than hungry ones.

# Observe

Keeping an eye on colonies is a good practice to do, so that any new unneutered, sick or injured cats can be promptly trapped and taken to the vet.

**Toxoplasmosis**

Some farmers can get concerned that feral cats could be the source of a parasite called Toxoplasma, which can cause miscarriage in ewes. Although cats can catch Toxoplasmosis, they 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 ewe takes in the infected cat’s faeces in its feed or water – so the risk to sheep is extremely low. Vets agree that there is no risk to non-pregnant, healthy sheep.

A healthy, stable colony of neutered cats is at much lower risk of Toxoplasmosis than allowing a colony to continually produce vulnerable kittens.

**Keeping ferals in their area**

The solution is to trap, neuter and return (TNR) the cats. Over 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.

Sometimes in very rare instances, relocation may be necessary but should generally be avoided. Relocation of feral cats is extremely stressful for them, as they become very dependent on the familiarity of their own environment. Feral cats should not just be released elsewhere, an appropriate habitat needs to be found and the cats need a period of adjustment while they learn where they can find food and shelter.

Remember, cats are protected by law and killing a cat constitutes an offence.

Sometimes very young feral kittens can be socialised with humans through gentle handling and positive experiences. However, genetics also plays a role in the confidence and friendliness of cats, and it can sometimes be better for the welfare of feral kittens for them also to be neutered and returned to the wild.