

Brevard County Sheriff's Office

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Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR) and Return to Field (RTF) Programs

With the implementation of the TNR and RTF programs; the Brevard County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) has received many questions/concerns from the citizens of Brevard County some supporting the program, some adamantly against it. It has been a learning experience for both the animal enforcement officers as well as the office staff. We've had to change our way of speaking to the public when confronted with complaints about feral cats. The learning curve has been high, and even now we are faced with new questions and complaints on a daily basis. When policy is changed, there is anticipated resistance to change and the issues that go along with it. While we go through this trial and error phase, we thought we would share some of the questions and concerns, along with our answers, we have received so far.

Frequently Heard Citizen TNR/RTF Questions & Concerns

~ How is a stray cat different from a feral cat? ~



A stray cat is a pet who has been lost or abandoned and is used to contact with people, and is tame enough to be adopted. A feral cat is the offspring of stray or feral cats and is not accustomed to human contact. Feral cats are usually too fearful to be handled or adopted. If they don't have early contact with people, the kittens of stray or feral cats will become feral and too fearful to be handled or adopted. Since a female cat can become pregnant as early as five months of age, the number of feral cats in a neighborhood can rapidly increase if cats aren't spayed or neutered.

~ Who owns and cares for these feral cats? ~

What does it mean to "own" a feral cat? A person typically owns an animal when they have possession over it. The problem, however, is that people do not generally "possess" a feral cat in the same way that they would possess a housecat. They typically do not care where the feral cat spends most of its time, they rarely try to confine it, and their interaction is generally limited to providing the animal with food and water. There may be a "Care-giver" for a colony of feral cats.

Once a cat or colony of cats has been TNR-ed, its ideal if a dedicated care-giver provides food, water and shelter; monitors the cats for sickness or injury; and TNRs new feral cats who arrive within the colony. Ideally, kittens young enough to be socialized (tamed) and new tame cats who arrive are removed from the colony for possible adoption.

I have some feral cats in my neighborhood; can you come and take them away?~

BCSO is frequently contacted by citizen's reporting there are problems with stray cats in their neighborhood. The below information provides options which are currently available to help eliminate stray cat problems in your neighborhood.

Brevard County does currently have a cat leash law. BCSO does not currently patrol neighborhoods looking for stray cats. There is however a nuisance animal ordinance which can pertain to persons feeding outside cats and allowing these cats to roam onto neighboring properties. If you are experiencing problems caused by owned cats, we suggest you discuss the issue with the cat owner, and request their help in resolving your problems. If these efforts fail, individuals have the option to contact BCSO Animal Services and make a nuisance cat complaint.

If you are experiencing a few stray/feral cats in your area and there is no known care-giver, you have the option to purchase your own humane cat trap and trap the cats. You would be instructed to set this trap, usually at night to capture the cat(s) once there is a cat in the trap you can transport the cat to the North Animal Care Center in Titusville or the South Animal Care Center in Melbourne; where it can be evaluated and determined it is healthy. The cat would be spay/neutered, vaccinated and ear-tipped. After the surgery recovery time, this cat would be returned back to the general area of capture. Because feral cats are not socialized and not adoptable, they do not belong in animal pounds or shelters, where virtually 100% of them are killed. Instead, they should be neutered, vaccinated, and returned to their outdoor home. The only way to reduce the number of feral cats is to spay and neuter. In addition, all the bad habits such as spraying to mark their territory, fighting and breeding are eliminated once they are altered and they roam much less; becoming less visible and noticeable.

~ Do Feral Cats Lead "Short, Miserable Lives?" ~

Feral cats do not experience significantly more or worse medical issues than do housecats. In fact, feral cats may actually be healthier as a population than domestic pet cats. This is because feral kittens develop natural immunity to a variety of illnesses. Spay/neuter further improves cat health by reducing wandering, mating, and fighting.

It is also not uncommon for feral cats to live ten or more years—a lifespan comparable to many domestic cats. And while feral and abandoned cats may face hardships, we don't think death is better than a less-than-perfect life. Many animals, such as raccoons, foxes, and field mice face similar hazards and do not live extraordinarily long lives, yet we would never consider euthanizing them "for their own good."

Some people feel sorry for feral cats because they are fending for themselves. Others are annoyed by the cats' behaviors and want them removed. But the majority of people don't feel that feral cats should be euthanized

~ My neighbor's feeding cats and they continually come into my yard and climb on my car and dig in my garden. I don't want them taken away; what can you do to help? ~

When people are angry about the cats or don't want them around, it is usually because of the cats' nuisance behavior. Intact free-roaming cats engage in behaviors considered nuisances. Cats like to perch on high ground, which explains why they are getting on your car. The digging is a result of a cat's natural instinct to dig and deposit in soft or loose soil, moss, mulch, or sand. Additionally, there is the noise from female cats in heat caterwauling in the middle of the night or male cats fighting for dominance, an activity largely related to mating. Also, the noxious odor caused by unaltered males spraying to mark their territory with a combination of urine and testosterone. If you are experiencing problems caused by owned cats, we suggest you discuss the issue with the cat owner, and request their help in resolving your problems. Spay/neuter surgeries resolve these behaviors, causing most complaints and animosity to dissipate. There are also a number of safe, humane cat repellent techniques you can employ in order to prevent cats soiling and lingering on your property; see www.alleycat.org/deterrents. If these efforts fail, please contact Brevard County Sheriff's Office Animal Services, provide the address of the neighbor who is feeding the cats, and make a nuisance cat complaint.

~ I've found a litter of newborn kittens, what do I do? ~

You might have come across the kittens while their mother is off searching for food, or is in the process of moving them to a different location. Try to determine if the mother is coming back for them, or if they are truly orphaned. To do this, stand far away from the kittens — 35 feet or more. If you stand too close, the mom will not approach her kittens. You might need to go away completely before the mother cat will return to attend to the kittens. It might be several hours before the mother cat returns — until she no longer senses the presence of humans hovering near her litter. Healthy kittens can survive this period without food as long as they are warm. If mom returns and the area is relatively safe, leave the kittens alone with mom until they are weaned. The mother cat offers her kittens the best chance for survival, so wait and watch as long as you can. The best food for the kittens is their mother's milk. Remove the kittens **only** if they are in immediate, grave danger. Six weeks is the optimal age to take the kittens from the mother for socialization and adoption placement, and any time after eight weeks for Trap-Neuter-Return.

If you discover that mom has been hit by a car or if for any reason it appears that she is not coming back, then you should remove the kittens and transport them to the local shelter. The kittens will be placed with a care-giver if available.

~ Aren't feral cats primary carriers of rabies? ~

No. Raccoons, foxes and bats are much more likely to carry rabies. Feral cats are shy and hide from people. You are more at risk of contracting rabies from domesticated cats, which readily interact with people. TNR cats have the added protection of being vaccinated for rabies at the time of the spay/neuter surgery.

~ My child was bitten/scratched by a cat. What do I do? ~

In addition to proactively warning your children not to touch animals that they don't know that they encounter outside; the first thing you should do is to wash the wound thoroughly with warm soapy water. If the cat is a pet, get the owner's name and address and ask for proof of rabies vaccination. If the cat is a stray, confine it if possible and call Brevard County Sheriff's Office Animal Services. Call your doctor and follow his/her advise for treatment. It is very important to report the bite within 24 hours to Brevard County Sheriff's Office Animal Services so that a bite investigation can be conducted.

~ What do I do if I have a sick/injured cat in my yard? ~

Brevard County Sheriff's Office Animal Services will transport the sick/injured cat to the shelter or to an emergency vet for treatment. If the cat is unable to be captured, a cat trap will be set. Once the cat is trapped, contact Brevard County Sheriff's Office Animal Services for pick-up.

~ There's a feral mother cat with kittens in my shed. Can you please take them to a no-kill shelter? ~

The animal shelters in Brevard County already care for and try to find homes for untold thousands of lost, injured, and abandoned cats, in addition to pet cats whose owners are unable or unwilling to keep them. There is simply not enough man-power or space available in shelters to house and care for a feral mother cat and kittens.

Because feral cats are so scared of people and usually cannot be adopted, those who are brought to a shelter, especially cats who cannot be identified as members of a known TNR colony, are likely to be euthanized either right away or after a holding period. It's a complicated situation: While it's difficult to accurately identify a feral cat without observing him or her during a holding period, safely caring for a feral cat in a typical shelter cage is terribly stressful for the cat. In addition, because of limited cage space at the shelter, an adoptable cat may have to be euthanized to make room to hold a feral cat. The best option is to allow the kittens to age and the family should abandon your shed when they are old enough.

~ I've trapped a cat. I don't like cats and do not want it brought back. ~

This is a Brevard County Sheriff's Office approved program and is the only option available for citizens of Brevard County. This program will serve to stabilize the existing cat population by preventing the birth of additional kittens as well as minimize nuisance behaviors exhibited by unaltered cats. These efforts will not only save cat lives but will also save thousands of tax-payer dollars by decreasing the costs associated with impounding and euthanizing feral cats as well as decreasing the number of unwanted kittens born every year. It's a win-win for the cats and citizens of Brevard County.



~ Isn't removing and killing the cats the only effective way to eliminate the cat problem? ~

Animal Services traditional approach for feral cats—catching and killing—is endless and it does not keep an area free of cats. Cats choose to reside in a location for two reasons: there is a food source (natural or manmade) 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. If all the cats in a colony are not trapped, then the ones left behind will tend to have larger litters of kittens. The cycle of reproduction and nuisance behavior begins all over again. The kittens are more likely to survive because there are fewer cats competing for food. The colony's population will continue to increase until it reaches the number that can be supported by the available food and shelter. When the colony is monitored by a caretaker who removes and/or TNRs any newly arrived cats, the population stabilizes and gradually declines over time. Cats have been living outside alongside people for 10,000 years—a fact that cannot be changed.

~ Why don't feeding bans eliminate feral and stray cats? ~

The logic behind bans against feeding feral cats is that if there is no food available, the cats will go away. This rarely happens. First, cats are territorial animals who can survive for weeks without food and will not easily or quickly abandon their territory. As they grow hungrier and more desperate, they tend to venture closer to homes and businesses in search of food. Despite the effort to starve them out, the cats will also continue to reproduce, resulting in the deaths of many kittens.

Second, feeding bans are nearly impossible to enforce. A person who is determined to feed the cats will usually succeed without being detected. Repeated experience has shown that people who care about the cats will go to great lengths, risking their homes, jobs and even their liberty to feed starving animals. In addition, there may be more than one feeder and other sources of food, including dumpsters, garbage cans and other animals.

~ What happens if a colony care-giver gets a complaint on them? ~

If you're a person who is feeding "stray" cats, you can be held responsible for them and their actions. There are State Statutes and County Ordinances that require cat owners to have their cats vaccinated against rabies and spay/neutered as well as nuisance violations. We will investigate reports of violations of these laws. As the "owner, harbor or caregiver" of an animal, you are responsible for compliance with these local and State laws and can be charged for failure to comply. The animal control officer will perform an investigation. If any violation of public safety, disease or nuisance complaints are observed, the designated colony caregiver will be given reasonable opportunity to correct or improve the situation before Brevard County Sheriff's Office Animal Services, working with the local group responsible, removes the colony.

~ Isn't it cruel to bring a feral cat back after TNR surgery and just leave it in the general area of being trapped? ~

Although there are risks for any animal who is free roaming and living outdoors; outdoors is the natural habitat for feral cats. Feral cat caregivers can take steps to make feral cats more comfortable, like neutering them, feeding them, and providing shelter. These steps promote the cats' well-being, improve their relationships with neighbors, and assist the people who live nearby to understand and co-exist with the cats. But most feral cats don't require intervention beyond Trap-Neuter-Return. If they appear healthy and of normal weight, no signs of severe injuries or disease, it is reasonable to assume they are doing well wherever they came from and can be let go after the spay/neuter recovery period.

~ How can I help? ~

Reliable volunteers are needed. Concerned Citizens for Animal Welfare of Brevard County works closely with Brevard County Sheriff's Office Animal Services to reduce the amount of cats euthanized at our local shelters in Brevard County by getting them spayed/neutered, therefore preventing unwanted litters of cats. What Brevard County Sheriff's Office Animal Services really need now are volunteers to help transport the cats from wherever they are located, to the spay/neuter clinic, and then back to the **EXACT** location where the cat was trapped.

Transporters don't have to trap the cats, keep them over night or handle them. They are just needed to do pickups and drop offs around various places in Brevard County. Drop off times are in the morning, and then later pick up in the afternoon where you may need to take the animal to a rescue person's house where it can stay overnight to recover from surgery. If you feel you have some spare time during the day to help with this, then please contact the Brevard County Sheriff's Office animal rescue coordinator for more information.