

# SAVING ANIMALS, ONE CAT AT A TIME

*A quick guide to rescuing stray and feral cats*

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You don't need a lot of time or space to save the lives of stray cats and place them in good, responsible homes. We have rescued and placed hundreds of them in the last few years, even though we have no special facilities: only a suburban house with a garage and a basement. People who hear about our cat rescue work call us all the time to tell us about stray cats in their yards or on their streets. They mean well, but generally they want us to take the cat of their hands because they can't keep it, and they don't know what else to do.

The fact I, almost anyone can do what we do, even if you already have cats. All it takes is a spare room, garage, basement, shed or any other space where the stray can be confined away from the other cats. Don't worry about the amenities. This is a temporary situation. As long as you provide food, water, shelter and a litter box, the cat will be fine until a permanent home can be found.

You may choose to provide veterinary care. We have all of our strays tested for Feline Leukemia and FIV (Feline AIDS), just for our own peace of mind. We also have them vaccinated for rabies and distemper. If at all possible, put spaying or neutering at the top of the list! In addition to the benefits to the animal, and to the pet overpopulation problem, it's a lot easier to find homes for altered animals. In fact, the more veterinary care you can afford, the easier it will be to find the right home for your foster cat.

So where do you start? Let me begin by describing our "facilities." Our own housecats have the run of the house, and strays are definitely "felines non grata" in any of the territory belonging to our cats. Besides, it simply isn't safe to expose your housecats to a stray unless the stray has been examined by a vet, tested for Feline Leukemia and AIDS (FIV), altered and introduced gradually into your feline family. When we began we used a basement, a garage, a couple of spare bedrooms and sometimes even the bathroom to house our foster cats. We have since moved to a larger house where an additional bedroom can be used instead of the garage.

The number of cats we can put in each room depends upon how they get along; generally a mother with kittens, or three to five adults is the maximum for each area. Some cats do not like others, and those cats have to be kept in a room by themselves. Also, we prefer not to keep cats in our garage during the winter. We keep our snow blower and other winter gear there, and we don't want to take any chances on frightening our strays or allowing them to escape. Don't feel, though, that you need to work on the same scale that we do! If you have only one room and can save one cat, you've done a great thing.

We also have a few large cages. Two are "Tokyo" cages with two doors and two shelves. One is a puppy cage, which opens on the top as well as the front. While not really necessary, a cage is handy for shy or difficult to handle cats; and even cats that turn out to be very friendly and affectionate may start out acting in a decidedly unfriendly manner.

## BRINGING THE STRAY HOME

When you bring a foster cat into your home, it is vitally important that you isolate it from other cats. Stray cats are a notoriously unhealthy group. Respiratory infections are par for the course, and can infect your whole feline family. Look for runny eyes, coughing, or sneezing. If you see these signs, you need to consult your veterinarian. These infections can become chronic, and may even be fatal if not treated. Ear mites and/or worms are also standard. Take a stool sample along when you visit your vet.

If you have one available, it's a good idea to keep a strange cat in a cage for a few days until it gets used to you and learns that it will be fed regularly. A cage may seem cruel, but animal behaviorists tell us that a cat sees it as a safe territory, which it can protect easily; making the cat feel more secure. Also, many cats are frightened and disappear behind the closest obstacle. If the cat hides from you, it will take longer for it to adjust. And don't forget to wash your hands between cats.

For cats that are very shy or difficult to handle, try putting a carrier with the door open in the cage. Chances are the cat will choose to hide in it. If you need to take the cat to the vet or relocate it, you simply close the door to the carrier, saving a lot of stress for both of you. This is a must if you are working with feral cats.

If the cat appears healthy and seems to be easy to handle, let it out of the cage into its room after a few days. We leave the cages set up so that if we need to take in an extra cat for emergency reasons, we can keep more than one cat in the room in separate crates. Though we don't like to use cages for long-term housing, we sometimes need to do it temporarily until the "extra" cat is adopted or assimilated into another room.

If you can afford it, provide veterinary care. Ideally, all strays should be tested for Feline Leukemia and FIV, vaccinated for rabies and distemper, and spayed or neutered. You will also need to take care of fleas and ear mites. If you decide to make foster care an avocation and take in one stray after another, veterinary care can be expensive. Talk to your vet about what care is strictly necessary under the circumstances, and the most cost effective way of handling it. Many vets will give a discount to cat rescuers; especially if you are already a good client.

## ADVERTISING AND SCREENING

There are a number of ways to advertise that your foster cat is up for adoption. The obvious one is the newspaper; but it may not be the safest one. They reach a very wide audience, including people who answer "free to good home" ads and adopt animals for unscrupulous purposes. If you choose this route, screen callers very carefully; and ask for at least a \$25 donation. The idea is to discourage those who want your foster cat for purposes other than a family pet.

The best way to advertise is by word of mouth. Ask everyone you know, and ask them to ask everyone they know. You might even post notices on bulletin boards at work. Placing a cat with a friend or acquaintance gives you peace of mind. You know that your cat is going to a reliable person, and you may even be able to keep track of its progress.

Our most successful advertising is done through flyers with a colored photograph of each cat, and the story of its background. Most vets' offices have bulletin boards, and are happy to post notices about pets for adoption. You stand a good chance of reaching responsible pet owners there, and vets often get calls from people who are looking for a new pet. Make your flyers neat and professional. More people will take the time to read them if they are attractive and easy to read. Put your phone number on your flyer, but never your address, or you may begin to find "drop-offs" in your yard!

## SCREENING

Don't hand a cat over to a person unless you feel confident that it's a good match. When someone calls, find out what kind of cat they're looking for, and if your cat doesn't seem a good fit, tell them. Placing a cat in the wrong home doesn't help either the cat or the person who is adopting it. You may want to ask for a deposit to be refunded upon proof of spaying, neutering, or other veterinary care; or a donation to help cover expenses.

How do you know whether a caller will be the kind of loving, responsible pet owner you are looking for? It isn't difficult to tell if you ask the right questions and LISTEN to the answers. Listen as much to the caller's attitudes as to their answers. Open-ended questions – the kind that can't be answered with "yes" or "no" – give you the most information. Some areas to discuss might be:

- How the caller feels about de-clawing, whether the cat will be kept indoors or out.

- Whether there are children and their ages, and whether there are other pets.

- Whether they have had cats before, and what happened to them.

- How their spouse feels about a new cat in the family, and what kind of cat he or she would prefer.

- If they own or rent their home, and if the landlord has given permission for a cat.

- What kind of cat they are looking for, especially as far as personality is concerned. A cat's personality generally doesn't change. In other words, if they want an affectionate cat, and yours is not affectionate, they probably will not be able to "teach" it to be affectionate.

- Who their vet is, and what kind of veterinary care they give their pets.

- Why do they want a cat?

Don't forget to tell them about any fees they are expected to pay; whether it's a spay/neuter deposit, a donation, or reimbursement for vet fees. Be cautious about people who want to give the cat as a gift. The intended recipient may not be happy to receive it, or they may not be the kind of person you would choose to adopt to.

Many cat rescuers do home visits, and/or check with vets and landlords to be certain that the person in question will be a good pet owner. Though people sometimes may be a little put off by this kind of screening, most will be very glad to cooperate if you explain the reasoning behind the questions. If people are very resistant, they may have something to hide.

Finally, you may want to specify a return policy. That is, if the adoption doesn't work out, or if they can't keep the cat for any reason, the cat is to be returned to you. This helps assure that the cat will not be abandoned or passed along to someone you would not approve of. And do follow up the adoption with a phone call a few weeks after the adoption. Kitty will have had time to adjust by then, and it is wonderfully satisfying to see the bond that has developed between your former foster cat and its new family. Makes you want to start all over again with another stray!