Trap/Neuter/Return with Return to Field Program

With the implementation of Volusia County’s TNR/RTF program VCAS has been faced with many questions/concerns from citizens in the unincorporated county, some supporting the program, some adamantly against it. It has been a learning experience for both the animal control 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, 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, 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 she has 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 dairy cow, a housecat, or a parrot. 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.

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

Volusia County does not currently have a cat leash law. At this time, Volusia County has no ordinance requirements, or resources to patrol neighborhoods looking for stray cats. Thus, it is not illegal for a person to allow their cat to roam loose as long as that cat is spayed or neutered as per Volusia County’s Mandatory Spay and Neuter Ordinance. 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 Volusia County 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 or contact Volusia County Animal Services to be put on a waiting list to borrow one of ours. You would be instructed to set this trap, usually at night, and to contact Volusia County Animal Services when there is a cat in the trap. This trapped cat would be evaluated and if determined healthy, transported to the Volusia County mobile spay/neuter bus “Pet Vet Cruiser” where it would be spay/neutered, vaccinated and ear-tipped. After the surgery recovery time, this cat would be returned back to the general area of captured. 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 and 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 repellant 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 Volusia County 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 and 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’ 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 contact Volusia County Animal Services. The kittens will be placed with a care-giver if available. If no care-giver is available they will be transported to the humane society.

~ 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 Volusia County Animal Services. Call your doctor and follow his/her advise for treatment. It is very important to report the bite within 24 hours to Volusia County Animal Services.

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

Volusia County Animal Services will transport the sick/injured cat to the humane society. If the cat is unable to be captured, a cat trap will be issued. Once inside the trap, contact Volusia County 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 Volusia 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-ed 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.

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

This is a County Council approved program and is the only option available for citizens of unincorporated Volusia 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 Volusia County.
Isn’t removing and killing the cats the only effective way to eliminate the cat problem?

Animal control’s 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 then 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. Even though there are not any cat leash laws at this time, 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, harbinger or keeper” 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 Volusia County Animal Services, working with CCFAW, 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 Volusia County works closely with Volusia County Animal Services to reduce the amount of cats euthanized at our local shelters out of Unincorporated Volusia County by getting them spayed/neutered on the Pet Vet Cruiser, therefore preventing unwanted litters of cats. What CCFAW and Volusia County Animal Services really need now are volunteers to help transport the cats from wherever they are located, to the Pet Vet Cruiser, 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 Volusia County. Drop off times are in the morning, and then later on 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 email ccfaw@ccfaw.org for more details.
Volusia County Animal Services

Trap/Neuter/Return with Return to Field Program

Frequently Asked Questions about TNR/RTF

In January 2015 Volusia County Animal Services, with County Council’s approval, working in conjunction with Concerned Citizens for Animal Welfare, implemented a trap/neuter/return (TNR) with return-to-field (RTF) program as a solution to the ever growing number of free-roaming or feral cats that reside in Volusia County.

For years these cats have been trapped, transported to area humane societies, and euthanized. This method has been unsuccessful in reducing the numbers of cats. Scientific evidence indicates that removing feral cat populations only opens up the habitat to an influx of new cats, either from neighboring territories or born from survivors. Each time cats are removed, the population will rebound through a natural phenomenon known as the “vacuum effect,” drawing the County into a costly, endless cycle of trapping and killing.

A combination of both TNR and RTF creates the greatest opportunity to maximize cat welfare, reduce nuisance concerns, and minimize reproduction. Bringing all the players in the County together to form a common strategy will accelerate the progress in lowering euthanasia and reducing the free-roaming cat population.

To learn more and/or register for this free program contact:

www.ccfaw.org
386/405-1559
Email: ccfaw@ccfaw.org
~ What is the “Vacuum effect”? ~

This occurs when a colony of cats is completely removed from a location, but the food source and shelter remain. A vacuum is created and before long, other cats in the area move in to take advantage of the resources. If the cats are intact, the colony will grow right back to the level the available resources can support.

~ How can the cat overpopulation problem be solved? ~

Spaying or neutering feral or stray cats using trap/neuter/return combined with return to field will reduce their numbers. Spaying or neutering pet cats before they reproduce will reduce their numbers and help stop pet overpopulation.

~ Is There a Difference Between a Stray Cat and a Feral Cat? ~

Yes. A feral cat is primarily wild-raised or has adapted to feral life, while we define a stray cat as someone’s pet who has become lost or has been abandoned. Stray cats are usually tame and comfortable around people. They will frequently rub against legs and exhibit behaviors such as purring and meowing. In contrast, feral cats are notably quiet and keep their distance. Stray cats will also often try to make a home near humans—in car garages, front porches or backyards. Most are completely reliant on humans as a food source and are not yet able to cope with life on the streets.

~ What is Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR)? ~

Trap/Neuter/Return is the humane, effective approach for feral cats. Feral cats are humanely trapped, spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and eartipped (the universal symbol of a neutered and vaccinated cat), and then returned to their outdoor home. Socialized cats and kittens are adopted into homes. The colony’s population stabilizes—no more kittens! Trap/Neuter/Return improves their lives and their relations with the community; the behaviors and stresses associated with mating stop.

~ What is a “cat colony”? ~

A cat colony is one or more free-roaming cats that live in close proximity to each other. Colonies are often formed around shelter and a food source.

~ How Does TNR Help Feral Cats? ~

Through TNR, feral cats can live out their lives without adding to the homeless cat population. By stabilizing the population, cats will naturally have more space, shelter and food, and fewer risks of disease. After being spayed or neutered, cats living in colonies tend to gain weight and live healthier lives. By neutering male cats, you also reduce the risk of injury and infection, since intact males have a natural instinct to fight with other cats. Spaying also means female cats do not go into heat. That means they attract fewer tom cats to the area, reducing fighting.
~How Does TNR Benefit the Community?~

TNR helps the community by stabilizing the population of the feral colony and, over time, reducing it. At the same time, nuisance behaviors such as spraying, excessive noisemaking and fighting are largely eliminated, and no more kittens are born. Yet, the benefit of natural rodent control is continued.

~What is Volusia County Animal Services’ role in the TNR program?~

The Volusia County mobile spay/neuter bus “Pet Vet Cruiser” designates three days/month for spay/neuter surgeries, rabies and distemper vaccinations, ear tipping and pain medications at no cost for registered colony caregivers. Appointments are made by contacting CCFAW at 386/405-1559 or emailing ccfaw@ccfaw.org. VCAS will also provide the use of our cat traps when needed.

~How can I join the TNR Program?~

Volusia County Animal Services has partnered with the non-profit group “Concerned Citizens for Animal Welfare” (CCFAW) to coordinate the TNR program. The first step to join this program is to register as a colony care giver by contacting CCFAW at 386/405-1559 or by email: ccfaw@ccfaw.org. They will provide you with instruction and information regarding this program.

~Why do I need to register in order to participate in this program?~

Concerned Citizens for Animal Welfare is the lead non-profit agency who has partnered with Volusia County Animal Services to work toward the common goal of reducing the cat over-population problem in Volusia County. Upon registering with CCFAW you will be provided instruction regarding utilizing the county’s free TNR spay/neuter program. They will set your appointment date/time and be available for questions regarding any issues you might encounter with the trapping process. They will provide Volusia County Animal Services with a list of those who have registered with them. This information will be used on the surgery date to verify they have qualified to participate in this program and have been provided the necessary information regarding the program and also as a way for animal control officers to contact them if an ear-tipped cat is picked up in the area of their registered colony.

~What is Ear-Tipping and Why Is It Important?~

Ear-tipping is a widely accepted means of marking a feral cat that has been spayed or neutered. It also often identifies them as being part of a colony with a caretaker. Ear-tipping is the humane surgical removal of the top quarter-inch of the ear. The procedure is performed by a licensed veterinarian, typically during the spay/neuter surgery. Ear-tipping is completely safe and rarely requires special aftercare. Ear-tipping is especially important as it prevents an already spayed or neutered cat the stress of re-trapping and, more important, an unnecessary surgery.
~What is Return to Field?~

A free-roaming (feral) cat is trapped by a private citizen or a Volusia County Animal Control Officer. Although the cat is perfectly healthy, it is feral and unadoptable. Even if the cat was friendly, the shelter may have no space or foster home to hold it. The traditional practice in these circumstances is to euthanize the cat after any mandatory holding period. With a Return to Field program, instead of being taken to a shelter to be euthanized, the cat is transported by the Animal Control Officer, while still in the trap, to the Pet Vet Cruiser, where it is spayed or neutered, vaccinated and ear-tipped. Concerned Citizens for Animal Welfare is contacted and the cat is picked up by a care-giver. After a period of recovery the cat is transported back to the general area of capture and released.

~What are the benefits to Return to Field?~

An immediate and often dramatic reduction of the number of cats transported to the humane societies for euthanasia is the most direct benefit of Return to Field. This reduction will save tax-payer dollars by decreasing the County’s monthly humane society bill as well as saving cat lives.

~Are all cats that are trapped or captured returned to the general area of capture?~

Only unidentified, healthy stray cats in good body condition and old enough to fend for itself will be spayed/neutered and returned to the general area of capture. Volusia County Animal Control Officers will transport the sick, malnourished, injured or declawed cats to the humane society. The health status of the cats is taken as direct evidence they have access to sufficient food and shelter to maintain condition, provided they are returned promptly to the same location where they were found.