




Alley Cat Allies
The cats' leading advocate

How to Help Feral Cats

A step-by-step guide to **Trap-Neuter-Return**





A teacher at the high school, your boss, the clerk at the grocery store—people all over the country care for outdoor cats every day. Like them, you’ve discovered cats in your community, and you want to help them.

Millions of cats who make their home outdoors are known as *feral cats*.

Feral cats are domestic cats. Like pet cats and stray cats. The difference is that feral cats are not socialized to people, and so they are wary of us and cannot be adopted. They have a home—the outdoors.

And, there is a simple way you can help them: Trap-Neuter-Return. This program ends reproduction, stabilizes colony populations, and improves cats’ lives. The behaviors and stresses associated with mating—pregnancy, yowling, spraying, and fighting—stop. And there are no new litters of kittens.

What is Trap-Neuter-Return?

- 1 Trap:** Humanely (painlessly) trap all of the cats in a colony (a group of cats living outdoors together).
- 2 Neuter:** Take the cats in their traps to a veterinarian or clinic to be neutered, vaccinated, and eartipped (a universal symbol indicating they have been neutered).
- 3 Return:** Return the cats to their original outdoor home.



Watch Alley Cat Allies’ video about Trap-Neuter-Return, *Trapping Cats: How to Trap an Entire Colony*, as a complement to this guide. Find it online at www.alleycat.org/Videos.



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What NOT to do if you want to help cats

You may think that calling animal control is the best way to help them. But it isn't. Remember that because feral cats are unsocialized to people, they are not adoptable. Even socialized cats are likely to be killed if taken to a shelter.

It's a fact that in today's animal control and shelter system, animals who are not adoptable—including feral cats—are killed. Clearly, they don't belong in the shelter system.

This guide will help you help cats effectively and humanely.

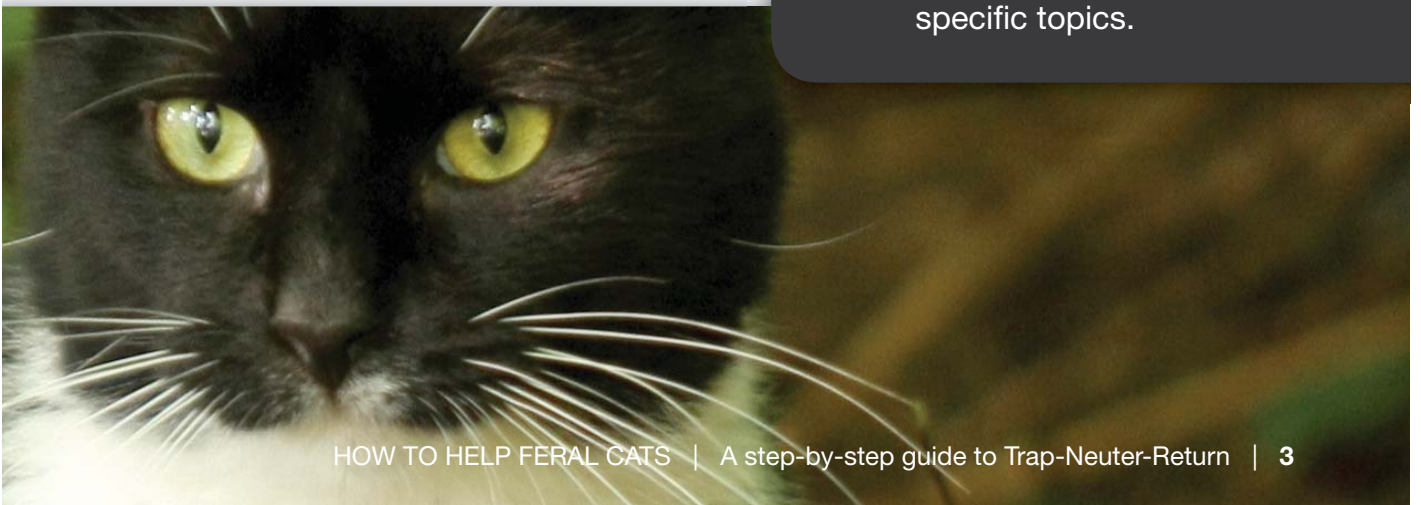
Since 1990, Alley Cat Allies has helped hundreds of thousands of individuals and local organizations worldwide improve the lives of feral cats by providing guidance on how to implement Trap-Neuter-Return, and educating communities about the benefits of the program. This guide reflects our standards we've developed in our over 20-year history, and it will show you how easy it is to help cats. Armed with your new knowledge, you will be able to join thousands of people working to improve the lives of feral cats!

Alley Cat Allies' Feral Friends Network

A member of Alley Cat Allies' Feral Friends Network in your area may be able to give you advice on performing Trap-Neuter-Return, loan you humane traps, or provide veterinary services for feral cats. Request a list of Feral Friends Network members near you at www.alleycat.org/Response.



Throughout the booklet we refer you to our website, www.alleycat.org. Here you can find more in-depth information on specific topics.




STEP 1:

Preparation for Trapping

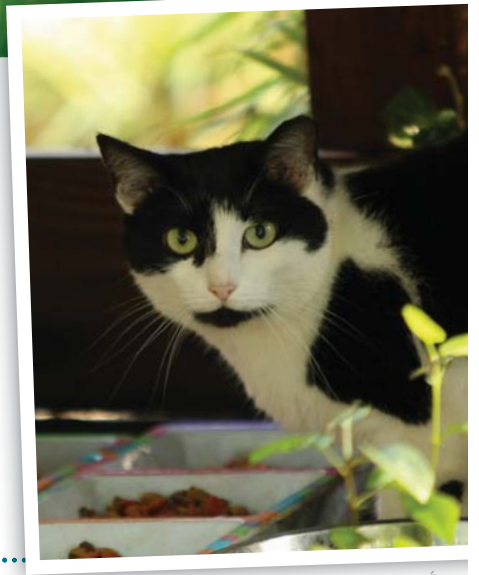
Five Things to Keep in Mind about Trapping:

- 1) **Only use a humane box trap or drop trap to trap a feral cat.** *(Never use darts or tranquilizers.)*
- 2) **Never attempt to pick up or handle a conscious feral cat—even a kitten.** You risk injury to yourself and the cat. *(Note: A cat with no vaccination record could be killed for rabies testing if a person is bitten!)*
- 3) **Do what you can to trap all cats and kittens during your first trapping session.** This is important because the more times cats are exposed to the trapping process, the more suspicious they become of traps.
- 4) **Feral cats are cautious of people in general.** This fact should influence every choice you make when trapping. They may feel even more frightened and threatened when faced with a new experience, like being trapped (caged) and transported to a veterinarian. This is true for cats who normally act docile around their caregivers as well. Feral cats will not communicate their needs (if they are hurt, in pain, or frightened). Instead, they will thrash about, trying to escape when in their traps or they may simply “shut down.” It is essential that you stay quiet, calm, and conscious of the cats’ well-being during your trapping ventures.
- 5) **Every trapping effort is different.** A colony’s location—a college campus, a warehouse, a farm, an alley, a small business parking lot—will have unique elements for you to consider. Use your discretion and common sense to determine any additional steps to those provided in this guide, and tailor the basics to fit your colony’s situation. For instance, you may need to work with college administrators, connect with other caregivers, or ensure you have enough traps and vehicles for a large colony.





But most importantly, before you trap a cat, *PLAN*. Take time to feel comfortable and confident. Review all of the Trap-Neuter-Return steps and scenarios in this booklet and online. This will help you be calm and unruffled when trapping—ensuring the safety and lowered stress level of the cats. And remember, you’re doing what is best for the cats. Keep in mind that simply doing Trap-Neuter-Return significantly improves the cats’ lives.



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1) Assess the Cats and Their Environment

- If there are signs of other caregivers, such as food or water bowls, consider leaving a note with your contact information. Be clear in the note that you are there to help the cats, not to remove them. Once you’ve found any other caregivers in the area, coordinate your efforts—their cooperation could be critical for success.
- Communicate with neighbors around the colony. Open communication and education are important parts of conducting Trap-Neuter-Return. Many people are not aware that feral cats live and thrive outdoors and that neutering improves their lives—and they may have problems with the cats that can easily be addressed. By introducing yourself as the person to contact if neighbors have questions or concerns, you can prevent potential situations from escalating and avoid endangering the cats. Learn more about helping cats and people co-exist at www.alleycat.org/CommunityRelations.
- Use the Alley Cat Allies’ Feral Cat Tracking System, www.alleycat.org/Tracking, to record the number of cats and a brief description of each, including health status. Also include photos of each cat if possible.
- While assessing the colony, determine if the cats are stray or feral. Stray and feral cats differ in their socialization level to people—stray cats are more friendly toward people and feral cats are more wary of people.

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This will help you prepare for what you will do after trapping and neutering—will you be looking for adoptive homes for the stray cats or returning all of the cats to the colony? (see ‘Special Scenarios,’ below.) Note the cat’s socialization level on the tracking sheet. It can be difficult to discern a cat’s level of socialization by just looking at her. Observe the cats’ appearance and behavior using the quick tips below. These tips are only a *general* guide. Each cat acts differently, so trust your own judgment. You can learn more about the difference between stray and feral cats at www.alleycat.org/StrayorFeral.

Stray Cat	Feral Cat
1 Likely to approach you	Will not approach you
2 May approach food right away that you put down	Will wait until you leave before approaching food that you put down
3 Likely to be vocal	Will be silent
4 May look disheveled	Will appear groomed
5 May be seen at all hours of the day	May be more active at night or only come out at night

2) Be Prepared for Special Scenarios

- **Kittens and/or Nursing Mothers:** You may come across kittens and/or nursing mothers in your trapping efforts. There are many factors for you to take into account before you decide what your plan of action will be, including the presence of the mother, the kittens’ age, and your own resources. Learn what to take into consideration, as well as how to trap the entire family at www.alleycat.org/Kittens. If you decide to include kittens and/or the nursing mother in Trap-Neuter-Return, it is important to use the proper traps (see equipment list at www.alleycat.org/Equipment) to ensure their safety. Follow proper post-surgery protocol for kittens and mothers, available at www.alleycat.org/PostSurgery.
- **Ill or Injured Cats:** Plan ahead to ensure you can provide immediate care to, and make decisions about, an ill or injured cat. Have the phone number on hand of a veterinarian who works with feral cats—and whose practice will be open while you are trapping. Building up an emergency fund to help cover unexpected expenses is a good idea, so you can get a cat medical treatment immediately if necessary.

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- **Socialized Cats:** Have a plan in place for how to help socialized cats. For instance, will you find potential foster or adoptive homes, work with a local cat rescue group, or include the cats in your Trap-Neuter-Return program? Whatever your resources allow, it's important to neuter every cat in the colony. For more information and tips on finding homes for socialized cats, visit www.alleycat.org/FindingAHome.
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3) Establish a Feeding Schedule

To get the cats used to coming out and eating while you are there (and help with your assessment process), establish a set time and place to feed the cats every day. Feed the cats as much as they can eat in a 30-minute period, and pick up the food after that period. If you have a feeding station, make sure it is positioned in an area that is free of human traffic and inconspicuous.

Remember to coordinate your feeding and trapping efforts with other caregivers. This will make the best use of your time and resources.



Tip: Feed out of unset traps for one to two weeks prior to the trapping day, to get cats used to seeing and walking into them. Do not put food anywhere else but inside the trap. Remove the back door, or secure the door of the trap so it stays open. Remove traps after the cats eat so there is no risk of theft, damage, or a cat accidentally being trapped.

4) Find and Coordinate with a Feral Friendly Veterinarian or Clinic

Work with a veterinarian or neuter clinic with feral cat experience. You can find one by requesting a list of Feral Friends Network members in your area using our inquiry form at www.alleycat.org/Response. Or, educate your own veterinarian who may not be familiar with feral cats, but would like to learn, with our comprehensive feral cat veterinary resource center at www.alleycat.org/Veterinarian.




Consider the following to help you choose your veterinarian or clinic and prepare them for the cats' neuter surgeries:

- **Prices:** Ask for the exact charge for spaying and neutering, vaccines, and all other treatments. Some clinics provide many services for a flat rate. Others itemize all of the services that they provide, including flea, deworming, and ear mite medication if needed, and may charge additionally for any treatments related to surgery, such as anesthesia and pain medication. Ask if these treatments are optional and then decide which services to request. Alley Cat Allies strongly recommends that all cats being sterilized be given pain medication unless there is a medical reason not to.
- **Appointment Policies:** Find out if the clinic understands the unpredictable nature of trapping cats. You may intend to trap six cats, but only end up trapping four. Conversely, you may think there are six cats to be trapped and then end up discovering a seventh. It's important that the clinic be flexible in order to accommodate a few more or less cats than you expected.
- **Testing Protocols:** Ensure that testing for FeLV and FIV is not a requirement. Alley Cat Allies follows the best practices based on research conducted by veterinary experts, and research indicates that there is no greater incidence of disease in feral cats than there is in pet cats—the average rate of infection is 3% to 6% of both pet cats and feral cats.



Tip: It is not common for feral cats to get the 'pre-op' blood test which is performed for pet cats at some veterinary hospitals.





Test results are not a diagnosis and tests can produce false positives, so we do not recommend euthanizing cats who test positive unless they are symptomatic, i.e. ill beyond recovery. Learn more about FeLV and FIV testing at www.alleycat.org/FeLV-FIV.

- **Vaccines:** Find out which vaccinations they require, which they offer, and how much they cost. You will want to get rabies vaccines, as mandated by your state regulations. If funding is available, FVRCP vaccines (also known as distemper or feline disease vaccines) are also recommended.
- **Ill or Injured Cats:** Know their policies concerning cats who need extra medical attention. Make sure you know how they will charge for treatments. Ask that they call you before making any decisions about procedures or how they will treat the cats. Ensure that you will be given the ability to make the ultimate decision regarding humane euthanasia if necessary.
- **Kittens:** Do they have age or weight requirements for kitten neuter? Ask for their kitten surgery protocol. Kittens can be safely spayed or neutered if they are healthy and weigh two pounds. To learn more about early-age spay and neuter, go to www.alleycat.org/EarlyAge. Consult with your veterinarian about feeding requirements for kittens prior to trapping; kittens may not need to have food withheld before surgery because their metabolism is faster than adult cats. To learn how to safely feed cats while they are in their traps, go to www.alleycat.org/PostSurgery.
- **Pregnant or In-Heat Females:** Will they spay a pregnant female or a female in estrus (in heat) and are they experienced in the procedure? Is there an extra fee for this?



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- **Recovery:** Find out when they discharge cats after surgery, if they have different discharge times for males, females, pregnant females, etc. Ask if they hold cats overnight for recovery in their office and if so, if there is an extra charge for this service.
- **Eartipping:** Check that the clinic understands the importance of eartipping the cats, and knows how to perform the procedure. Find veterinary instructions for eartipping at www.alleycat.org/Eartip.
- **Other Protocols:** Confirm that they use dissolvable sutures so no follow up appointment is needed, and that they will remove all items they attached to the cats, such as tags, bandages, collars, or other items that either may have identified them in the clinic or been part of their medical care. See Surgery Recovery instructions for veterinarians at www.alleycat.org/Veterinarian.



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Eartipping—What Does it Mean?

Eartipping is the removal of the tip of a cat's left ear (approximately 3/8"). It is an effective and universally accepted method to identify a neutered and vaccinated feral cat. To learn more about eartipping visit www.alleycat.org/Eartip.

To learn more about other considerations you should take into account, and issues veterinarians must know about when working with feral cats, visit: www.alleycat.org/Veterinarian. For help with finding financial resources go to www.alleycat.org and search for 'fundraising' and 'financial tips'.



5) Set up your Holding/Recovery Area

- Choose an indoor, dry, temperature-controlled (about 75 degrees), and safe overnight holding/recovery area for use before and after the cats' surgeries.
- Some examples of acceptable locations include bathrooms, basements, garages—or possibly your veterinarian's office, as discussed above.
- Make sure it is quiet and inaccessible to other animals.
- Ensure that all entries in and out (doors, windows, ceiling tiles, etc.) are closed at all times in the unlikely event that a cat should escape from her trap.

6) Assemble your Trapping Kit

Your trapping kit should include:

- A FRIEND for your safety and peace of mind. Alley Cat Allies recommends trapping with at least one other person. A cell phone and a flashlight are also suggested for these reasons.
- TRAPS. For a list of the traps Alley Cat Allies recommends please go to our website www.alleycat.org/Equipment. You should have one trap per cat plus a few extras in case additional cats are trapped that you did not account for.
- BAIT, including several large pop-top cans of tuna, mackerel, sardines or other smelly fish that is tempting to the cats, preferably oil packed so that it does not dry out (if you don't bring pop-top cans, be sure to bring a can opener).



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- WET wipes for easy clean up.
- FORKS or spoons (to scoop out the bait). Paper towels or wipes.
- NEWSPAPERS to line the bottom of the traps, and tape or clothespins to hold it to trap floor, if necessary (especially for windy days).
- TRAP LABELS (see page 13 for suggested text) with room for the date, cat description, exact location where cat was trapped, and room for any observations, such as noticeable injuries.
- TRAP COVERS that are big enough (i.e. beach size towels, blankets, or sheets—cut to size) to fully cover the top and all four sides of each trap after cats are caught, one cover per trap.
- CARABINERS, twist ties, or pipe cleaners to secure the doors of the traps closed.
- TRASH BAGS for tuna lids, used plasticware, etc.
- THICK GLOVES to wear for your safety and comfort while carrying cats in traps.
- ALLEY CAT ALLIES' FERAL CAT COLONY TRACKING SYSTEM (www.alleycat.org/Tracking) and pen or pencil and clipboard.
- VEHICLE LINERS such as cardboard, large plastic trash bags, a plastic shower curtain, or towels. Puppy pads also work well if the cats have “accidents.”
- BUNGEE CORDS to hold traps securely in place in your vehicle during transportation.
- PATIENCE. Trapping can be time-consuming and, at certain moments, a bit stressful. If you remember to stay calm and follow the plan that you’ve devised, you will be successful!

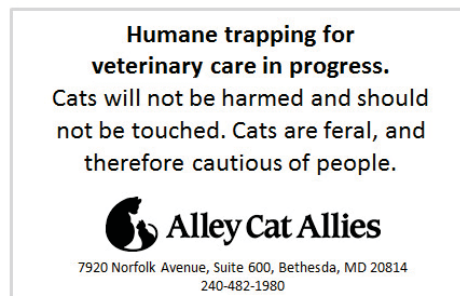




7) Prepare Equipment

Practice ahead of time how to set and bait traps. Our photo demonstrations, linked from www.alleycat.org/Traps can help.

It's always a good idea to test all your traps before going out to ensure they are functioning properly. Fill in the label mentioned above with your name, phone number, and information on what you are doing, for example:



Plan to use a vehicle that comfortably fits all the traps inside its climate-controlled area. You may be able to stack traps on top of one another, as long as you have a way to secure them so that there is no way for them to fall or tip over. Just be sure to use a puppy pad or folded newspaper between the traps to protect cats in lower traps.

8) Make Spay and Neuter Appointments

Pick the day you will trap, and make your neuter appointments. You should schedule the appointments to occur as close to the day of trapping as possible (preferably trap the day before or the morning of the appointment); the number of reservations should equal the number of cats you plan to trap.

Now you are ready to start trapping.



STEP 2: Trapping

1) Set-up and Prepare for Trapping

Do all of your set up and preparation away from the colony site—remember, feral cats are generally fearful of people. Trapping will also go more smoothly if you don't disrupt the cats' feeding area. Throughout the entire trapping process, clinic stay, recovery, and return, you should make the environment around the cats as calm and quiet as possible. This will help minimize their stress.

Twenty-four hours before trapping, withhold food, but always continue to provide water. This will ensure that the cats are hungry enough to go into the traps. Remind other caregivers and neighbors to withhold food as well.

On the day of trapping, prepare all of the traps:

- Count all of your traps and record how many you have.
- Line trap bottoms with newspaper, and tape or clothespin it down if it's windy.
- Before baiting, ensure the trip plate is functioning properly.
- Bait traps. Place about one tablespoon of bait at the very back of the trap, so that the cat will step on the trigger plate while attempting to reach the food. You

may choose to put the food on a safe (without sharp edges) disposable container (such as a plastic lid or paper plate). Drizzle some juice from the bait in a zigzag pattern along the trap floor toward the entrance.

Also place a tiny bit of food (¼ teaspoon) just inside the entrance of the trap to encourage the cat to walk in. Do not use too much food at the entrance of the trap. The cat must be hungry enough to continue to the trip plate, and cats should have a relatively empty stomach for at least 12 hours before surgery.



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- At the colony site, place traps on level ground—the cats will not enter an unstable or wobbly trap. Make sure they are not placed on a hill where they could tip or roll over when cats enter them. Ensure that metal traps do not sit on particularly hot or cold pavement (those temperatures could make the metal painful to the cats' paw pads when they touch it).
- On your already prepared trap labels, fill in the exact location where you are setting the trap. This will make return much easier!
- Set the trap and move away from the area.

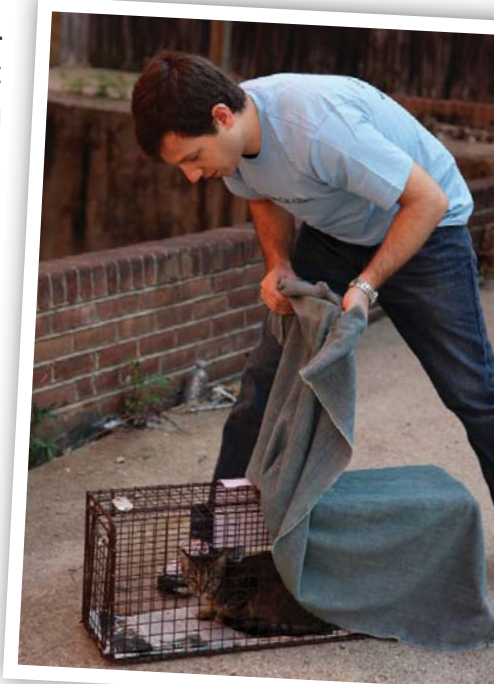
Be patient. At each trap, wait for a cat to enter and for the trap to close.




Tip: Keep an eye on the traps at all times for the safety of the cats and to make sure your equipment is not taken or tampered with. Observe from a location far enough away that the cats will not be disturbed, but close enough so you can still see all the traps.

2) Once Cats are Trapped, Calmly Walk Over to the Traps:

- Cover the traps with trap covers.
- Do not open the traps or release cats once trapped—even if it appears that the cats are hurting themselves. Feral cats may thrash around after being trapped. Do not be alarmed by this—it is completely normal. Covering the trap will calm them down almost immediately. And remember; never try to touch feral cats or let them out of the trap.
- When trapping an entire colony, use your best judgment about removing each cat as they are trapped, since the other cats might scare, thus disrupting the trapping. Wait to remove the trapped cats until the other cats are not around. Or when setting out your traps, partially cover the back end of the traps, which will provide the trapped cats with a bit of security until you can cover them fully. Keep in mind that these are guidelines and some situations will call for you to deviate from them.



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For example, if a cat is severely thrashing around you may need to go ahead and cover the trap and remove it from the area, or if you are trapping in cold weather, cats should be covered and moved to a warm location (like your car) as soon as they are trapped.

- Count your traps again before leaving the trapping area to ensure you don't leave any traps behind.



Tip: Cats can become trap-shy—frightened to go near or enter a trap, or trap-savvy—mastered the art of removing food without triggering the trap. Don't be discouraged. There are several unique but straightforward techniques to humanely trapping hard-to-trap-cats, including the use of a drop trap. Please visit www.alleycat.org/HardtoTrap.



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3) Transport the Cats from the Trapping Site

Safely transport the cats to the veterinarian's office, clinic, or to the holding area which you should have already prepared. Please refer to the preparation section on page 11.

STEP 3: Post Surgery

- The cats should be returned to you in the same covered traps in which they were brought to the clinic, with clean newspaper inside. You will receive medical records, including rabies vaccine certificates. Be sure to save these for your files!
- Let the cats recover in the covered traps overnight in the climate-controlled and quiet recovery area you have prepared. When cats are recovering from anesthesia they are unable to regulate their body temperature, which is why it is so important for the recovery area to be warm but not hot.
- While the cats are recovering, keep them in their covered traps; this reduces the stress on the cats and ensures the safety of both you and the cats.



Tip: According to Dr. Julie Levy, a leading feral cat veterinarian and researcher, a good rule of thumb is that cats can be returned 24 hours after surgery, once they're clear-eyed and alert unless advised otherwise by their veterinarian. The clinic may ask you to make exceptions for cats who are slow to recover, need continuing post-operative care, or have specific issues. You may also want to consider holding cats longer in freezing weather, as anesthesia drugs may impact their ability to regulate temperature. However, it is always the goal to return the cats as soon as you can—"rapid return" is associated with better outcomes, and confinement for feral cats is extremely stressful.

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- Monitor the cats. Keep an eye out for bleeding, infection, illness, or lack of appetite. If a cat is bleeding, vomiting, breathing irregularly, or not waking up, contact your veterinarian immediately!
- Feed kittens who are under six months old shortly after they wake from anesthesia. Adult cats can be fed a few hours after they have woken from anesthesia, but you may also want to wait to feed them after you return them to their colony site. To learn how to safely feed cats while they are in their traps, go to www.alleycat.org/PostSurgery.
- Return the cats to the same location (their colony site) where you trapped them. Early morning is a good time. Point the trap away from roads or high-traffic areas. Open the front door of the trap and completely remove the cover, or if the trap has a rear door, pull the cover away from the back door, pull that door up and off (if possible with your trap), then completely remove the cover and walk away. Be careful to keep your distance and keep your fingers and hands as far from the cat as possible when opening the trap. Sometimes it takes the cats a moment to realize where they are, but they will run off once they get their bearings. See video of cats being returned in *Trapping Cats: How to Trap an Entire Colony*, available at www.alleycat.org/Videos.
- Once you have returned the cats, provide food and water. If you are continuing to care for them, you can then resume the cats' regular feeding schedule.
- The cats may stay away from the area for a few days after being returned, but they will come back eventually.
- Clean traps with non-toxic disinfectant; throw out all newspaper, and wash trap covers.
- For more detailed post-surgery instructions, visit www.alleycat.org/PostSurgery.



GREAT JOB!

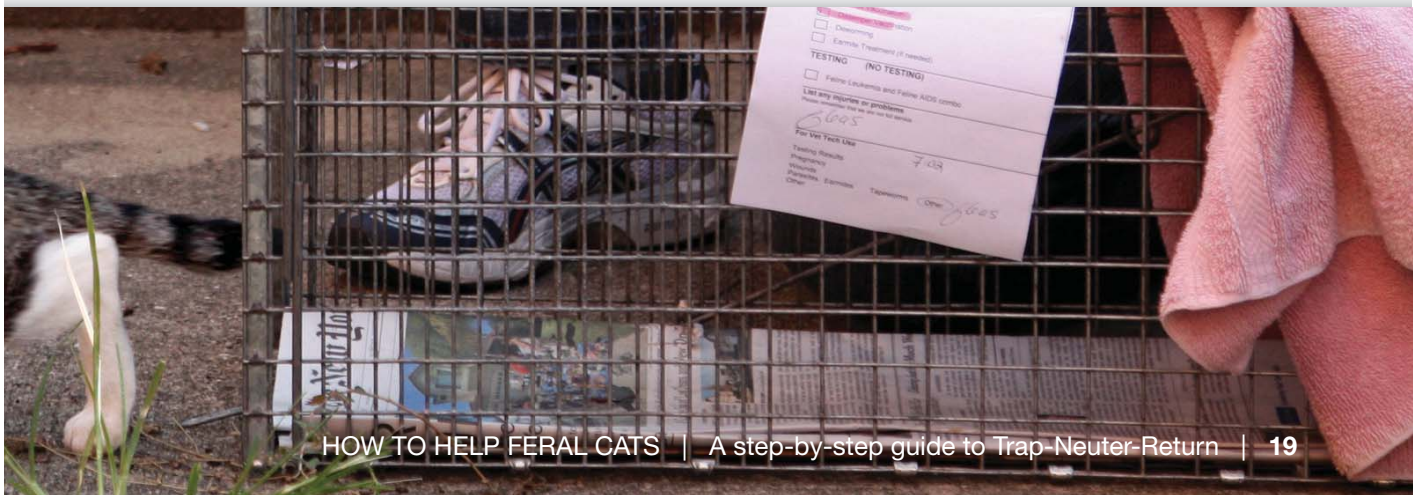
You made it through a successful trapping.

You have joined the hundreds of thousands of other compassionate individuals and groups across the globe working to improve and protect the lives of outdoor cats.

After you have returned the neutered feral cats...

- Trap any remaining colony members that eluded your first round of trapping, and any newcomers that join the colony.
- If you will be trapping on a larger scale or if you will be continuing to trap in surrounding areas, you should implement ‘targeted trapping.’ It is the most effective method of trapping because it targets entire colonies in a single geographic location before moving on to the surrounding colonies and ensures that populations are stabilized, creating “kitten-free zones.” To learn more about targeted trapping visit www.alleycat.org/TargetedTrapping.
- Alley Cat Allies’ best practices for ongoing colony care can be found at www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.
- Join the Alley Cat Allies Feral Friends Network to put your new skills to work as a resource for your community. Visit www.alleycat.org/FeralFriends for more information and to submit an online application.
- Learn about the other resources Alley Cat Allies has to offer, including newsletters, videos, and merchandise, and sign up to learn more about the issues facing cats at www.alleycat.org. For more personalized help, you can access our email assistance form at www.alleycat.org/GetHelp or you can contact Alley Cat Allies at (240) 482-1980.

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The cats' leading advocate



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