TNR Trap-Neuter-Return

This innovative technique involves trapping the cats in a colony, having them neutered, vaccinated, marked for identification, and returning them to their territory. A caretaker then provides regular food and shelter and monitors the colony over time. With TNR, the cats' reproductive capacity is eliminated; leading to a gradual decline in their numbers, and nuisance behavior is substantially reduced.

TNR holds great promise for effectively limiting feral cat reproduction and gradually lowering the cats' numbers. In addition, nuisance behavior, such as yowling and odor, are significantly reduced by the neutering. The returned cats are looked after and allowed to live out their lives in a manner often most suitable to their feral nature. When properly implemented, TNR is a win-win for the cats and the community.

Often feral colonies are found in locations where contact with humans is slight, such as abandoned buildings, alleyways, vacant lots, remote parts of parks, warehouses and barns. It's not unusual, however, to also find the cats in more populated areas, such as the backyards of a residential block, the parking lot of a supermarket, the grounds of a prison or jail, or around the clubhouse of a golf course. They are extremely adaptable animals who can survive almost anywhere if enough food and the most basic of shelter is available.

Ideally, all the cats in the colony will be caught and fixed and every effort should be made to do so, even if they can't all be trapped at once. Caretaking a feral colony is made much easier when the neutering rate is 100 percent. Otherwise, that one female you didn't get may keep having litters of kittens. Still, getting most of the adults fixed will at least temporarily stabilize and improve the situation.

The minimum veterinary intervention upon capture includes spay/neuter, "eartipping" and rabies vaccinations. Eartipping is a procedure where a quarter inch off the tip of the left ear is removed in a straight line cut. It is the only reliable method known for identifying a neutered feral, as will be discussed at length in Lesson 7.

Whenever possible, kittens young enough to be easily socialized should be removed from the colony along with friendly adults who are clearly former domestics and can be re-homed. Removing adoptable cats immediately reduces the size of the feral population (a primary goal of TNR) and gives the removed cats a chance at longer, safer lives. Four factors can help determine how feral a cat might be: Age, Generation, Human Contact, and Personality. Depending on these generalities, you may be able to guess how tamable a cat might be.

That said, if foster resources are not available, the TNR of the colony should not be delayed. A mistake well-meaning caretakers sometimes make is to devote all their time initially to rescuing kittens and abandoned adults and finding them homes, believing this should take priority over getting the colony fixed. As a result, more kittens are born in the interim, the caretaker's resources become drained and the TNR may never happen. A better approach is to go ahead right away with getting the colony neutered and to rescue as many kittens or friendly adults that resources available at the time allow. This approach provides the greatest benefit to the most cats in the long-term.

Following surgery and a recovery period lasting usually two to three days, the ferals are returned to their territory. They must be brought back to the location where they were trapped and not released elsewhere – ferals are extremely tied to their surroundings and will flee in search of them if placed somewhere new without a proper relocation effort having been made. To relocate ferals safely, two to three weeks of confinement in the new territory is required. If relocation is needed, please involve

someone experienced with this process for your initial experience – it is a process that requires time, strict attention and follow up, and should not be undertaken lightly.

While less dramatic than the trapping phase, after-care is the key to success of any TNR project. The cats will continuously need food and shelter and should be provided these basic necessities in as consistent a manner as possible. Moreover, many things will happen over the years of the cats' lives, such as new unaltered cats occasionally showing up, injuries or other health issues, conflicts with neighborhood residents and the like. When a caretaker is present to address these matters, the cats are more likely to lead a healthier and safer life than if they are left on their own. A caretaker who watches for new cats will also help sustain the gradual reduction in the colony's size over time through attrition.

Trap-Neuter-Return has many benefits when all or almost all of the cats in a colony are neutered:

Population stabilization - The size of the colony stabilizes as new litters are either eliminated or greatly reduced in number. Gradually, if newborns or newly arrived friendly strays are promptly removed from the colony as they appear, the number of cats will decline over time.

Noise reduction - A common complaint about feral cats is their high-pitched screeching in the middle of the night, which can disturb the sleep of an entire residential block. Most of this noise is the result of mating or fighting – behaviors which are eliminated or greatly lessened after neutering. Not that you won't hear a good snarl once in a while, but not to the point where it becomes a constant nuisance.

Foul odors reduced - The noxious odor often associated with the presence of feral cats in an area is caused primarily by unaltered males spraying to mark their territory. Testosterone mixed in the urine is responsible for the powerful smell. Neutering stops the cat's production of testosterone and, a few weeks after the surgery, any remaining testosterone has cycled out of the cat's system and the odor is eliminated. In my experience, most male cats stop spraying completely after they're altered, but even if they don't, the "I can't even use my own backyard" smell is gone.

Less visibility - Once mating behavior is eliminated, the cats tend to roam much less and stick closer to home base where food and shelter is supplied. As a result, they become a less visible presence in the area and are less likely to sustain fatal accidents with cars.

New cats are kept out - Feral cats tend to resist the intrusion of new cats into their territory. The degree to which they keep out newcomers is a function of the size of their food supply and territory. If they have a small territory and are fed only as much as they need, colony cats are highly motivated to guard their small space and limited food supply from newcomers. On the other extreme, if only a few cats inhabit a large space and are provided unlimited food, they may be more willing to allow new cats to join them.

Rodent control - Cats deter rodents, more by their scent than by hunting. Feral cats' best friends are often the superintendents of buildings or managers of warehouses because these people know the choice is cats or rats and prefer the former. Typically, someone will bring a cat or two into a rodent-infested situation to alleviate the problem. However, new problems arise when the cats proliferate. With TNR, the cats get to stay, the nuisance problems from feline overpopulation are eliminated and rodent control is maintained.

Improved community relations - When a feral cat colony is out of control, with litters of kittens continually recurring and noise and odor a real complaint, neighborhood residents often become hostile towards both the cats and anyone they believe is helping perpetuate the situation, such as feeders. When

TNR is implemented and its advantages realized, the caretaker becomes an asset to the community instead of an enemy and the cats are better tolerated.

Removing feral cats as a means of solving the problems associated with them certainly has the appeal of simplicity. What would stop overpopulation and nuisance complaints faster than just taking away all the cats? But while in theory this may sound plausible, in reality removing feral cats almost never works to eliminate their presence. Here's why:

The vacuum effect

Feral cat colonies spring up in certain locations because the habitat is suitable for their survival. If shelter and food adequate for at least their bare subsistence was not available, the cats would not be there.

Feral colonies usually exist side by side throughout a neighborhood or area. When one colony is completely removed from a site but the habitat is left unaltered, a vacuum of unutilized food and shelter is left behind. Migration from adjacent colonies is the inevitable result and soon new cats replace the old. This "vacuum effect" was first observed by wildlife biologist Roger Tabor in his extensive studies of London street cats, recorded in "The Wild Life of Domestic Cats."

The phenomenon of new cats moving in can happen very quickly. I was once involved in the spay/neuter of a 35 cat colony that lived in a bungalow community. On the day of surgery, when all the colony cats were being fixed, new cats from adjacent blocks started showing up, tentatively exploring the vacated grounds. They left when the colony cats were released a few days later.

The vacuum effect might be avoided if, upon the removal of the colony, the habitat was altered to also remove the food and shelter. This is extremely difficult to do in practice. Shelter can take the most meager of forms – a shed, a hole in a wall or tree, a broken window leading into a basement, some pallets piled high, etc. Removing food sources is even harder and requires constant oversight. All it takes is a person walking by, spotting a cat and continually leaving out food. Trying to change habits when it comes to sealing dumpsters and disposing of trash bags is also difficult.

Over breeding

Trapping all the cats in a colony requires patience and persistence. Practitioners of trap and remove efforts – whether animal control officers, private extermination companies or private property owners – rarely have the time, resources, commitment or knowledge to successfully trap and remove 100 percent of a colony. Instead, trap and remove attempts typically involve laying out a number of traps, waiting a few hours at most, then carting away whoever was caught.

Not surprisingly, some cats are almost always left behind. These remaining cats now have less competition for the food and shelter provided by the habitat. As a result, a higher percentage of their kittens are likely to survive than when the colony was fully inhabited. This "over breeding" continues until the colony again reaches its natural population cap, which is the number of cats the habitat's available food and shelter can support.

Abandonment of domestic cats & lack of monitoring

Feral cat colonies originate with lost or abandoned and sexually intact domestic cats. Abandonment of cats is unfortunately an ongoing problem which isn't likely to end any time soon. Many abandoned cats were dumped because they reached sexual maturity and began displaying the problem behavior associated with unneutered cats, including spraying to mark territory or yowling.

These cats wander until they either die or find a suitable habitat where they can survive. A habitat where a feral cat colony was just removed will offer suitable refuge, allowing sexually intact and abandoned cats to begin the reproductive cycle anew. An advantage of TNR is the presence of a caretaker to watch for newly arrived cats and either remove them for adoptive placement or at least ensure they get neutered and don't reproduce. Trap and remove efforts rarely leave this kind of monitoring system behind. Consequently, removed cats, if they are not replaced by new ferals, are eventually replaced by lost or abandoned cats.

Alienation of caretakers

Trap and remove efforts, especially if the cats' fate is euthanasia, are usually conducted against the wishes of the cats' caretaker - the one person most needed to guarantee the success of the trapping. The caretaker knows how many cats there are, their habits, their hideouts, their feeding pattern. She controls their food source and, by not cooperating, can thwart attempts to make the cats hungry enough to enter baited traps. Trying to trap cats when their caretaker is actively opposing the effort is very much an uphill struggle. TNR, in contrast, by allowing the cats to live, transforms the caretaker into a willing population control worker and makes it reasonably possible to capture all the cats and get them altered.

Insufficient animal control resources

Few municipalities, especially larger urban ones, can devote the manpower needed to remove a substantial percentage of the feral cats living in the community. For example, in New York City, there are at least tens of thousands of feral cats by even the most conservative estimates, and fourteen full-time animal control officers. Even if every one of them devoted all their working hours to capturing feral cats, it would have little effect. Considering that this undermanned force has numerous more pressing issues to deal with at any moment, the impracticality of attempting the task is apparent.

Even in smaller communities with one or two animal control officers and perhaps a couple of hundred feral cats, it's not realistic to expect these officers to be able to devote the time and effort required to trap enough cats to get ahead of the reproductive curve. As discussed earlier, volunteers are not going to join a trap and remove program in sufficient numbers to fill in the gap.

All of these factors may be operating together to defeat a trap and remove attempt – the vacuum effect of neighboring ferals migrating into emptied territory, the over breeding of colony cats not captured, the re-supply of feral colonies by newly lost or abandoned cats, the lack of cooperation from caretakers, and the lack of adequate animal control resources. In light of this, it's hardly surprising the trap and remove approach has historically failed to curb feral population growth.

Communities that do trap and remove typically see constant annual levels of both complaints and number of cats captured. This reveals that all that's being achieved is turnover – new feline faces, but not fewer. A successful control program, by gradually reducing the feral population, would see falling levels over time.

As a caretaker, at some point you'll likely be confronted with "Why don't you take the cats away?" or "Why don't you stop feeding them?" or "Why aren't you finding them good homes?" Your understanding of the "whys" will help you be a more effective advocate. It is also important that people come to understand the feral cats do not belong to YOU – they "belong" to all of us; you are a volunteer and are working to help the cats AND the people, but you cannot take in all the cats you help – no one can. TNR does not always make sense to people right away. If you take the time to explain how it works and why it's often the best alternative, your chances of success in helping both the cats and the community will greatly improve.

Preparations for Trapping

Preparation is the key to success for TNR projects. The process is based on years of experience trapping cats, from small to large colonies, in all sorts of weather and in a wide variety of settings. There is a way to do the work that maximizes the chances of getting as many cats in as short a time frame as possible. While there are likely to be some unexpected developments once things get underway, the more you've put all the pieces in place and anticipated what may happen, the smoother the trapping will go.

Step One: Establish a Feeding Pattern

Feral cats are habitual creatures by nature and can be trained to eat at the same time of day and place. If you're able to establish a regular feeding pattern, it will make the trapping much easier. Rather than spreading out traps throughout the cats' territory and hoping they make an appearance, you can let the cats come to you because you'll know where and when they'll arrive to eat.

The pattern should start being established at least two weeks prior to the trapping. If you can't come every day at the same time, then be as consistent as possible. Don't feed in the morning one day, late at night the next, then in the afternoon and so forth. Try to keep it to the same general time of day. Don't leave food out when you're not there, or at least not as much as usual, or the cats will learn to come and go as they please. If you have to leave food out, then feed the cats something special when you come, such as a can of tuna, so they have an incentive to show up at the time you arrive.

If you're able to choose the time of day when you feed, pick a time that will facilitate the trapping. For example, if the cats live behind a factory, feed them after most of the workers have left for the day and it's quiet. Remember that after you trap the cats, you may need to transport them and set them up with food and water, so don't make the feeding time (and hence the start of the trapping) too late at night.

Setting up a regular feeding pattern will also allow you to get an accurate count of the cats and assess any special cases. Unless you already know all the cats well, start logging them and making a record, whether you take digital photos or write notes. Having a reasonably accurate count will mean you're able to schedule the correct number of spay/neuter appointments, have the right amount of equipment, and have sufficient transportation and volunteers.

While counting, note whether there are any special cases like young kittens that can still be easily socialized, friendly adults who might be adoptable, or sick or injured cats that will need extra veterinary care. Finding out if there are special cases before the trapping begins will give you the time and opportunity to make arrangements for them. You might not be able to find a foster home for kittens, for example, but you'll have a better chance if you start looking a couple of weeks in advance, rather than waiting until you've got them in a trap.

Many individuals practicing TNR, and the communities in which they live, may not have the resources available to care for all special cases as well as might be desired. While it is always better to take a friendly cat or potentially adoptable kitten off the street and give them the chance at a good home, it isn't always possible. Don't let this stop you from going ahead with the TNR, if that's the situation. Neutering the cats and preventing the birth of more cats into the same circumstances is extremely important, and will improve the quality of the lives of the cats who are fixed. Even if you can't do everything for them, you can still do a lot.

Another thing to be careful of is that many caretakers, especially those new to TNR, will delay neutering the colony and first concentrate their energies instead on pulling out kittens and friendly adults to find them homes. They see rescuing the cats that can be saved as the priority and think the TNR part can wait. If proceeding in this manner will lead to a long delay in the TNR, more often than not it's a mistake. Two cats get saved; yet five more are born to take their place. Nuisance behavior continues and neighborhood hostility towards the cats and their caretakers rises. If you can't TNR the colony and rescue potential adoptables at the same time, then it's better to first get the cats fixed and stabilize the situation, then concentrate on finding homes for the adoptables.

Step Two: Find a Holding Space

Most people performing TNR will hold the cats themselves after trapping but will drop them off at the clinic in the morning for the spay/neuter, then pick them up late in the afternoon. This means that for a period of time during the trapping, the cats need to be held somewhere. This type of location is referred to as a "holding space."

While the cats are being held, they do not leave their traps except for the surgery. The rest of the time, the trap doubles as a cage. Many people utilize carriers to hold the cats and will transfer them from trap to carrier using different techniques. When starting out in TNR, it is advised to keep the cats in traps until you are used to handling the cats and have become more knowledgeable. The last thing you want on your first outing is to have a cat get loose and try to recatch it.

How long the holding space is needed will depend on when you begin trapping. If you're doing a "mass trapping" – defined as the TNR of an entire colony at once - it is recommended that two, preferably three days of trapping for colonies of more than a few cats. Following the spay/neuter, 48 hours post-surgical recovery time is usually sufficient. This would mean keeping the cats confined a total of five to six days during a mass trapping effort.

An adequate holding space is anywhere that is warm, dry and secure. "Warm" means at least 65 degrees Fahrenheit at all times. The cats may be used to being outdoors in frigid temperatures, but when confined in a trap, they can't move around or huddle with one another to generate warmth. If it's too cold, they'll get sick. In addition, the anesthesia given during the spay/neuter surgery causes a cat's body temperature to drop. In the hours after surgery, as the anesthesia wears off, they regain their normal temperature. But during the time it's low, it is vital they are in a warm enough space. Otherwise, they could die.

A "dry" holding space is one protected from the elements, such as rain, direct sunlight, strong wind or snow.

"Secure" means the space is accessible only by people working on the project and not by strangers or other animals who might pose a threat to the cats.

Many varieties of settings can serve as holding spaces. The easiest are a garage, basement or outdoor shed. When these are not available, you might need to be a bit more creative.

Concerns about smell, fleas or other type of damage to indoor areas are easily addressed. Lining the floor and any tables with thick plastic sheeting, then cleaning up the space thoroughly after the project, eliminates these potential problems.

Step Three: Reserve Traps

Having counted the cats and secured a spay/neuter date, the next step is to make sure you have enough traps on hand for the number of cats you're planning on catching. Contact your local feral cat organization, shelter or humane society to see if there are trap banks which will lend you the needed equipment at low or no cost. Pasado's Safe Haven, Purrfect Pals, and Meow all have traps available if they are not in use. Those will require a refundable deposit for loan. If there are no resources for equipment available, you may need to purchase traps yourself. Please see the handout for where to purchase traps.

To raise money for traps (and also veterinary expenses), consider holding a small fundraising event, such as a garage sale, bake sale or raffle. Put out collection jars at flea markets, pet stores or fairs with flyers explaining your project. Then buy the number of traps you can afford and have room to store, even if it's only one! If your access to traps is limited, this will limit the number of cats you can bring in for spay/neuter. So before you do Step Three and schedule your spay/neuter appointments, check out the general availability of traps in your area. If you discover you'll most likely only be able to get a small number of traps, then don't schedule spay/neuter for too many cats. Whatever the size of your project, once your spay/neuter appointments are booked, immediately reserve the number of traps you'll need if you're working with a trap bank. If you're not working with a trap bank, then start going about gathering the equipment that you'll require.

Its also a good idea to have at least one pair of trap dividers. These tools allow you to safely care for the cats while they are confined. The items are inexpensive, costing approximately $25 each, so consider buying a pair to always have on hand. Otherwise, check local trap banks or rescue groups to see if they have any to lend you.

Step Four: Locate and Schedule Spay/Neuter

Once you have a fairly accurate count of the cats in the colony and have found a holding space, then you can schedule a spay/neuter date. If you're doing a mass trapping to neuter the whole colony at once, then get appointments for the total number of cats. However, there may be reasons why trapping and fixing all the cats at the same time is not possible. The holding space may not be large enough, you might not be able to round up enough traps or available spay/neuter options may be too costly. If you're facing these obstacles, then schedule a spay/neuter date for as many cats as you can comfortably handle.

Step Five: Arrange Transportation

Transportation may be needed during different phases of the TNR project: (1) picking up and returning traps, (2) bringing the cats from their territory to the holding space after they're trapped, (3) bringing the cats back and forth from the spay/neuter clinic, and (4) returning the cats to their original location. Plan this out in advance and draw up a schedule for yourself and any other volunteers.

Whatever vehicle you use to transport the cats, line the floor (or seat) with thick plastic sheeting. Plastic drop cloths are available at most hardware stores and can be cut easily with a scissors. Be sure to place towels or cloth on top of the plastic so that any liquid will not run, but instead will be absorbed during the drive.

Trapping

You've established a feeding pattern, counted the cats, found a holding space, scheduled spay/neuter, reserved traps and arranged transportation. Now it's time to trap! For some, trapping may seem like the most intimidating part of the process, but if you've prepared well and followed the steps, you'll have greatly eased the task of catching the cats. Using the right equipment and following a few basic guidelines, you will further increase your chances of success.

Traps

The key piece of equipment is, of course, the trap, generically known as a "humane box trap." The cat enters the trap through an open front door in order to reach the bait placed at the back. On the way to the bait, the cat steps on a "trip plate," causing the front door to shut behind him. There are a large variety of humane box traps available, from small ones designed to catch rodents to ones big enough to catch large dogs. To work with feral cats using the methods described in this course, the box traps you use should have two special features: (1) a rear door and (2) a length of 35 to 36 inches. When caring for the cats while they're confined in their traps, you'll need to be able to access each trap from both ends. To do this, a rear door is required. Rear doors also make it safer to transfer a cat out of one trap and into another trap, a transfer cage, or a carrier. When the cat is returned to his colony, releasing through a rear door is safer than through the more-difficult-to-open front. Likewise, if a raccoon or other animal is accidentally trapped, a rear door makes release easier and safer. A length of 35 to 36 inches is recommended because the trap will double as a cage. Any shorter and the space may be too cramped, especially for a larger cat. Any longer is unnecessary and means extra weight and expense. These are some factors to consider when using/purchasing traps: size and weight of the trap; size of the trip plate; rear door; sturdiness; easy to use; necessary storage space; cost.

This basic list will cover what's needed for most trappings:

- Traps
- Trap divider
- Bait
- Can opener
- Plastic forks or spoons
- Paper or plastic plates (small)
- Pounce or a similar cat treat
- Bed sheets (one per trap) -- or similar coverings

Have at least one or two additional traps on hand than the anticipated number of cats. Catching the last cat or two will be much easier if you have extra traps to put out in more spots. Plus it's insurance against the appearance of an unexpected feline or two. A trap divider will be needed if more than one cat gets caught in a trap, and you need to separate them and transfer one into another trap.

Two kinds of bait may be used – the primary one should be a very smelly, fishy kind, such as cheap tuna, sardines or salmon. The second one should be a more standard canned cat food without fish – chicken, beef, etc. – just in case you come upon the occasional cat who doesn't care for seafood. Have a can opener on hand, even if all your bait is in flip-top cans, in case you run out and have to go buy something that doesn't pop open. Plastic forks or spoons are for doling out the bait, which is put on paper or plastic plates. Pounce or a similar cat treat is excellent for crumbling up and making a little trail leading into the trap. If you don't use Pounce, be sure you get a treat that is soft and crumbles easily. The juice from tuna or other seafood baits will also work well for making trails. Sheets are a necessity. Most cats when

trapped initially become agitated and may quickly move back and forth, trying frantically to escape. This sometimes leads to bloody noses or claws. The cat will calm down soon after you cover the trap with a sheet. From the point of capture until the time of release, a sheet should always be covering the trap. Each sheet should be large enough to comfortably cover an entire trap. To avoid having to run around and find one during the trapping, tuck a folded sheet under the handles of each trap when you first put them out.

Consider bringing the following supplies, as well, if there's a reasonable chance you may need them, given the circumstances of your project:

- Newspaper
- Clothespins
- Blankets
- Plastic drop cloth
- Flashlight
- Water bottle (1 liter, full)
- String
- Needle-nose pliers
- Vegetable oil spray
- Logging sheet
- Labels
- Pens
- First aid kit
- Another person

Newspaper is a good item to have on hand for a few possible uses. It can be used to cover the trip plate mechanism so a cat can't tell what to try to step over. Many trappers also believe cats don't like the feel of the metal floor and will be more likely to go into a trap if the floor is covered with newspaper. If you do use newspaper to line the floor and there's even a slight breeze, use clothespins at the corners to keep the paper from flapping around and scaring the cats away.

Blankets are useful if you're trapping in cold weather and the cats can't be placed immediately into a warm space. Blankets should be relied upon for only brief periods of time, depending how cold it is. If it's very frigid out and we need to leave a set trap unattended for several minutes or more, we'll wrap the empty trap in a blanket, leaving the front and rear doors uncovered. This provides added warmth for any cat who ventures in while we're gone.

Plastic drop cloths, at least 3 millimeters thick, are good for protecting car seats and floors. A flashlight is a necessity if you're trapping after dark.

If desired, a full, one liter water bottle with string tied around its base can be used in place of the trap's normal trigger/trip plate mechanism. By propping up a corner of the trap's front door on top of the bottle, you can decide if and when to close the trap by pulling the string. This is useful if you're trying to catch multiple young kittens at once, only one particular cat in the colony, or a cat who won't step on the trip plate.

Needle-nose pliers are handy for quick trap repairs, while vegetable oil spray helps loosen up sticky moving parts of the trap.

A logging sheet can be used to record the following at the time of trapping: when a cat was caught, where, a description of the cat and any special notes (e.g., limps on front paw). Later, the same sheet can be used to track sex, vaccinations, eartipping, and the outcome (e.g., released, fostered, etc.).

If you're trapping at multiple sites, the traps should be numbered using labels attached to the metal plate on top of the trap. A trap's number should be recorded on the logging sheet when a cat is caught in it. To ensure no mix-ups later, it's wise to also write the colony location and a brief description of the cat on the label. Have pens with you for writing.

A basic first aid kit is good to have ready should a bite or scratch occur. Quickly cleaning a wound might prevent a more serious infection from developing. The kit should include, at a minimum, hydrogen peroxide, cotton balls and band-aids. Gauze and surgical tape could also be added.

Having another person accompany you is highly recommended, even if you're after a small number of cats. Its possible attention may be required for more than one task at the same time, or you may find you need an item and someone to go get it. Plus it's good for morale to have company. Don't turn it into a big party though or you'll distract the cats – two people is plenty for a small number of cats and no more than three or four for a relatively large number.

The Days Before

Before you head into the field to lay out traps, be sure you've done the following first:

• Leave yourself enough time

Plan on trapping for at least two days – three if you're trying to trap more than a few cats. If you only allow for one day or night, you're taking a big chance. Even if everything goes according to plan, some cats are naturally very wary and may not enter a trap the first time you try. It will take an extra day or two of being denied food before they'll venture in. Furthermore, it often happens that not everything goes according to plan. You might experience inclement weather or other unexpected conditions at the site, such as an unusual amount of noise or foot traffic. The cats may not all show up that day. One of the colony feeders may "forget" to withhold food and put out a huge bowl of dry food that morning. Too much can go wrong not to schedule more than one trapping day.

Withhold Food the Day Before

The single most important factor for a successful trapping is how hungry the cats are. When it comes to your average box trap, most cats have a natural wariness of going in. It's possible you may tempt some well-fed cats with the scent of tuna or something very tasty, but many will not overcome their wariness unless they are driven by hunger. The day before the trapping, do not feed and be sure to remove any food from the site. This way, when it comes time to trap, the cats will not have eaten for 24 to 48 hours and will be quite hungry.

Withholding food for a few days will only displease the cat, but not harm him. Withholding food is actually harder on the caretaker than the cats! If you're trapping in the middle of winter and conditions are severe, it's best for the cats' health to minimize the amount of time they go without eating. In these conditions, give the cats a meal 24 hours before the trapping, but remove all food within a few hours afterwards, so that they will have gone 18 to 24 hours without eating by the time the trapping begins. For example, if you'll be trapping on a Saturday morning and the temperatures are below freezing, leave food out for the cats Thursday night and Friday morning, but remove all food by noon on Friday.

Also withhold food for only 18 to 24 hours if there are sick cats or young kittens in the colony. Water should be left out for the cats at all times and should never be withheld. Make every effort possible to coordinate with feeders. If you can’t get in touch will everyone who feeds, or if you

suspect a feeder may ignore your instructions, go by and inspect the site a couple of times during the day or night before the trapping. This way you can remove any food placed out.

Check the Traps

Read all the manufacturer's directions on how to use the trap or have the people you borrow the traps from show you how to set one. Then practice setting the trap and opening and closing the rear door. Don't wait until you're out in the field to figure it out.

Next, test each trap you're going to use to make sure all are working properly. If you're borrowing from a trap bank, test them before you leave the premises. If you purchase traps, test them when they arrive. Usually they're in good repair and function properly, but once in a while they get damaged in transit. It's a bad time to find out the trip plate doesn't work when a cat steps on it and nothing happens.

The Trapping

If the cats have been trained to eat at a certain time, that's when to start the trapping. You don't need to begin at the same exact hour, but within the same general time of day.

Note: They'll be hungry and may show up even a bit earlier than usual.

Prepare the Traps

Baiting and other final preparations to the traps can be done once you're on site, but preferably some distance from where the traps will be laid out and out of sight of the cats. Too much activity too close to where they're used to eating may alarm them and frighten some away.

Line up all the traps in a row, rear doors facing you, and lift up or remove the rear doors. Next, fold up the sheets and tuck one between the handles of each trap. Line the trap with properly folded newspaper and only two sheet maximum. Finally, dish out the bait, using generous amounts, and place each plate at the far rear of each trap. Using a small amount of the food or juice, make a small trail from just outside the trap leading inside towards the back bounty of food. Close the rear doors, double checking they are securely locked.

NOTE: If you're trapping a cat that you know will be operated upon within a few hours after you catch him, then use only a small amount of bait. Ideally, a cat's stomach is empty during surgery to preclude the possibility of vomiting, followed by choking and gagging. So if you have to use bait soon before surgery, you want to minimize how much food will be in the cat's stomach. You should also let the veterinarian know that the cat ate a small amount.

Laying Out the Traps

Once all the traps are ready, place them out into the cats' territory. If you've successfully established a feeding pattern, then most of the traps should be concentrated near the feeding station. Other locations for placing traps could include paths the cats may travel to reach the feeding site or other spots where you have repeatedly observed the cats spending time.

Put out all the traps at once – don't put out only a few. You want to limit the number of times you enter the cats' territory because each time you do so, there's the possibility one cat will run off for the day. In addition, placing all your traps at the same time will give the cats more opportunities to enter one.

When you put a trap down, be sure the ground is fairly level so the trap doesn't rock back and forth. If there is no level ground, place a board or something flat under the trap. Whenever possible, lean the trap up against something length-wise, like a wall, a fence or a bush, and don't leave it sitting out in the open surrounded by empty space. Cats are more likely to enter if the trap appears to be part of a familiar structure. Don't place traps right next to each other but spread them out, preferably a couple of feet apart, at least.

Depending on the landscape, try to blend the traps into the environment as best you can. Placing traps on a lawn, for example, allows the grass to come up through the floor. Or if you're trapping in a parking lot, sprinkle some pebbles and similar debris onto the trap floor. You can toss in leaves or loose grass. Lean a board or box against the trap, or place branches on top. Anything you can do to make it look as though the trap naturally belongs to the landscape will help.

At this point, some trappers like to unfold the sheet and drape it over the top and sides of the trap, leaving the front and rear doors uncovered. The theory is the cats are more attracted to a sheltered space. While the theory is probably true, most cats will enter an uncovered trap. Draping a sheet properly can be time-consuming -- you have to tuck the sheets under the trap or weigh them down to make sure they don't flutter in the wind and scare a cat away. You may want to save this for when the cat has proven difficult to catch.

One situation when you will want to cover with a sheet as a matter of course is if you need to leave the trap unattended for any period of time, say more than half an hour or so. In that case, once trapped, the cat will be somewhat calmed by being covered.

With the trap properly positioned, open the front door and set the trigger. Remove any rocks, plants or debris that might block the front door as its shutting. Feral cats can move with astonishing speed and will be out of the trap and gone if anything obstructs the shutting of the front door.

Observing the Action

Once all the traps are set, move out of the territory to a spot where you can comfortably observe as many of the traps as possible. When the cats start showing up, it's natural to want to watch the action, but try to avoid staring at them, especially when they're poised at a trap's front door and considering whether to go in. If they pick up on your anxiety, it may cause them to back off. Instead, look off in another direction until you hear the trap shut.

Once a Cat Goes In

Immediately after the trap door shuts, most cats will realize they're trapped and panic, moving rapidly back and forth and looking for a way to escape. If this occurs, walk over to the trap and quickly cover it with a sheet, then step back and let the cat calm down. Covering does have a calming effect. Once the cat is still, pick up the trap and carry it away, keeping the trap covered at all times. If the cat panics while you're carrying her-- tilt the trap at a severe angle – this forces the cat to expend her energy hanging onto the floor of the trap rather than dashing back and forth. You can also use a trap divider to lessen the amount of space the cat has to move around in. Don't be afraid if the cat gets a bloody nose or paw – these are common, minor injuries that usually heal quickly on their own.

There will be some cats who do not realize they're trapped right away when the front door shuts behind them. They may go on happily munching away on the bait for several minutes. Or there are occasionally cats who do realize they're caught, but don't panic. In these cases, don't rush in to cover the trap with a sheet – there's no need to enter the territory at that point and potentially frighten away another cat. Leave them alone until they begin to show signs of agitation then enter and cover.

When you pick up and remove a trapped cat, replace the old trap with a new one in the exact same spot. Often there are "hot spots" where cats keep going into traps in disproportionate numbers…. there must be something about the positioning that makes the cats less wary - but take advantage of the phenomenon.

The Next Trapping Days

If all goes as it should, most (not all) of the cats in the colony will be caught on the first day of trapping. One may have gotten frightened early on and not returned while you were there. Another might have found a scrap of food that escaped your attention and was not that hungry. Perhaps yet another is particularly trap shy. The key to overcoming these problems is to continue to withhold food throughout the trapping period. The increasing hunger of the cats is what will get them to go in.

On the second day of trapping and thereafter, the same procedures are followed as the first day, only with fewer traps. If you begin to suspect you have a "hard-to-catch" cat or two on your hands, then try some simple things like removing the newspaper on the floor of the traps and/or changing the covering. You may also want to try other types of bait then what you have been using.

Trap-to-Trap Transfers

If two cats end up in the same trap, which happens once in a while, you'll need to first separate them and then transfer one into a different trap. To do this, first cover the trap with a sheet and give the cats a moment to calm down. Then pull back the sheet and insert a trap divider from above between them. Re-cover with the sheet.

Next, take another trap and cover it with a sheet, too, though not over the rear door. Then line up the rear door of the empty trap with the rear door of the trap containing the cats. If you're doing the transfer alone, the empty trap should be backed up against something immovable, like a wall. If there are two of you, each should be pressing down on one of the two traps. To ensure the transfer goes well, you'll need to take precautions against having either trap suddenly shift and create an opening between them through which a cat can escape.

Once the rear doors of the two traps are lined up and both traps are securely in place, lift both rear doors. Fold back the sheet covering the rear half of the trap containing the two cats. Most of the time, exposing the cat in the rear compartment will cause him to move into the covered, empty trap. If it doesn't, give the cat a little push by tilting the divider separating the two cats towards him. Once he enters the second trap, shut both rear doors. If you are inexperienced, do the trap transfer inside a shed, car or somewhere that is enclosed in case of escape. Otherwise it may be difficult to retrap the cat that gets away.

Advantages of Mass Trapping

When it's possible, TNR-ing all the cats in a colony at once is much more efficient than catching one or a few at a time over the course of weeks or months. Going "one-at-a-time" not only takes longer, but also means having to repeatedly make trips to the clinic, secure a holding space, borrow equipment, arrange transportation and so on. A mass trapping, by contrast, involves going through the process just once.

It's also easier with a mass trapping to catch all the cats. If you're going one-at-a-time with an average sized colony, you're bound to run into problems trying to catch the last few cats. In order to get those remaining cats hungry, you have to withhold food from the entire colony. Then you have to pick out the cats you're after from the rest of the crowd, which can be tricky. By contrast, with a mass trapping, you withhold food once and when you're down to the last few cats (which are becoming increasingly hungry), they're the only ones still out in the territory.

In fact, when doing a mass trapping, It's best that you keep on trying to catch the last cat, even if the spay/neuter date has come and gone. As long as the rest of the colony is confined, there will never be a better opportunity. The hassle of arranging a spay/neuter appointment specially for him once he's trapped will likely be far less than the trouble you'll go through trying to catch him later once all his colony mates have been returned.

You will have a better time catching the entire colony if you are able to bungee the traps open and feed in the traps for a week in advance; when they are used to eating in the traps, even if they see the other cats get caught they are more likely to go in another trap.

Winter Trapping

During the first years after TNR was introduced to the United States, the prevailing sentiment was not to trap cats during the winter in colder climates, but only during the warmer seasons. The logic was that trapping placed too much stress on the cats and potentially compromised the health of the females whose bellies are shaved during the spay procedure.

The cats' reproductive activity is dramatically lower during the cold season, which means there are rarely any kittens, nursing mothers or pregnant cats. This can greatly simplify the trapping. In addition, you can get a huge jump on the upcoming spring kitten season.

Winter trapping isn't more stressful for the cats than at other times of the year. As far as avoiding jeopardizing their health, the key is to make sure the cats are well fed and that adequate winter shelter is in place. A warm, dry place to bed down will compensate for a shaved stomach.

Hard-to-Catch Cats

Fortunately, there are very few cats who will not enter a trap if you follow the methods outlined and give it two or three days. But occasionally there is one who will not enter a box trap, no matter what you do. If after you have studied the cat's patterns, tried every kind of bait, every time of day, multiple traps at once, and still no luck—it's time to use the drop trap.

The Drop Trap

A drop trap is an enclosure propped up on a stick. The cat walks underneath it to reach the bait and while she's eating, the trapper pulls a string attached to the stick, causing the enclosure to fall down over the cat. The cat is then transferred out of the enclosure and into a normal box trap via a reinforced opening built into the drop trap.

Cats are not nearly as wary of going under a raised enclosure as they are of going into a long, narrow box trap. They may sniff around a bit and be a little cautious at first, but almost always they end up going under. It is remarkable how effective the device is. No longer do you wait hours for a particular cat to finally enter a box trap – once you see there is one who is especially reluctant, break out the drop trap and try to move things along. The trap is also ideal for selectively trapping a particular cat out of a colony and for catching multiple kittens at once.

Using the trap does take a bit of skill, especially when it comes to transferring the cat out of the drop trap and into a box trap. For this reason, a drop trap should never be used by someone for the first time on a cat you've been trying to capture for years. You must first practice doing the drop and then transferring. Once you've practiced a couple of times, you'll understand what to do and be much less likely to make a mistake when trying to get that difficult to trap cat.

Several rescues in our area have drop traps you may borrow, or there are plans on how to make your own available.

Feed in the Trap

One way to get a cat to enter a trap is to gradually train him to eat inside one. Place a trap near the cat's usual feeding spot and tie the front door open or jam it open with a stick, or better yet use a bungee cord – a stick may be dislodged, but a tight bungee will hold. At first, place the cat's daily meal a few feet away from the trap's front door. Keep putting the plate there over succeeding days until you see the food is being eaten. Then move the plate closer so that it's just in front of the trap door. Again, keep placing the plate at that spot until the food is being eaten. Then move the plate a couple of inches inside the trap. Continue this pattern, moving the plate a few inches at a time further into the trap each time you see the food is being eaten. When you see the cat is going all the way to the rear of the trap to get to the food, then the trap can be set. This method requires leaving a trap out in the cat's territory. If it's your own backyard and there's no chance any strangers are going to come along, then you might not need to take any precautions against the trap being damaged or stolen. If you're at all concerned or if the trap must be placed in a more open, accessible location, then chain the trap onto an immovable object, like a fence or pipe. This method can be used not just for difficult cats, but to facilitate any trapping.

The Camouflage Trap

Extensively blending the trap into the environment will make it appear less threatening to a shy cat. Camouflage techniques include putting the trap inside a large cardboard box (such as the one it arrived in from the manufacturer), cutting out the rear of the box so the cat can see through. Leaning a large board against a wall to create a lean-to, then putting the trap under the board, is another technique. Place the trap under a bush or by a pile of old tires – anything you can do to make the trap look like a natural part of the territory will help.

Cats Who Won't Step on the Trip Plate

Every now and then you may come upon a cat who steps over the whole trip plate. If this happens to you, there are other tricks you can try. First thing though is to get the cat out of the trap before he fills up on the bait. To do this, don't go running up to the trap and scaring the cat badly. Such a frightening experience may mean the cat won't come back after you've made the needed adjustments. Instead, walk slowly and quietly towards the trap, letting the cat back out at her own pace as you approach. Many times, the cat will set off the trap on her way out. If she doesn't, she knows where the good stuff is and will likely return once you move away.

Once the cat has exited the trap, cover the entire trip plate mechanism – with a cardboard extender. The idea is to hide the trip plate so the cat can't see what to step over. Then back away and wait for the cat to go back in. The cardboard should be cut to fit into the trap and should be placed starting six or so inches in front of the trip plate so when the cat steps on the cardboard before stepping on the trip plate, the weight will be enough to trip the plate and shut the door. Be sure the cat will be inside the cage enough before the plate trips.

If the cat still steps over the trip plate, even with the newspaper covering it, then again approach the trap slowly so the cat leaves. You can then try one of two things. (1) You can run a stick through both sides of the trap just in front of the trip plate and a few inches above the ground. This will force the cat to step over the stick in order to get to the bait, causing him to step on the trip plate. Keep the trip plate covered with the newspaper.

(2) Another option for a cat that knows not to step on the trip plate is to bypass the trip plate mechanism altogether. Instead of setting the trap with the trigger, open the front door and prop a corner of it on a one liter water bottle with a string tied around the bottom. When the cat re-enters the trap, wait until he reaches the bait and then yank the string, pulling the bottle away and causing the front door to close. The bottle should be filled with water to give it weight and keep it in place before you pull the string.

You should also practice yanking the string and pulling the bottle away before you attempt to do it live. If you don't pull hard enough or if you haven't made the string taut enough, you may startle the cat and give him time to run out. So do it once or twice at home to get the right feel.

Special Cases (Friendly Ferals)

Feral cats can act friendly, especially to their long-time caretakers. They may let themselves be petted while eating or rub against their feeder's legs. Despite these signs of affection, caution should always be exercised and traps utilized when trying to capture ferals. If you try to pick up a friendly feral and force her into a carrier, she may panic and try to bite your hand in an effort to escape. One good bite can result in a trip to the emergency room and a course of antibiotics. Be safe and always use traps.

Many a caretaker of ferals have made the mistake of becoming overly friendly with their colony cats. Once the cats start becoming friendly the cats will have a tendency to come out of their hiding areas and will become seen more often by strangers. People who feed at their apartment porch are a good example. Once the cats are seen often around a particular porch, other tenants can easily complain to the management and that is when troubles begin. It is always better to have feral cats that remain aloof, unseen, and are fed in an area away from the eyes of strangers. This cannot be stressed enough. It is also a good reason to remove any friendly cats from a colony to rehome, whenever possible.

Special Cases (Kittens)

Whenever possible, kittens young enough to be easily socialized (eight weeks and younger) should be removed from the colony, fostered and put up for adoption. The ideal age for removing feral kittens is five to six weeks. At this age, they have gained much of the benefit of nursing and being with their mother and are eating on their own, but are young enough that in almost all cases they can be socialized quickly – sometimes within a matter of hours. They can usually be easily socialized up to eight weeks of age as well, but an extra couple of weeks in an outdoor setting can be very dangerous for them. If you are working with a shelter or rescue, find out first if they have anyone to foster/assess the kittens. Have a plan before you trap! Older kittens can often be tamed, but if you have nowhere for them to go, you may have to simply TNR them and know you have helped to improve their life in the wild. Remember, a female kitten can go into heat as early as 4 months!

If the environment is extremely dangerous, you might consider trapping them as soon as they can eat on their own, which is between four to five weeks of age. At that age, if they haven't started eating on their own, they can learn quickly by letting them lick wet food off your finger, wiping a little on their nose and/or letting them muck about in a plate of soupy wet food. If you take in kittens younger than four to five weeks old, you may have to bottle feed and stimulate them to pass stool and urine, a labor-intensive process.

Because time is of the essence, you may need to trap the kittens before you're ready to capture any of the adults. Here are two ways to go about only catching the young ones:

1. Use a drop trap or set a regular trap manually by not using the trigger, but instead propping a corner of the front door on a water bottle with a string attached (review "Picking one out from the crowd" under "Hard-to-catch cats," above). Only pull the string if you've got a kitten or kittens inside. Young kittens often travel in bunches, so you can often catch more than one at a time. The trick is not to get greedy. If two of them are in the trap eating away and a third is hovering near the front door, then wait to see if the third goes in, too. But if the third kitten is off playing a few yards away, then go ahead and trap the two you've got, and then re-set the trap. Otherwise, you're liable to miss your chance.

2. Use a trap meant for a very small animal, like a chipmunk or a squirrel. The opening should be no more than 5" x 5" (otherwise, an adult could squeeze in).

Unless kittens are of bottle-feeding age and not moving around much, you should trap baby kittens and not try to pick them up with your hands. Even a little kitten has sharp enough fangs and a strong enough jaw to put a hole in your finger. Additionally, they're usually too quick to grab. If you do try to scoop up kittens, even of bottle-feeding age, use protective gloves and grab them by the scruff of the neck, which is how their mother carries them.

You can use kittens to catch the remaining kittens too – once they are trapped, transferring the kittens to a cat carrier, then setting the carrier up at the end of the trap can lure the remaining kittens into the trap. Mom cats are excellent bait as well! If you are not experienced in trap to carrier transfers, set the trap alongside the other trap but make sure the kittens will remain warm by wrapping the trap in towels at least at one end which will still allow the kittens to be seen through the open trap. They will also cry out if they see their mom or siblings which attract the others to the open trap.

Special Cases (Nursing Mothers)

• Nursing mothers discovered after being trapped

Often it's not discovered that a female cat is lactating and may be nursing a litter of kittens until after she's trapped and seen by the veterinarian. Typically, in these situations, the age and location of the litter are unknown. Some caretakers will think they should release the cat as soon as possible without having her spayed. They believe immediate release is justified by the risk there may be kittens too young and vulnerable to survive in her absence.

While such a decision is driven by compassion, it is usually the opposite decision that is best. Continue with the TNR, for feral kittens over two weeks old can survive a day without nursing (kittens at least four or five weeks old are eating on their own). If the lactating mother cat is released without being spayed, she may never be trapped again, continuing to produce litter after litter. When faced with this situation – a nursing mother discovered after trapping typically you should have the cat spayed as soon as possible and then release her the day after surgery if she appears alert and there are no signs of post-surgical complications. While this is 24 hours sooner than we would normally release a female cat, the risk is justified by giving her kittens a better chance to survive. Contrary to popular belief, a spayed female can still nurse upon her return to the litter.

If you release lactating females without spaying them, there's a good chance you won't succeed in getting the population under control -- and the project will fail. Experienced trappers will always get the cat fixed, with very limited exception such as if you live in a very cold climate and the spay appointment is more than 2 days away. Before you release such a cat, make a phone call to an experienced mentor and talk it over. It is easy enough to keep the cat in the trap for several hours while you seek out direction from others. Also, your mentor may know of a place to get her spayed asap – do call and check.

• Nursing mothers known before the trapping

If it is known before the trapping takes place that a female cat has given birth and is likely nursing, then it's best to delay trapping her until the kittens start showing up at the food bowl and the whole family can be trapped at the same time.

Whether to delay trapping an entire colony because among them is a nursing female with baby kittens is a judgment call. It's better if you can wait, but if you can't, then avoid catching the mom: (1) feed her separately beforehand so that her lack of hunger may keep her out of any traps, (2) set up the traps so they are all within sight and try to very quietly shoo her away if she approaches, or (3) only use a drop trap or regular traps using the bottle and string method.

Special Cases (Pregnant Cats)

If a cat is clearly pregnant, the decision needs to be made whether to trap her and have her spayed. The vast majority of animal welfare professionals would agree that spaying is the correct choice. They know that a kitten born and adopted into a home means that another cat somewhere else in the system did not get placed and was euthanized for lack of space, and in the height of kitten season many kittens are euthanized in shelters too. Plus, while it sounds nice to let the cat have her kittens, another harsh reality is many feral cats can die while in labor; complications, just like with human births, occur frequently. One thing that can make it easier for you to decide to spay the pregnant cat is to know that during a spay

surgery the entire uterus is removed – the fetus is never removed from the uterus, but the whole thing is removed as one unit and an anesthetic is injected into it. There is no pain involved at all. This is the harsh reality of feline overpopulation, the state of affairs in most communities.

Cats have an approximately two-month gestation period. A veterinarian who is experienced with feral spay/neuter may be comfortable aborting up until the very end.

If you decide not to spay for personal or veterinary reasons, then you need to decide whether to allow the cat to give birth outdoors or whether to trap her and keep her confined until she gives birth and raises her kittens to an adoptable age. A feral mom and her kittens can be kept for a couple of months in a cage with a carrier and litter box inside. The mom does almost all the work when it comes to raising the kittens – you'll just need to feed everyone and play with the young ones so they're socialized. To learn how to safely foster a feral cat, talk with experienced foster people, research online information, or call one of the rescue groups you are working with for advice. This is not something to take lightly, as it is very stressful for the mom cat to be kept confined; ferals do not like confinement. If you let them reproduce in the wild, and they all survive, all it takes is missing one kitten and the whole cycle starts again. You will find that all trappers have had trouble spaying pregnant cats in the beginning, but just one season of working on this opens your eyes to the reasons we all choose to do it.

Letting the cat give birth outdoors is often a dubious proposition, given the high mortality rate of feral kittens (50% or higher). They are exposed to parasites, disease, predation by other animals, being hit by cars, accidents when they start exploring and moving around, etc. Spaying the female is a better choice.

Documentation

Keep good records of your work, including date trapped, colony, description, sex, spay/neuter date, vaccinations, whether eartipped or not, and the outcome (released on such and such a date, fostered, etc.). Carefully store veterinary records, including spay/neuter records and vaccinations. Track the colony over time as well – how many cats (including kittens) were present when you first arrived on the scene? How many after you finished the first round of trapping? How many a year later? What happened to the cats returned?

These records serve many purposes. They will prove what you've done and that you've acted in a responsible manner if local authorities, such as the health department, are ever concerned. Keeping records will also allow you to better manage your own colony, as it's easy to forget things over the years.

Cleaning Traps

At the end of each trapping project, it's important to thoroughly clean the traps and any other equipment used, such as trap dividers or cages, in order to prevent the spread of disease. First, any loose materials should be scrubbed off. Then the equipment should be dipped in a bleach solution. The scrubbing should be done first in order for the bleach solution to effectively sterilize all surfaces.

A diluted solution of bleach to water of 1:32 will kill most common feline viruses, including feline distemper. The bleach needs to contain at least 5.25% sodium hypochlorite, which is the active ingredient. You can find the percentage of sodium hypochlorite on the label of the bleach container. Most "ultra" bleaches will have the necessary amount, but do check. You shouldn't use more than a 1:32 solution, with one exception which will be discussed, because bleach is corrosive to metal and repeated cleanings with too strong a solution will ruin your traps and other equipment over time.

One exception to the 1:32 formula is if ringworm may be present. It takes either repeated cleanings with a 1:10 solution to kill ringworm spores, or one cleaning with undiluted bleach.

One way to dip traps in a diluted 1:32 bleach solution is to use a 30 gallon garbage can. Fill the can with water, then pour in almost a full gallon of bleach. Using rubber gloves and eye protection, like safety goggles, dip one end of the trap into the can, then turn it over and dip the other end. Remove the trap, place it on the ground and let it air dry. Do be very careful not to get the bleach solution on your skin, but if you do by accident, be sure to wash it off immediately. Wearing pants and a long-sleeve shirt will lend added protection.

Preparing the Holding Space

Before and after the spay/neuter surgery, the cats need to be kept confined in a holding space as already described.

To prepare the holding space, first cover the floor with a thick plastic drop cloth. Plastic drop cloths are inexpensive and can be found at most hardware stores. The plastic protects the floor from urine, food and other waste that might escape the traps. When the plastic is rolled up and thrown away, any odor that develops over the course of the holding period goes away. One suggestion for keeping odor down is to roll up and replace the plastic not just at the end of the project, but also in the middle when the cats are taken out of the holding space for the spay/neuter. Most people will also place blankets or towels down on top of the plastic for extra warmth, but make sure to replace them if they become soaked. Another good idea for the flooring in cold weather (especially if holding is outdoors such as a shed) is to first place heavy cardboard down to help the cold from coming up into the traps. Then the plastic is placed, and the towels or blankets on the top closest to the traps.

Tables for placing the traps on are helpful, though not essential. The feeding and cleaning does tend to go faster when the traps are raised off the ground, plus it's easier on your back. However, placing the traps directly on a plastic-covered floor is perfectly acceptable. If you do use tables, cover them with thick plastic, too, and be sure they're strong enough to hold multiple traps with cats.

Line the traps up side by side on the tables or the floor (you don't need to leave space between them) and cover with bed sheets. If it's cold in the holding area, use thick towels or blankets.

If your own animals are nearby, it's a good idea to keep them out of the holding space in order to eliminate the risk of any air-born diseases or parasites being transmitted.

A common concern is flea infestation of the holding space. Even though most ferals do carry at least some fleas, this is rarely a realized concern. It appears the fleas stay on their hosts for the most part. Keeping the tops of the traps covered with sheets probably helps keep them from spreading; applying flea medication during the spay/neuter surgery will also help. Most of all, cleaning up thoroughly afterwards is important. All the newspaper that was in the traps, all the plastic lining the floors and tables, and any other waste should be quickly thrown away. The space should then be swept or vacuumed. If you're still worried, then purchase a flea bomb and fumigate the space (repeat the bombing in three weeks to kill any newly-hatched fleas).

Using Traps to Hold the Cats

The cats are confined in their traps during the entire holding period except for the spay/neuter surgery. They are not transferred into cages, dog crates, pens or the like, unless you are an experienced trapper.

Occasionally, people's first reaction is that it's cruel to keep a cat in such a small space for days at a time. While understandable, this shows a lack of knowledge of a feral cat's nature.

When confined, ferals prefer to be in tight, dark spaces. If you were to transfer a feral cat into a large cage that had a small cardboard box or carrier inside, the cat would spend the entire time inside the box or carrier. If you did not give him that little hideaway, but left him only in the open space, he would be terrified.

Traps, when they're covered and the right size, are perfect for ferals – they feel secure and usually calm down and adjust to their confinement very quickly. If the traps are kept clean using the methods described below and the cats are fed regularly, they can be reasonably comfortable under the circumstances for at least several days. A cat who requires further confinement, such as one who is ill and needs a course of antibiotics, can be kept in a trap for as long as two weeks.

Transferring out of the trap and into a cage can risk escape and injury if not done very carefully. In addition, if you're working with a large number of cats, it's impractical to gather that many cages, carriers and litter boxes.

Feeding and Cleaning

Here's a checklist of the equipment and supplies you'll need to care for confined ferals:

- Traps (36" long) with rear doors
- Trap dividers (in pairs)
- Newspaper
- Water dishes & water
- Food dishes & food
- Bed sheets
- Plastic drop cloth (3 mm)
- Garbage bags
- Latex gloves (optional)
- Long craft tables (optional)

For each trap, follow these steps:

One: Start at the front door end of the trap. Get the cat to move to the other end by folding back the sheet towards the rear of the trap. Ferals tend to move from light to dark and will retreat back to the part of the trap still covered by the sheet. If this doesn't work, tap the side of the trap lightly and shoo the cat. If he still won't move, insert one of the dividers from above and give a gentle shove.

Two: Once the cat has moved to the rear end, insert two trap dividers from above into the middle of the trap, one right behind the other. The cat is now sectioned off and cannot escape when you open the front door. It is ideal to use two trap dividers when you put them in vertically through the top of the trap. If you only use one, the occasional cat will be strong enough to bend the outer tong of the divider and squeeze through or push the divider up and crawl out underneath. None of this can happen if you simply use two dividers back to back.

One divider at a time is safe only if you insert it horizontally through the sides of the trap. Make sure the divider has gone all the way through and is sticking well out the other side. Using two dividers vertically from above is preferable because it's faster and more practical if you have multiple traps lined up side by side in a tight holding space. With experience, a single divider is sufficient.

Three: While the cat is sectioned off in the rear end of the trap, open the front door and line the bottom with newspaper, first removing any dirty newspaper or debris. Be generous with the paper – it serves as both litter for the cat to eliminate on and padding from the metal floor.

Don't put in a small litter box with litter – the cats will have no idea what it is and will rarely use it in the manner intended. Instead, they'll lie in it, knock it over, get it in the water bowl and create an unmanageable mess! They're fine with the newspaper, which they'll often shred to cover their waste.

Four: Close the front door, making sure it's locked, and remove the dividers. Then fold the sheet back over the front half of the trap.

Five: Go to the rear end of the trap, now fold back the sheet towards the front of the trap, and get the cat to move away from you towards the front end. Insert two dividers from above, back to back, sectioning off the cat, and then open the rear door.

Six: Line the floor with ample newspaper, removing any dirty paper or debris. Near the rear door, place food on a plate and water in a low container with a flat bottom. Don't use cat food cans for water dishes – their edges can cause cuts. Small plastic snack containers work well. The best are stainless steel bird food cups which hook to the side of the trap.

Seven: Shut the rear door, making sure it's locked. Remove the dividers and cover the rear of the trap with the sheet.

Eight: Repeat this process twice a day if needed; once a day may be sufficient.

When dealing with a large number of cats, it's helpful to work in an assembly-line manner. First, put enough newspaper on top of each trap. Then go down the row and clean all the front ends of the traps. Next, prepare all the food plates and water dishes and put them on top of the traps by the rear doors. Finally feed and clean through the rear ends of the traps.

Always start the feeding and cleaning at the front end of the trap. Otherwise, if you start at the rear, you'll end up backing the cat up into the food and water when you get to doing the front.

Another Approach to Feeding and Cleaning is to use trap transfer as described before. This is recommended if you do not have a large number of cats in the holding area. Prepare a clean trap with newspaper, food and water. Back the traps up to one another (remember to prop one of them up against the wall or a structure for stability) and then transfer the cat from the soiled or messy trap into the clean trap utilizing the toweling to encourage the cat to go into the other trap. Next clean the trap, prepare it for the next cat, and repeat. This should be done twice daily as well, if needed.

Some trappers have devised holding cages for their recovery cats; these cages will hold a small litter box and food/water dishes, and can be made from supplies from a local store selling houseware supplies (like Target, etc). Ask your mentor if you are interested in this; it may be easier to just use the traps until you are used to doing TNR

Before you use a space to hold feral cats, formulate a plan of action for how you would recapture an escaped cat, and then adapt the holding space to your plan before any cats are brought in. NEVER open a trap or carrier in an area that is not fully enclosed – if the cat escapes and gets outside, you are unlikely to catch him again.

Spay/Neuter Date and the Release--

The Night Before and Morning Of

A cat's stomach needs to be as empty as possible during the spay/neuter surgery. Food in the stomach leaves open the possibility of the cat reacting badly to the anesthesia, vomiting and then choking. For these reasons, as a general rule, food should be completely removed from the cats' traps by 10 p.m. the night before the surgery and none provided that morning. Kittens are the only exception to this general rule. Kittens, which can be spayed as early as two months, two lbs., need to eat closer in time to the surgery so they are not too weak. How close in time depends on their age, so if you're dealing with kittens, check with your clinic or veterinarian for instructions on when to withdraw food and water. If you have recently trapped a cat (say the morning of the appt) do NOT hold off taking for surgery because there is food in the trap.

When the cats are brought to the clinic, they can be brought in traps – one cat per trap and each trap covered. Bringing ferals in traps is an important safety feature for veterinary staff. It's easy for staff to isolate the cat at one end of the trap and inject him with a sedative through the bars. The traps should be covered at all times to help keep the cat calm. As you gain experience, you will learn to transfer cats from traps to carriers, which is also acceptable to take the cats to clinic in.

Spay/neuter clinics and veterinarians tend to run on a tight schedule, so you should make a point of being on time for your appointment.

Standard Veterinary Treatment

Veterinary treatment for TNR normally includes the spay/neuter surgery, vaccinating for distemper and rabies and eartipping. Rabies vaccinations are mandatory in most jurisdictions. Eartipping is a way of marking the cat as having been spayed and neutered, more about this later.

Recommended treatment, if it's available and affordable, includes flea medication (especially if a particular cat is infested), ear mite medication, and blood draw and/or testing for diseases. The idea is to do as much as you can for the cat while you've got him at the vet. However, in many cases, veterinary services beyond spay/neuter, vaccines and eartipping will not be available or affordable.

If the issue is expense, then much might depend on how many cats you're dealing with. For example, if you're getting two cats fixed, then springing for flea and ear mite medication might not strain your budget. But if you're dealing with twenty cats, the additional cost could be prohibitive. The primary concern is to get the cats fixed – don't let the inability to provide treatment beyond the basic stop or delay a TNR project from going ahead.

Eartipping

“Eartipping” is the accepted method for marking a spayed or neutered feral cat. While under anesthesia for spaying and neutering, a quarter of an inch is removed from the tip of the left ear in a straight line cut. This is neither painful for the cat nor bloody if properly done. One technique is to clamp the tip of the ear off with a hemostat, slice the tip off with a razor blade.

Universally, the left ear is the one tipped. However, some programs tip the right or left ear for males and the opposite ear for females. On the West Coast of the United States, the practice has developed of tipping the right ear for females and the left ear for males. To remember it easily use this: “The female is ALWAYS right!”

Sometimes, when people are new to TNR, they initially view eartipping as a kind of mutilation and attempt to find other, seemingly less invasive means of identifying the cat as spayed or neutered. In fact, the eartipping procedure is far less severe a veterinary intervention than removing a female cat’s uterus or a male’s testicles. It is merely cosmetic, but potentially vital for protecting the cat. For example, an eartipped female will not be unnecessarily re-trapped, sedated and cut open for spaying. In some municipalities, feral cat groups are notified when an eartipped cat is turned into a local shelter and then have the opportunity to try to reunite the cat with his caretaker. Without the eartip, no one would know the cat came from a managed colony.

Other attempts at identifying neutered ferals have proven ineffective. A tattoo inside the ear is usually only visible after a cat is trapped and then only if someone thinks to look. Eartipping allows for the identification of a neutered feral from a distance and prevents unnecessary trapping. Relying on photos or memory does not alert animal control or anyone else that the cats are being cared for and are already fixed.

As a caretaker, the eartipping will easily allow you to determine whether any cats still need to be caught. I find it easier to see the eartip by looking from behind the cat – in other words, looking at the back of the ear instead of from the front. Binoculars help, too. If you’re trapping in a colony where some TNR has already been done, be sure to check the ears of each cat trapped.

Anesthetic

Right after the surgery, the cat is out cold and lying very still, eyes usually open. As long as the breathing is regular (observe the chest area), the cat is fine. Make sure the cat does not twist his neck into an awkward position that blocks off his breathing. If you’re concerned about this, alert a qualified veterinary technician. If there’s no veterinary personnel available, handle the cat and straighten his neck ONLY if you’re wearing thick, protective gloves (Kevlar gloves are best) and you’re certain the cat is unconscious. An alternative to handling is to insert a divider in the trap between you and the cat, then open the trap door and gently tug on the cat’s tail until his body straightens.

Because of the danger of blocked breathing and the need to handle the cat if this should happen, clinics should not return cats to caretakers at this stage.

Tremors/Shivering

During the surgery, the anesthesia causes the cat to lose control of her body temperature and it drops. During anesthetic recovery, in an attempt to regain normal body temperature, the cat will shiver violently and tremble, sometimes paddling their paws in the air. Again, this is normal and lasts approximately 15 minutes to half an hour.

Wobbliness and Agitation

After the shivering stage, the cat begins to wake up and regain consciousness. They try to stand up, but are still groggy and often will fall over or knock against the sides of the trap. They appear to be in a drunken state. At this point, they may become agitated, being awake but not in full control. This is a good time to cover the trap to calm them, if you haven't done so already.

When to Resume Feeding

Adult cats can be safely fed a few hours after they have regained consciousness. Feed them half the normal amount in case their stomachs are upset from the anesthesia. Water can be provided as soon as the cat is alert. Kittens should be fed sooner than adults due to their higher nutritional needs. Consult with the clinic staff for exact times for resuming feeding and providing water.

Warning Signs

Post-surgical complications from spay/neuter are rare, so it's unlikely you'll ever encounter them unless you handle a large volume of cats. Nonetheless, it's helpful to know what to look for.

There are two "red flag" situations when you should seek immediate help – prolonged unconsciousness and excessive bleeding. If a cat remains unconscious more than an hour after the spay/neuter surgery, this could be a serious problem, and you should call your veterinarian. A large amount of blood -- even one-eighth of a cup -- is another reason to call the veterinarian, for it may indicate that the incision has opened. Urine tinged with blood or drops of blood near the incision site, however, are normal, even a couple days after the surgery.

Seriously Ill Cats

With ill cats, you want to find out whether the cat's condition is potentially treatable or clearly terminal. If the cat is so sick that she's going to die in a matter of days, then the kind thing to do is euthanize, especially if the cat is already sedated. The presence of certain kinds of tumors, for example, could indicate advanced malignant cancer.

This situation might be one where an FIV/FeLV test would be useful. The test might help distinguish whether the cat is suffering a bad upper respiratory infection that a week or two of antibiotics would treat, or end-stage feline leukemia. The point is to try to find out as much as you can. Don't assume the staff will tell you that they believe the cat is terminal and that euthanasia is appropriate. Ask questions and be sure to indicate to the staff when you drop off the cat that they appear ill so they can take extra time examining the cat.

The Release -- When and How

Usually you will holds cats, male and female, for 48 hours before returning them to their territory, assuming they appear alert and recuperated. If there is no significant problem in doing so, you can hold females for 72 hours to give them a little extra time because their surgeries are more invasive than a routine male neuter. However, the extra day is a luxury and not at all a necessity. Sometimes caretakers like to make sure the cats are eating again before releasing them, but some ferals are too stressed by confinement to eat, so that's not always a good yardstick. As long as they appear alert and there's no bleeding or sign of other problems, it's best to let them go.

There are reputable feral cat groups that only hold the cats for 24 hours before release, believing that any additional confinement is too stressful for the animals and an unnecessary burden for the caretaker. Often the cats don't appear fully alert until the second day of recovery. One more day doesn't seem too demanding if it will improve their chances of a smooth recovery. The topography of their territory can also be a factor – if they have to climb and jump over fences, for example, it's best to give them a little more time to heal and be sure they're ready to resume the rigors of their daily routine.

Never release the cats within hours after the surgery, as soon as they are alert and recovered from the anesthesia. This provides no opportunity to see if an incision opens or any other complication develops. It gives no chance for the cat to recuperate from the demands of surgery before facing the demands of the outdoors. Like people, not all cats handle anesthesia or surgery the same – some need more time before they're 100 percent. There are cases of immediately released female cats who burst their sutures, exposing their internal organs. Releasing right away is all about the convenience of the people trapping the cats, not at all about the cats' well being.

Holding cats for too long is also not a sound practice. Confinement is stressful for ferals, especially when they're fully recovered and ready to go. Once they've recuperated, holding them may be doing more harm than good. Unless a cat is ill or there's some other unusual circumstance, ferals should not be held for more than a few days past the spay/neuter surgeries.

Stop and Consider

Will it be a great deal more trouble for you to hold the cats for 48 hours recovery time instead of 24? What would you do if one of the cats required a little extra time and attention prior to being released?

Weather conditions may be another factor in terms of the timing of the release. Try to avoid releasing them in very inclement weather, like snow or heavy rain. Better to wait a day if possible. If the weather is frigid, I like to release them in the late morning after the sun has had a chance to warm the air a bit, as opposed to a release at night when the temperature is dropping.

Always release the cats back into their own territory – never let them go somewhere new without doing a proper relocation. Ferals are extremely territorial. If you put them somewhere new without going through the two to three week relocation process -- even some place you believe is far safer for them -- they are likely to run away and end up who knows where as they search for their old homes.

After being released, the cats may become reclusive for a few days. Continue to put out food and water as usual. Within a week or two (and often much sooner), the cats will return to their old routine and show you the same level of trust as before.

Relocation

The goal of this in-service is to help people understand how to help cats by doing trap-neuter-return. We do not advocate relocating the cats if it can be avoided – they will normally do best in their home territory, and once neutered the colony will stabilize. Moving cats is usually just a temporary fix, since once they are gone new cats are likely to move into the territory. However, should it be necessary to move the cats, there are methods that should be used to ensure the safety of the cats in their territory. It involves 1-finding a safe home; 2-working to set the home up for the cats prior to bringing them; 3-trapping, altering and bringing the cats to the safe area of confinement; 4-ensuring the cats will be kept confined for 2-3 weeks; 5-doing follow ups to give support to the new caregivers (many will stop feeding if they don't see the cats, but ferals are often unseen!); 6-retrieving your equipment.

Should you feel a relocation is needed, it is suggested you ask for the advice of an experienced trapper. Often the cats will be allowed to stay if it is presented in the right manner; if relocation is absolutely necessary, a person experienced in relocations will be your best resource. These people are available through the Feral Cat Task Force that currently includes Pasado's Safe Haven, MEOW Cat Rescue, and Purrfect Pals.

One last thought—if you are ever unsure of what decision to make, find a mentor—someone who has started out just like you and over time has learned what works best for them and listen to their advice. As you go along, you will develop your own way of doing things but while beginning, it's best to go with tried and true! Each of the Feral Cat Task Force rescue groups have mentors, all you need to do is contact them and you will find someone willing to help you. You are going to be surprised that even after learning all this material, every time you go out on a trapping venture, new questions will arise and new complications will present themselves to you. Having a mentor in place prior to that will serve you well!

Welcome to the world of Ferals and THANK YOU for helping them!

Thanks go to HSUS (Humane Society of the United States) along with the rescue group Neighborhood Cats for most of the information contained here. It has been edited for ease of training to our mission.