The Control of Nature

How the “No Kill” Movement Betrays Its Name

By keeping cats outdoors, trap-neuter-release policies have troubling consequences for city residents, local wildlife—and even the cats themselves.

By Jonathan Franzen

A long-serving animal-control officer described a system intensely pressured to keep animals moving through it. “No Kill sounds great,” the officer said. “But it’s a myth.”Illustration by Antoine Maillard

This past June, at the height of kitten season in Los Angeles, Gail Raff got a call for help from the neighborhood of Valley Glen, where a young woman had trapped a cat that needed fixing. Although the City of Los Angeles subsidizes the sterilization of unowned cats, appointments at clinics are hard to come by, and Raff was known in the animal-rescue world as a trapper who secures as many appointments as she can. Arriving in Valley Glen, she learned that the young woman, alarmed by the number of cats in her neighborhood, had been doing her best to feed them. Now they were having babies all over the place, and she wanted to do the socially responsible thing. She gave Raff the address of a “problem” house, not far from hers, where

the cats were concentrated. Raff promised to come back and start trapping as soon as she got more appointments.

A month later, on a warm evening in the San Fernando Valley, I joined Raff on a mission to the problem house. With us was Orly Kroh, a good friend of Raff's for more than forty years, who is also a trapper. Both women are outgoing and glowingly complected, in the Southern California way, and both were wearing black. In gathering dusk, Raff took two cage traps from the back of her Mazda CX-7, covered their floors with newsprint, which protects a desperate cat from injuring its claws, and baited them with chunks of sardine.

Valley Glen is a neighborhood of single-family houses and tree-lined streets, notable for its large immigrant population. The problem house, which stood at the corner of a block with a cheerful plenitude of parked cars, had a lonely and embattled look. Every shade and curtain was drawn, nothing stirring inside. Raff assured me that, despite appearances, the owners were home. The first time she'd trapped here, three weeks earlier, a frail old couple had emerged from the house speaking Farsi and summoned a bilingual friend, who conveyed to Raff their enthusiastic approval of her trapping. The couple had been feeding the cats, thereby drawing further cats to their yard, and they didn't know anything about getting them fixed.

Leaving one trap by the curb, Raff carried the other one up the house's driveway and placed it near a dirty, half-empty swimming pool. She was seeing things I couldn't see—cats on the back wall of the yard, cats in transit from the house of the socially responsible young woman. Then I saw a cat myself, spectral in the dusk. It was entering the trap.

"I think I may have one," Raff called to Kroh.

The cat made a deft U-turn, scampered out of the trap, and vanished. We joined Kroh in the street, where she was watching another cat. Its wariness visibly warring with the lure of sardine, it crept into the second trap. When the door fell shut behind it, Raff hastened over to check its ears. Every street cat that's taken to a clinic has the tip of one ear clipped off, to mark it as fixed.

“No ear tip,” Raff said.

The cat was silent in the cage, sporadically thrashing.

“Put your finger in there, Gail,” Kroh said. “See how friendly she is.”

In contrast with truly feral cats, which shun close human contact, cats that have run away or have been abandoned after losing their fear of people are known as friendlies. This particular cat was not a friendly. Raff draped a beach towel over the cage, and Kroh secured the door with zip ties.

Behind the house, more cats had arrived. One of them nosed around the trap and tentatively entered it. After a moment of suspense, the door fell shut, and Raff relaxed. “Usually it’s not this easy,” she said.

She had a third trap in her Mazda, and she wanted to use all three of the appointments she’d made for the following morning. Most of her cats go to a nonprofit clinic near the Burbank airport, FixNation, which performs more than forty per cent of city-sponsored surgeries. Raff used to get Saturday appointments every week, but the demands on FixNation are so great that she can now get them only once or twice a month.

Behind the house, while Raff set the trap, Kroh heard something inaudible to me: the cries of newborn kittens. She groped around in a bank of dense bushes and then, finding nothing, played the sound of a mother cat on her phone. She and Raff were reminding me of birders, who see and hear things that unpracticed people don’t, and who sometimes resort to using playback. As a birder, I was interested in cats because they kill staggering numbers of birds in the United States. But I also had sympathy for the animals we were trapping. The cats were skittish and hungry, endearing. It wasn’t their fault that they were on the street.

Kroh had extended her search to the far side of the problem house. “I found a baby,” she reported, “and I found the feral mom, she’s in the bushes. I think she just rejected this one.”

From the sidewalk, we watched a tiny black kitten teeter on the edge of a window well. Before it could fall in, Kroh scooped it up and placed a call to

a group that she and Raff trusted, Kitten Rescue. All around us, feline shapes were flitting along fences and pausing in the street. “There’s like a hundred cats here,” Kroh said, cradling the kitten. “There’s two cats right there, spraying the house, spraying away.”

Cartoon by Liana Finck

No one knows how many cats live outdoors in Los Angeles. The city’s Animal Services Web site offers a mysteriously precise estimate of nine hundred and sixty thousand; other sources put the number as low as three hundred and fifty thousand and as high as three million. “It’s getting worse and worse,” Raff had told me. “There used to be a kitten season, and now it’s kitten season 24/7.” Cats are impressive reproducers—females can become pregnant at the age of four months and can have more than one litter in a year—and a warming climate seems to have increased their fertility. In addition to the cats dumped on the street by renters whose new landlords forbid pets, and by the children of deceased cat owners, large numbers are said to have been abandoned by people who acquired them during the pandemic or whose budgets are now pinched by inflation. Los Angeles is also a city of immigrants, many of whom come from cultures in which cats are a casual outdoor presence, belonging to no one, and sterilization isn’t widely practiced.