

Feral Cats Management in Winnipeg & North America

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Abstract

This paper will discuss Feral Cats and best management practices. Providing options, the city of Winnipeg can adopt to best manage its Feral cats' population. Feral cats, or in some communities referred to as Free-ranging/roaming cats, are cats that live outdoors in colonies and have little or no human contact. These cats become problematic to the environment because they can begin to affect native wildlife species through predation and thereby trip the balance of natural ecosystems. The Wildlife Society refers to Feral cats as *Exotic species to North America*, and exotic species are known to cause problems for native species. Most North American cities including Winnipeg, have problems in managing Feral Cats. This report will examine a management technique for Feral Cats in which the city of Winnipeg can adopt to curb Feral Cats population. In addition, information on Feral Cats in Winnipeg will be examined and reported.

Feral Cats

Many a time the terminology is mixed up. Some refer to stray cats and feral cats as the same thing, however, there is a difference. A stray cat is referred to a pet who has been either lost or abandoned. This cat is used to contact with humans and is tame enough to be adopted. On the other hand, a feral cat is the offspring of stray or other feral cats. It is not used to contact with people. Feral cats usually are too fearful to be handled or adopted. (*The Humane Society of the United States, 2017*). Stray cats may easily be reunited with their families or even adopted into new homes, but not the case for feral cats. Feral cats will find it extremely difficult or even impossible to be able to adapt to living as pets in close contact with humans. (*The Humane Society of the United States, 2017*).

As we know at this point, the kittens of stray or feral cats will become feral. Since a female cat can become pregnant very early in life; as early as five months of age (*The Humane Society of the United States, 2017*), that would imply that the number of feral cats in a neighborhood or city can geometrically increase if the cats aren't managed. However, there are many things that can be done to improve feral cats' health and quality of life.

Why are Feral Cats considered a problem?

For starters, feral cats pose ecological problems for local wildlife in an area. The number of birds killed by feral cats is indeed alarming. According to Peter Marra of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Washington, D.C.: "America's cats, including housecats that adventure outdoors and feral cats, kill between 1.3 billion and 4.0 billion birds in a year." Although this statistic varies from place to place, the problem still stands.

Feral cats also eat a lot of rodents in places they exist. Also, Feral Cats on island ecosystems seem to be a serious problem as the cause the extirpation of some indigenous species. (*10,000 Birds, 2013*). We may see less damage done by feral cats in non-island ecosystems because there is more edge, more room for the different parts of the system to expand into now and then. Take, for example, a hungry feral Cat in Winnipeg will go to find new prey in an area previously not explored, leaving the last few of one or another bird species alone for a while. However, on the island, the feral cat eats all the birds.

Another problem posed by feral cats in neighbourhoods and cities is nuisance behaviors, such as urinating and defecating in someone's yard or garden, or digging in someone's yard or garden, or jumping on someone's car and upsetting an owned cat (*The Humane Society of the United States, 2017*). These are some of the greatest concerns the public has about feral cats.

Feral Cats in Winnipeg

The population of feral cats in Winnipeg has run wild, according to animal-welfare advocates who estimate the number of feral felines roaming city streets; there is more than 50,000 of them in Winnipeg as at 2011. According to a cat advocate, Lynne Scott who runs a program that traps feral cats and takes them to clinics to be spayed and neutered, "Winnipeg's stray-cat overpopulation problem is massive and the city's animal bylaws are too "antiquated" to properly address the problem." She estimates that there are between 50,000 and 100,000 feral cats running wild through

city neighbourhoods in 2011. Moreover, those trapped by the city's animal services usually can't be adopted and most end up euthanized.

In October 2011, the Cat Advocacy Rescue and Education (CARE) was created in Winnipeg by Randi Roberts. With help from volunteers, they deal with the out-of-control stray cat population in their neighbourhood. After nearly four years of offering low-cost or free spay and neuter services, CARE hit a major milestone in the summer of 2015 when volunteers treated the program's 1,000th feline patient. (*Companion Animal Health Fund, Western College of Veterinary Medicine. University of Saskatchewan*). Although this number represents only a small percentage of Winnipeg's feral and stray cat population, progress was made in combating a persistent problem



A volunteer works at the CARE clinic. Photo courtesy CARE.

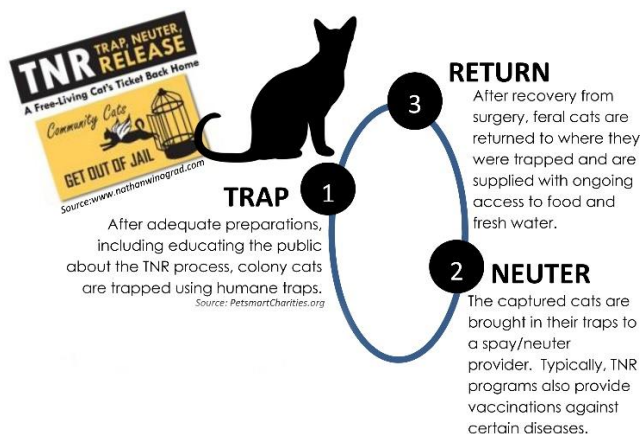
in a high poverty neighbourhood. CARE recently held its largest clinic ever: 17 volunteers neutered 49 cats in one day.

Feral Cats Management

According to Rachel L. Wilken, “the topic of feral cat control is highly debated and emotionally charged (*Slater 2001*).” Jessup (2004) states that euthanasia is the humane method of control, and abandoning cats is illegal and immoral. Another claim that well managed feral cat colonies that follow legal codes can be a successful and humane means of managing feral cats (*Hughes et al. 2002*).

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)

Trap-Neuter-Return is a form of feral cat management. It has been in practice for decades in the US after being proven in Europe (*Alley Cat Allies Research, 2017*), scientific studies show that



The TNR Feral Cat Program:

<http://www.thunderbay.ca/Assets/Living/Animal+Services/images/TNR+diagram.jpg>

Trap-Neuter-Return improves the lives of feral cats, as well as improves their relationships with the people who live in close proximity to them, and decreases the colony size over time. With TNR cats are humanely trapped and taken to a veterinarian to be neutered and then vaccinated. After recovery, the cats are returned to their colony. One of the things TNR does is stop the breeding cycle of cats and prevents reproduction. TNR is a far more preferred and better alternative to euthanasia. Animal control for decades have been pursuing the

removal and killing of outdoor cats, and this has proved to be futile. So many reasons to embrace and promote TNR:

- It stabilizes feral cat colonies
- It improves cats' lives
- It answers the needs of the community
- It protects cats' lives
- It works! (*Alley Cat Allies Research, 2017*)

How TNR alleviates nuisance caused by Feral Cats

According to the Humane Society of the United States, TNR alleviates the nuisance caused by feral cats in the following ways;

- When feral cats are trapped, neutered and returned to their territory, they no longer can reproduce.
- The cessation of sexual activity eliminates the noise associated with mating behavior and dramatically reduces fighting and the noise it causes.
- Neutered feral cats also roam much less and become less visible and less prone to injury from cars.
- Foul odors are greatly reduced as well because neutered male cats no longer produce testosterone which, when they are unaltered, mixes with their urine and causes the strong, pungent smell of their spraying.
- When the colony is then monitored by a caretaker who removes and/or TNRs any newly arrived cats, the population stabilizes and gradually declines over time. (*The Humane Society of the United States, 2017*).

Forms of Feral Cat Colony Management

After TNR is performed, the colonies must be managed. There are ways of management that caregivers can implement – these are best practices for feral cat management. These practices are important for the community.

Revaccination against rabies

Vaccinate cats against the rabies virus, even though this virus is extremely rare in cats. Considering the minimal costs involved (assuming the vaccines are purchased in bulk from the manufacturer) and the enormous public health benefit. (*Best Friends Animal Society, 2017*).

Health monitoring

Even though it can be challenging to re-trap a sick or injured cat, to the extent possible, caregivers should monitor colony cats for health issues (upper respiratory infection, abscesses, wounds, etc.). (*Best Friends Animal Society, 2017*).

Feces and urine accumulation

A litter box or sandbox should be installed (in as discreet a place as possible) for the cats, and be sure it is cleaned out regularly. Not only will this practice keep your own yard clean, it will help maintain neighborhood relationships, since the cats will be less likely to urinate and defecate in areas where they aren't wanted. (*Best Friends Animal Society, 2017*).

Flea management

Fleas can be a problem for colony cats. Although the risk to humans is relatively low, and it's more likely that infected fleas will be found on rats, caregivers should treat colony cats and their immediate environment for fleas, if necessary. (*Best Friends Animal Society, 2017*).

Shelters

Shelters should be used to protect cats from extreme weather. The shelters must be kept clean and in good condition, and located discreetly to avoid drawing attention to the cats. Shelters shouldn't be placed on property without permission from the property owner. (*Best Friends Animal Society, 2017*).

Colony tracking

To have a detailed colony data (original population, current population, number of cats sterilized, kitten births, number of cats pulled, etc.) can be invaluable for demonstrating the effectiveness of TNR. (*Best Friends Animal Society, 2017*).

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