



Free-roaming cats include tame strays and feral cats. They often seek shelter on school campuses underneath portable structures, or among piles of debris.

Feral vs. Stray: Identification and Detection

Truly feral cats are not usually seen; they remain hidden during the day, and hunt at night. They will not approach people or tolerate being approached, and they typically do not meow. Because they were not socialized as kittens, feral cats are not adoptable.

Stray cats were socialized to humans at some point while a kitten, and some may even have a collar or microchip identification. Though they often become timid and wary of humans, they may linger in areas frequented by people and meow (especially for food). Stray cats can often be re-socialized and are therefore candidates for adoption.

Do not attempt to re-socialize stray cats without first spaying/neutering and vaccinating them. Rabies, plague, and other diseases can easily be transmitted via a bite or open wound.

A “feral” cat refers to cats that are free-roaming and were never socialized to human contact. The term feral is also used incorrectly to include other types of free-roaming cats, such as abandoned, lost, and otherwise socialized cats. Collectively referred to as free-roaming cats, population estimates range from 30 to 60 million in the United States alone. They are a ubiquitous problem in both urban and rural areas—including schools.

Free-roaming cats are increasingly considered a public health problem. Numerous diseases, parasites and other pathogens may be vectored by free-roaming cats via a bite, scratch, contact with feces, or simply by petting them.

Free-roaming cats can be a problem in school environments where food and shelter is frequently available. They may scavenge among trash and lunch areas, or near kitchen doors. Well-intentioned staff often feed them. Unfortunately, feeding free-roaming cats in schools may:

- Increase the chance of encounters between cats and staff or students, and therefore spread communicable diseases, parasites, etc.
- Support reproduction (if cats are not spayed/neutered) and add to the free-roaming cat population.
- Draw additional cats and unwanted animals to the school.
- Result in accumulated feces; feces can vector diseases and give rise to significant filth fly populations that may enter structures.
- Lead to a loss of native wildlife; free-roaming cats kill billions of birds, mammals, lizards, and frogs each year.

Trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs are often initiated by local citizens. TNR programs attempt to humanely trap live cats, surgically spay/neuter them, and return them to their trapped location. When at least 75% of the local population is spayed/neutered, the number of free-roaming cats eventually dwindles from reduced reproduction and attrition¹. TNR programs show success in residential, urban, and rural settings, but are not appropriate for school environments where free-roaming cats raise concerns about public health and safety.

TIPS FOR ADDRESSING FREE-ROAMING CATS IN YOUR SCHOOL

1. Determine whether the cat is free-roaming. Lack of a collar, poor health, and frequent visits to the school in search of food or shelter are good indicators that it is not owned.
2. Consider relocating the cat AFTER spaying/neutering and vaccinations. If the cat is a stray (e.g., tame), it may be a candidate for adoption. If the cat is feral, sometimes a landowner is willing to take over its care; however, do not release any cat unless an owner has agreed to take over their care. Often, the school staff responsible for feeding free-roaming cats is willing to lead this effort.
3. Trap the cat humanely, safely, and with proper assistance. Numerous online resources exist to help you correctly trap free-roaming cats while taking into consideration your health and theirs. Traps may also be available from your local animal welfare resources.
4. Know what services are in your area. Many cities and some rural areas have access to low-cost spay/neuter clinics or veterinary offices. Your city or county animal control services will accept unowned animals and usually relinquish them to a local shelter. However, animal shelters often fill with an influx of kittens in the spring. Sometimes, a tame cat's best chance of finding a home lies with you.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

To help prevent student and staff encounters with free-roaming cats:

1. Know what your school district's policy is on free-roaming cats in school environments.
2. Do not feed free-roaming cats on school grounds. If fed, they will take up residence in the school environment and multiply.
3. Do not create a place of shelter for free-roaming cats on the school campus. You would do them a better service to explore your local animal welfare resources and find them a good home in a more appropriate environment.
4. Report free-roaming cats that seem to linger to your facilities department. Note details about where it was seen. Such details can help your facilities staff remediate the source of shelter or food, and ultimately discourage both cats and other small mammals from residing on campus.
5. If free-roaming cats are present in your school, educate students and colleagues about the dangers involved in handling them and being exposed to their feces. Rabies and other diseases vectored to humans by cats are increasing.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST RESOURCES FOR MANAGING FREE-ROAMING CATS:

- Neuter/Spay Oregon: <http://neuterspayoregon.blogspot.com>
- Oregon Humane Society: <http://www.oregonhumane.org>
- Safe and humane trapping: The Feral Cat Coalition: <http://www.feralcat.com/trapinst.html>
- Humane Societies and Animal Control Agencies of Washington: <http://www.nwdogrescue.com/graph/washcnt.html>

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- ¹Anderson, M.C., B.J. Martin, G.W. Roemer. 2004. Use of matrix population models to estimate the efficacy of euthanasia versus trap-neuter-return for management of free-roaming cats. *Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association* 225: 1871-1876.
- Robertson, Sheilah A. 2008. A review of feral cat control. *Journal of Feline Medicine* 10:366-375.
- The National Pesticide Information Center (NPIC) provides objective, science-based information about pesticides and related topics to enable people to make informed decisions. To contact NPIC, call 1-800-858-7378 or visit <http://npic.orst.edu>.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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