

# **Socializing cats that are nonsociable to humans**



**Experiences and opinions of other groups and individuals**

Compiled by FD McMillan

# The cat that is nonsociable to humans

## 8 types:

	Description	Cause of cat's current nonsociability	Description	Identifying traits, characteristics, or features of this type of cat	Chance for socialization efforts to be fully successful	With socialization efforts, most likely maximum endpoint*
<b>Never socialized to people</b>						
<b>1</b>	No adverse experiences with people (e.g., abuse)	◆ Born feral	True feral		[10-20%]	Tolerance of human proximity
<b>2</b>	Adverse experience(s) with people	◆ Born feral ◆ Abused	True feral, abused		[0-10%]	Tolerance of human proximity
<b>Partially socialized to people</b>						
<b>3</b>	No adverse experiences with people	◆ Early people contact but not fully socialized, became free-roaming				
<b>4</b>	Adverse experience(s) with people	◆ Early people contact but not fully socialized, became free-roaming ◆ Abused				
<b>Fully socialized to people but reverted due to time away from people</b>						
<b>5</b>	No adverse experiences with people	◆ Extensive early contact with people, became free-roaming for extended time period			[80-90%]	
<b>6</b>	Adverse experience(s) with people	◆ Extensive early contact with people, became free-roaming for extended time period ◆ Abused			[60-70%]	
<b>Fully socialized to people</b>						
<b>7</b>	No adverse experiences with people	◆ Pet cat in strange and very fear-inducing environment (animal shelter)	Friendly pet cat very scared		95-100%	Full socialization
<b>8</b>	Adverse experience(s) with people	◆ Abused	Pet cat, abused		[80-90%]	

### KEY QUESTIONS:

- Can we tell these cats apart?
- How early can we tell them apart?
- What is the value of telling them apart?
  - A1: Don't push cat with psychological limitations beyond those limitations
  - A2: Different socialization methods for the different types
- Do socialization Methods differ for the different types?
- Are the findings practical and utilizable in all shelter/sanctuary environments?

## **Socializing (taming) the nonsociable cat**

### **What does it look like from the cat's point of view?**

When a cat has never been socialized to humans, his mind does not “see” a human in any way that we can relate to. For us, the sight of another human being is a routine, everyday event. We see a fellow member of our own species as a source of familiarity, not as a strange phenomenon that scares us. This is not how a non-human-socialized cat sees us. To them, a human might as well be an alien.

**Visualize this scenario:** You and your neighbors are enjoying a backyard cookout. Suddenly, everyone spots a 40-foot tall creature that looks like the alien from the movie “Alien.” As the terrified people run in all directions, the creature uses its tentacle-like appendages to snatch you. You are carried away and taken into a monstrous cave-like place that is filled with bizarre...machines? tools? furniture? and has dozens of these massively tall aliens all emitting noises that sound like a combination of gargling and screeching. You are overcome by the most intense terror you have ever known, and you begin screaming wildly for your friends to come save you even though you have no idea if they are anywhere nearby.

You are placed in a small, clear, and very cold box. After a few minutes one of the aliens approaches you and when it is horrifyingly close it begins to emit bizarre noises directed right at you.

Then two slime-covered claw-like appendages begin to emerge from what resembles eyes of this hideous creature and extend slowly toward you. You are trembling terribly with intense fear as these claws – each about 5 feet long and easily able to snip your head off like scissors would snip off a flower from its stem – poke, prod, and pinch you all over your body. Then both claws position themselves around your neck, and as your life flashes before your eyes, the creature's head leans over you and begins to ooze a putrid, yellow-brown goo that falls down on your head and nearly suffocates you as it covers your head and body.

Have you figured out yet that these aliens are friendly and are just trying to comfort you? And that this will continue until they have “socialized” you to feel comfortable living with them?

## **Forgotten Felines of Sonoma County**

<http://www.forgottenfelines.com/new/pages/info/tame.html>

### **Facts to Consider when Deciding For or Against Socialization**

- An adult feral cat can require a few months or up to a year or more to socialize.
- Semi-feral cats will usually be more receptive to socialization. However, if the cat is older and has been on the street for many years it may be as difficult to socialize as a total feral.
- The cat will usually bond with her/his socializer. Due to this fact, many adult ferals are not good candidates for adoption.
- If you have decided that it is in the best interest of the cat to be adopted by someone other than yourself, it is important to integrate that person into the cat's environment once the cat is comfortable with you.
- If you find that introducing new people results in regressive behavior in the cat, you should seriously consider changing your adoption goals.
- The semi-feral cat is also difficult to place. S/he will want to bond with you. Quite often bringing new people into his/her environment will be overwhelming and cause the cat to regress. If this happens, it would be wise to rethink your adoption goals.
- A domestic cat that has reverted to feral behavior will usually be the easiest cat to socialize. It will also be the most likely candidate for adoption. However, if the cat has been living on the street for many years and has had abusive treatment from humans, this will make the re-socialization process more difficult. It is possible that a cat with this history would not be adoptable.
- You have not failed if the cat you are working with can not be socialized for adoption. You may find that your perception of what is best for a feral cat is not always what a cat is willing or capable of adapting to.

## **MetroWest Humane Society**

<http://www.webpaws.com/mwhs/semiferal.html>

### **Socializing Feral Cats**

- Socializing a feral animal can be a difficult but very rewarding experience, and the outcome will have a lot to do with how old the animal is, how feral the animal is, and your personality and patience level.
- The hardest cat to socialize is an older, totally-feral animal. This type of animal has spent a long time in the wild and will be very wary of ever accepting human contact.
- If you can socialize a totally-feral cat, that cat will likely develop a deeply devoted bond with you, and you only, and you may want to consider keeping this cat as your pet. Once these cats allow themselves to trust and bond to that one person, they take time trusting anyone else, and if abandoned by that one person can revert to their wild behaviors.
- Here are some tips on socializing a feral cat:
  1. Once the cat is in your home, keep the cat in a very small area, because too large of an area will stress and frighten the cat. Make sure that this room is quiet and calm and that there are no other animals or small children in this room.
  2. First, only 'visit' the cat to take care of his/her personal needs such as food, water, and the litterbox. Again, food is a very big motivator for feral animals, so get the cat used to the fact that you are the one taking care of his needs. While you are taking care of the cat, feel free to talk to the cat very slowly and softly, this will also get the cat used to you and your voice. And always move slowly around the cat.
  3. Once the cat seems comfortable with your presence, try sitting with him for a few hours a day. Don't try to touch the cat yet—just sit near and talk to him. Each time you 'visit', you can also try to sit closer and closer to the cat, being sure to pay attention to his signs. Remember that anytime the cat gives you a signal to 'go away', do so. Never push. Let things go at the pace the cat chooses.
  4. Once he seems comfortable with you near, you can try to touch the cat. You may want to wear a long shirt or gloves just in case you get scratched or bitten. When you start, always move your hand slowly towards the cat and let the cat smell your hand before you touch him/her. If the cat seems calm enough you can try to pet the cat gently. Again, don't push things. Start slow, pet the cat for a minute or two the first day, and work your way up to more time. At any time, if the cat seems to be angry or scared, stop. And remember, most cats strongly dislike their paws and backsides/tails to be touched so try to stay away from those areas at first.
  5. If the cat is resisting touch, you can try a few tricks: try to give the cat a little tuna or shrimp before touching to coax the cat into trusting you, or tie a sock or a piece of clothing of yours (with your smell on it) around a stick and 'pet' the cat with it from a distance. This contact is a big step, so be patient.
  6. Once he/she can sustain long contacts and seems comfortable with your touch, you can try to hold the cat. You can start off by holding the cat for short periods of time and working your way up to longer 'hugs' and putting the cat on your lap.
  7. If he/she allows this, and seems comfortable with you and the room, you may want to then try to show the cat other parts of the house or other animals. You may also want to try to get the cat to play.

# Stanford Cat Network

[http://catnet.stanford.edu/articles/socializing\\_ferals.html](http://catnet.stanford.edu/articles/socializing_ferals.html)

## Tips on Taming Feral Cats

When approaching a frightened cat:

- Speak and move slowly and calmly and avoid high-pitched sounds
  - Do not make sustained direct eye contact, look down and to the side
  - Watch for body language signals and back off if the cat is warning you by growling, spitting or swishing tail
  - Keep fingers and fist together when approaching the cat – spread fingers resemble unsheathed claws which is a sign of aggression to cats
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- **Patience:** A lot of patience is required to socialize feral cats. Each cat will come around at their own pace regardless of their age – although generally the younger socialize the fastest. You have to follow the cat at their own pace and don't expect too much too soon.
  - **Routine:** If you can, interact with the cat at the same time each day, so he begins to anticipate your visits. Cats feel more secure when they can predict their environment. They feel insecure and therefore are more likely to be aggressive when things happen unpredictably.
  - **Frequency:** Short, frequent visits work best in the first few weeks. A five minute session twice a day will do wonders. However if the cat can see and hear humans most of the time, that is ideal. For example a cage in a veterinary clinic or in a living room of a home is better than a quiet bedroom where the cat is rarely exposed to humans. If the cat is in a quiet area, leave a talk radio station on and place T-shirts with your smell in the cage.
  - **Confinement:** Confining the cat to a cage or small room with limited hiding spaces will greatly accelerate the taming process. Ideally the cat should be at waist level where he feels less threatened by your size. A small room can be equipped with a cat tree so the cat can get up off the ground. Block off hiding places like under a bed because if the cat can retreat fully you can't initiate interactions. The cat should feel secure, so provide a cardboard box on it's side or a partially enclosed bed such as a kitty cube.
  - **Isolation:** It is important to isolate the cat from other cats, because feral cats will often bond strongly with other felines, and the result is that they have no need for human comfort. If you can separate them for a few weeks they will still retain their fondness for other cats when re-introduced. It's important that the cat starts to see humans as the source of food, comfort and love.
  - **Cats that are not ready to be touched:** Try using a feather wand (sold as cat toys) or a stick with a piece of soft flannel wrapped around the end to touch the cat first. You can use Feliway on the feathers or fabric to help soothe the cat further. First, slowly move the stick towards the back of the cat's neck. Gently start to stroke the back of the neck and head. Rub the top of the head, avoid ticklish areas such as the sides. Over a few days, move your hand down the stick each time you use it when the cat relaxes so eventually your hand is right beside the cat when you are rubbing gently. Finally, you can start touching the cat with your own hand. Distract the cat with a toy or food while you reach your hand around behind his head to touch. Do not reach towards the cat's face with your hand, try to sneak your hand around behind so he think it is still the stick. Rub the back of the neck and head – don't touch any other areas yet. Once the cat is appearing to enjoy this you are well on your way!
  - **Treats:** Feeding treats can be a good way to some cat's hearts. Others may become aggressive and try to "scare" the food out of you by lunging or spitting. In that case don't use treats, they don't work well for every cat! You can start by placing treats such as kibble, cooked deli meat, or small chunks of tuna at the front of

the cage, Once the cat is comfortable eating it with you watching, try to get her to eat while your hand remains nearby. Try rubbing him with the stick while he eats the treat, and if he accepts that, rubbing with your hand.

## **Cat Action Trust**

<http://www.cat77.org.uk/articles/feral.htm>

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### **Feral or domestic? - that is the question**

- **Not all feral cats are truly feral!**

A lost or abandoned pet cat forced to fend for itself outside may behave like a feral cat in order to survive. Because of their behavior they may be indistinguishable from "true" feral cats while outside, but once trapped and brought indoors they often revert to their original tame habits. This process can take minutes, hours, days or even weeks, depending on how long it takes the cat to get over its fear and learn to trust humans again. Once such a cat is confident that it is safe and that humans mean it no harm, it will be friendly and affectionate again.

- **Can adult feral cats find homes?**

When people are asked why they want to adopt a cat the most common answer is that they want an affectionate and cuddly companion. Adult feral cats don't come into this category, or at least not in the short term. Many people are able successfully to coax an adult feral cat into the house, gradually gain its trust and confidence and finally turn it into a loving pet. This is a wonderful achievement and reward for an animal lover who takes a cat in for its own sake. Such a late transformation is only possible because of the cat's innate intelligence and affection.



## Socializing a Feral Cat

By Heidi Bickel

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© 2005 [www.SaveSamoa.org](http://www.SaveSamoa.org) & [www.StrayPetAdvocacy.org](http://www.StrayPetAdvocacy.org)

[http://www.straypetadvocacy.org/html/socializing\\_a\\_feral\\_cat.html](http://www.straypetadvocacy.org/html/socializing_a_feral_cat.html)

### Summary List of Tips

1. Think like a feral cat. Allow her to be scared. Reset your clock to her needs.
  2. First things first – a trip to the vet. Have your vet check for worms and parasites (fleas and ticks), test for FeLV and FIV, ringworm and lice. Spay or neuter as soon as possible.
  3. Prepare your home: a dark room that is fully cat-proofed, with hiding places, food, water, toys, two litterboxes filled with organic-only potting soil, and articles of your clothing bearing your scent and placed in appropriate places around the room.
  4. Release her into the prepared room and leave her alone for 24 hours.
  5. Be prepared for the worst when you go in the room. Wear long sleeves, long pants, gloves, shoes, and bring along a piece of cardboard for a shield in case she attacks out of fear.
  6. Work on building trust. Food = trust. Feed her on a regular schedule and stay in the room while she eats.
  7. Don't force contact with her. Petting is a threat; let her come to you when she is ready.
  8. Avoid direct eye contact with her. Eye contact is aggressive to a feral.
  9. Initiate play with a fishing pole type toy. Never play using your hands as the object of attack.
  10. *Be prepared for two steps forward, five steps back.* It takes a while and a lot of testing on her part for her to truly trust you.
  11. Pay attention to her body language. When she says, "That's enough," back off. This reinforces her trust.
  12. Don't have expectations of this cat. Let her show you who she is, accept her quirks and limits, and you will have a friend for life.
- So you've decided to give a feral cat a forever home. The good news is that this cat will show you a loyalty like none you have ever known before. You will develop a bond that is nothing short of amazing, but this bond will only happen over time, coupled with patience, a whole lot of work, and love.
  - Feral cats survive by instinct, and that instinct includes not trusting people. They avoid them at all costs, with the possible exception of the person who brings them food. Even that is a precarious relationship at best.
  - You are asking this cat to completely change his/her way of reacting to people.
  - Socializing a feral cat doesn't occur overnight, and it takes a full commitment on your part along with changing your way of thinking about cats in general to make it work. It can be done, however, regardless of the cat's age or what some authors have said on the subject.

### First Things First – Change Your Way of Thinking

- ◆ The first thing you must do, before you even have the cat in your home, is change your point of view to that of the cat.
- ◆ Stop thinking of this kitty as a lap kitty or purr bug who wants to lap milk from your hand. This isn't a lap cat by any stretch of the imagination, and may never become one.
- ◆ She doesn't want to be touched at this point, and will probably view any attempts at petting as a threat. You are a predator to her, pure and simple. She views herself as your potential prey.
- ◆ She may have had bad experiences with people before you, from all-out abuse to being shot at or rocks thrown at her while she was just trying to find food. Even if she never had these experiences, a true feral has been taught from birth to distrust you.
- ◆ Approach her on her terms, working with her slowly once she is captured. You must go by her time frame, and this changes for every cat.

- ◆ You need to allow for her to be afraid, you can't lose your patience with her, and you can't rush her to "conform" to your expectations.
- ◆ If you can do all that, then you have what it takes to help this cat. You have a feral point of view.

### **Preparing Kitty's New Home**

- If kitty wasn't an expected arrival, this preparation can be done while she is at the vet's office getting spayed (or neutered).
- Be prepared before you bring this scared ball of claws and teeth into your home!
- She will need her own room, away from any resident pets or children. It should be fairly quiet (NO loud noises!), a dark room that is fully cat-proofed with a few hiding spots she can flee to when she feels threatened.
- You will need all the basic kitty supplies plus a few additional things to make the adjustment period as pleasant as possible for kitty: food and water bowls, litterboxes, toys, a radio, and a comfy place for you to spend time with her. Get a loud tick-tock wind-up clock, and wrap it in a towel, and put it with your sweatshirts for a snugly place to sleep (especially good for kittens).
- You can provide her with hiding places of your choice and making, although she may find better ones. Take a big cardboard box, flip it upside down and cut a couple holes in different sides big enough for her to pass through. Weight down the top so it doesn't move with her, and put some nice soft blankets inside for her. Also put a smelly sock or shirt or some other object with your scent on it so the cat will get used to your particular human smell.
- The litterboxes are another issue where it pays to think ahead. At first, use straight organic potting soil with no litter. This will be more familiar to her, since she is used to going in dirt. Over time, mix in the litter until all you have is straight litter-filled litter pans. Don't use clumping litter just yet – that is way too foreign and she won't know what to do with it. Unless they are really scared or sick, ferals are generally fastidious about using a litterbox. It's part of their natural defenses to cover their waste so predators can't easily find them. If she is truly feral, don't be surprised if she hunkers down in the litterbox for a while. The soil reminds her of home and comforts her. She will figure out what it is really used for eventually.
- Be sure to cat-proof (especially: escape-proof) the room really well. One of a cat's most effective defensive tools is the ability to hide. You will be amazed at how small she can make herself, what tiny holes and cracks she will be able to get herself into to hide from you. The last thing you need is to have to chase this cat out of an unsafe hiding spot or, worse yet, from inside your ductwork or walls. Get down on your belly and look everywhere in the room for anything that may be unsafe. Remember, cats don't have shoulder blades like we do – if they can get their heads in it, they can get the rest of their bodies in it, too. Be sure to check vertical spaces as well.
- Her first reaction to being let out of the trap/cage/carrier may be to RUN and escape. They can and do scale walls when they are panicked. Check any and all shelves and make sure there isn't anything she can knock off and break. Check that there are soft landing pads around these areas too. At some point of her confinement, she WILL try to escape (whether you see it or not). If you want to have fresh air flowing through an open window, buy some decorative trellis material at a hardware store and cut it to fit the window so she can't push out or rip through the screen.
- Ferals love string—string reminds them of mouse tails—and they loooove mouse tails! While this makes choosing toys they like easier, it also poses a danger to them. They love to EAT string. String can get tangled up in their digestive systems and require surgery to remove it. When cat-proofing, be sure to pay attention to taking away any string they might get at, and put away those wonderful toys on a string when they aren't in use.

## **The First Days**

- OK, so the room is ready. Bring her into the room in the carrier, close the door behind you and open the door of the carrier. Step away from the carrier and let her come out on her own accord. One of two things will happen: she will bolt out of there and find a place to hide (or scale the walls looking for a way out), or she will be too scared with you still in the room to move. If she does come out, don't go after her and—whatever you do—do not try to catch her. Just watch to see where she goes. Now leave her alone for at least 24 hours. It's hard to do, but unless it sounds like she could be hurting herself don't go in there. She needs to adjust to her surroundings. As long as you provided plenty of food, water, two litterboxes, and cat-proofed the room really well, she will be fine. She may yowl, although most of the time ferals will be too scared and shocked to yowl that first day.
- Leave a nightlight on for her, but not a large overhead light. The relative darkness will give her a sense of security. She knows instinctively that she can see better in the dark than most animals, humans included. Put a classical CD on repeat play at a low volume. Ferals especially respond very well to classical music, especially harp music if you have it. It is very calming to them.
- Once you start going into the room, do it at regularly scheduled times. Knock at the door – not too loudly – to announce your arrival. This will do two things: it will probably spook her enough so she doesn't bolt for the door, and it starts setting a routine she can count on. Cats like routine.
- At first, always bring food with you. She needs to associate you with good things, and for a feral that is used to scrounging, food is a very good thing. Scoop her litterboxes, feed her, bring her fresh water. Talk to her quietly with a calm, soothing voice when you are doing these things so she gets used to hearing you. At this point, do not seek her out. You are still very scary, but she is noticing everything you do in her room.
- When you go into her room, always remember that you are still dealing with a wild animal, and you are the enemy. She is truly wild, and truly scared, she will try everything to get out of this confinement. Since you seem to be the gatekeeper to her confinement that means defeating you. Even kittens will put up a fierce fight if they feel threatened. You need to come prepared for her if she decides to launch an attack at your face, and some really do this. Be prepared, and realize it is not personal. Wear long sleeves, extra layers of clothing, long pants, shoes, heavy leather gloves (welding gloves are good), and bring a flat piece of cardboard to use as a shield. If she launches at you, raise the cardboard so she bounces off something fairly soft instead of your arm or face, possibly inflicting injuries onto both of you.
- Most ferals won't react this way but you don't know her history. If she's been through abuse and feels she is trapped in a fight-or-die situation, she will fight. She doesn't know that you aren't the same thing that hurt her before. You may feel silly that first time you see her and all she does is turn tail or meekly meow, but it is better to be prepared for the worst and hope for the best.

## **Building Trust**

- In essence, socializing a feral cat is no more than building back up a trust that has been lost or never known.
- The first step of proving that you are a reliable source of food has been taken—and noted—in the cat's mind, but that's not enough to really get through to this cat that you are worthy of her trust. This is the part that takes all that patience and hard work mentioned before. This part of the process can take weeks or even months to work through. It all depends on the cat, what experiences she's had with humans, how old she is, how ingrained those survival instincts are in her.
- Once you've established your basic routine with her—what times she will get her food—start spending more and more time in the room with her at those times. Read, bring in a laptop and work quietly, write, watch TV on low volume, just be in there with her. Try to be on her level as much as possible by sitting or lying on the floor or on a low chair. You look really, really big to her when you are standing up. Try to see things from a

scared kitty's perspective, and then adjust yourself so you aren't so scary. The most important thing is just to be there with her. Reading out loud is one of the best things you can do, because she will get used to you and your voice. The more she sees that you are there and aren't threatening her, the more trusting she will become.

- Once she's comfortable enough to come out of hiding with you in the room, *reinforce that you are associated with good things*. Leave treats out for her (not in your hand just yet, but close to you). Entice her to play with a fishing pole type toy so your hands aren't too close. Cats are very smart and it won't take her long to figure out that you are the force behind the toy.
- When she comes out, as much as you want to look her in her eyes, *do not make eye contact*. In the feral cat world, direct eye contact is considered an act of aggression. Especially in the beginning, when she's feeling you out, avoid looking at her at all. This will reinforce to her that you are not a predator watching her every move and waiting for her to show a weakness. When you do begin looking at her, look just over the tops of her ears rather than into her eyes.
- Don't extend your hand to her right off. When she comes out eventually while you are sitting on the floor, slowly place your hand on the floor palm flat, not near her but so she can see it. As much as you are itching to pet her, don't. Let her make that first move toward you either by bumping your leg, arm or hand. This is where the patience of a saint comes in. This is the step that can take a very long time. Remember, *she has had her entire world flipped upside down and is captive for the first time in her life*. She is not going to trust you yet, figuring somewhere along the way you are going to hurt her. For every bit of progress you see, she will test you again and again before making another step toward trusting you.
- You will know when kitty's trust is growing. She will play, she will watch you with interest and not fear, she will come close and even touch and smell you. To get her ready for that first real petting, let her get used to your hand being close to her and moving toward her. Let her sniff you so she knows that this thing moving toward her is part of you.
- When you think she is ready for the next step (when she has made moves to be close to and touch you), lay your hand down palm flat next to her gently. Place a toy near your hand – but not close enough to get scratched. She should come up to your hand and sniff it and nudge it. If she does, raise it *very* slowly. Don't look into her eyes, but talk to her gently and when your hand is up to her face level, leave it there then start petting her. I cannot tell you how you will know when to do this, just that you will know.
- When you touch her for the first time she may be very receptive, like "What took you so long? I've been waiting for AGES!" But if you feel her tense up, stop and let her be. Pay close attention to her for signals that she's uncomfortable. If you see or sense that she isn't sure about it, just stop. Being attuned to her and stopping before she has to forcefully tell you to stop will prove again to her that you aren't a threat.
- Through all of this, there may be *sudden and seemingly inexplicable setbacks*. This is typical behavior for a feral kitty. *Two steps forward then five steps back*. It is frustrating at times, actually more than frustrating. Working with a feral would be like working with an abused child. Just when you think you've gotten through, something in their brain kicks back to what they learned before and their experiences with adults. With patience and love she will see again that you only mean to love her. She'll come back around. Those old, ingrained habits of not trusting people are hard to get through.
- When she starts getting into petting and love, pay attention to her body signals. Ferals are especially sensitive and can easily be over-stimulated. The nerves in her skin become so sensitive that the petting she loved just seconds ago becomes almost painful. She will tell you that it's too much in signals she thinks are clear as day, but can be more difficult for us humans to see. Watch for swishing tail, pupils becoming dilated, ears going back. When she gives off these signals, stop petting now. She may come back in a few seconds for more

love, but she needs to calm herself down. If you don't stop, she will tell you in no uncertain terms that it was too much – she will scratch or bite.

- Through this entire process she may give you mixed signals even in the same day. If she hisses, swats or bolts from you, don't take it personally. You may have startled her inadvertently and a hiss is just her way of saying that you invaded her space, or it was a knee-jerk reaction to being startled. When she reacts to you in this manner, look at whatever you just did that pushed her limits and learn from it. Sometimes for no discernible reason ferals take a few steps back in the trust factor.
- No matter what happens here, always remember: you've just brought a wild animal into your home. She'll love you like no other, but it may take a while before she switches from survival mode, to "this is my turf" mode, to "these are my people!" mode. Take heart in the little steps and the tiny amounts of progress that you two make day to day. No matter how many times you have done this, it is always a learning experience for both the cat and the person.

### **What to Expect From Your Feral Cat**

While individual cats differ, in general there are a few things you pretty much can count on with your feral cat

- ◆ She will be skittish and distrustful of strangers all her life
  - ◆ She will hide whenever there are loud noises or sudden changes to your household
  - ◆ Food may be a constant issue with your feral cat. Those who have to survive on their own merits eat every meal as though it could be their last. Those old habits die hard. For some ferals, free feeding is the best option so they know that food is always available. Others can't handle this and will eat everything in sight, becoming obese. This is something to watch carefully, although most will learn in a short period of time that they don't have to eat everything in sight
  - ◆ These cats often go to extremes. She will either try every time you open the door to get out, or she will show no interest at all in going outside. She will be aloof and only want love on her terms, or she will seem to want to make up for the time when she couldn't get attention and demand all the time. You may or may not get a lap cat, but that's true for any cat.
  - ◆ With ferals, the best thing to do is *not expect anything from them*. Let them show you who they are and what they want. Accept them for who they are, and they certainly will do the same for you.
- If this is your first time (or fiftieth!) taking a feral cat into your home and your heart, we strongly suggest that you find a support group. These people who have been there can encourage you on those down days, give suggestions when you feel lost, and smile and cry with you when you make those leaps of progress. One such group of people can be found at [www.TheCatSite.com](http://www.TheCatSite.com) in the [Caring for Strays and Ferals Forum](#). Joining is free, but the information and support you gain is invaluable.

## **TAMING FERAL KITTENS AND CATS**

*Copyright 1996, 1999, Sarah Hartwell*

*This information was originally prepared for Cats Protection and Feline Advisory Bureau and draws together the experience and expertise of many feral tamers working for these organizations and information received from a number of non-profit organizations specializing purely in feral cats and kittens. The contributors have many hundreds of hours experience and can be considered experts in the field of feral kitten taming.*

### **FERAL KITTENS**

#### **Untamable Kittens**

- A small proportion of kittens remain untamable even if caught while young. This is due to genetics - the wildest ferals are best equipped to survive and they pass on this wiliness and fear of man to their offspring. Kittens over 12 weeks old are harder to tame and the results may not be satisfactory - they may bond to one person only, be nervous, hard-to-handle and practically impossible to home as pets. It is possible to have them neutered at this age, avoiding the need to keep them in captivity and under stress.
- Early neutering of untamable young ferals allows them to be returned to their colony; if kept in captivity for a few months they might have problems reintegrating themselves into their colony. Keeping them penned for months also ties up a pen which could be used for a succession of homeable pet cats and can cause great distress to what is basically a wild animal.
- Some feral tamers insist that all cats can be tamed if given enough time and effort. Personally I believe it cruel to persevere if the cat or kitten shows no sign of change over a period of months. Research into feline behavior has found that some cats and kittens (even those born into domestic environments to domestic mothers) simply lack the genetic make-up to adapt to a household setting. Their genetic make-up means they are fully wild and it is not a failure on your part.
- **Taming Feral Kittens – How Long Does the Process Take?** Each feral kitten is different due to temperament and the amount of exposure it has previously had to humans. A kitten will progress at its own pace as it begins to feel safe and secure and develops trust in the person taming it.
- Don't rush things or the kitten may later revert to feral ways. Reinforce the taming/socialization with plenty of tidbits and, later on, plenty of petting and play sessions. Don't be rushed into rehoming the kitten - it needs an understanding environment where the socialization process can continue.
- Even experienced feral-tamers may feel discouraged on encountering a kitten which cannot be tamed or may become over-attached to a tamed kitten and keep it despite their original intentions. An untamable kitten shouldn't be viewed as a failure - it is genetically predisposed to life as a wild animal.

### **TAMING ADULT FERALS**

- I consider the best approach with adult ferals is trap-neuter-release. I know people who have successfully tamed adults and I have re-socialized fearful cats. I also know of disaster stories. I trust the reader to decide whether their adult feral will respond to taming and to know if the process is working or not.
- Unless feral cats have had some exposure to humans during early life (e.g. semi-ferals around restaurants or those in colonies accustomed to human caretakers) their temperament when tamed may be unreliable. Sometimes, free-ranging ferals have gradually made a transition to indoor life; in these cases, the cats chose to socialize with me and I provided encouragement and food rewards, but have not attempted to cage or confine them.

- These guidelines are based on the work of cat shelter colleagues and on my work re-socializing fearful or traumatized cats.
- Taming adult ferals is traumatic for both parties, time-consuming and often unsuccessful.
- It is not usually possible to verify whether late-tamed cats were feral from birth or strays gone wild which were subsequently re-tamed, in most cases I suspect the latter.
- I do not promote the confinement and taming of adult ferals - these are not temperamental pets, these are wild animals which find close captivity and forced human contact stressful. Most are best neutered and rehomed to a semi-wild environment, e.g. as working cats at stables, where they can choose whether to socialize themselves with people.

### **TAKING ON A MATURE FERAL**

In general, a mature feral is one which is sexually mature. The likelihood of taming the cat depends on several factors:

- His/her temperament
- Any previous contact with humans, e.g. a managed colony or farm colony
- The cat's age and whether he is 'set in his ways'
- Neutered males are generally less aggressive and easier to tame than entire males. I have found no overall difference in tameability of males and females once they have been neutered/spayed.
- Recommended containment for an adult feral is a large and robust cat play-pen or kitten cage. The cage must be big enough for a front-opening, solid-sided cat carrier to be placed inside through the cage door. Initially the cage should be kept covered by a blanket or sheet to reduce stress. At this stage, the cat is a trapped wild animal. The kitten cage should be placed in a quiet room with a door which closes securely. Make sure there are no inaccessible hiding places e.g. fireplaces with chimneys, loose floorboards or gaps in wooden walls.

### **FIRST CONTACT WITH YOUR ADULT FERAL**

- For the first 2 or 3 days, restrict your visits to feeding and cleaning times to reduce stress until the cat adapts to its caged environment. After that, build up the amount of time spent in the same room with the cat over a period of days.
- When in the room, talk constantly and softly, even if you are simply reading a book out loud. The cat must get used to your presence. If possible leave a tape recording of your voice playing when you are not in there; if this isn't possible leave a radio tuned to a news station (at low volume) in the room. When re-socializing fearful adults, I use the room as my TV viewing room or reading room.
- If the cat shows any curiosity (most will probably be too scared) offer tidbits to get him to trust you. If possible, eat some of your meals in there, preferably containing food the cat would like and make sure you have some tidbits if he shows interest. I usually cook a separate portion of meat/fish to give as a tidbit.
- Leave some of your own worn clothing in the room so it gets used to your scent. Wear a T-shirt in bed so it picks up your scent and leave that in the room. I have met feral tamers whose tamed cats like to carry worn knickers (panties) around because of the owner's scent.
- Whenever approaching the cat in the cage, keep low. Standing over the cat is threatening to him. Always keep your face well out of claw's reach – frightened cats lash out instinctively.

### **OUT OF THE CAGE AND INTO THE ROOM**

- Most cats are fastidious creatures and are easily litter trained. Feral cats with access to a soft substrate (dirt, sand) should be used to burying feces to hide their scent from predators. Ferals from urban areas may have grown used to toileting on hard surfaces and may be harder to litter train.
- Once the cat uses its litter tray and bed appropriately and reliably, you can leave the cage door open giving it access to the whole room. Place some used bedding, food/water and a second litter tray (one it has already used) in separate corners of the room. It probably won't venture out until left on its own and it will immediately find a secure hiding place.
- You may not see it for several days, but once you are confident that it is no longer living in the cage, you can remove the cage and its contents. Make sure you fix a notice to the outside of the room door saying there is a wild cat loose in the room. Disasters have happened when a door has not been secured shut.
- Once it has settled into the room, spend as much time in there as you can. You will probably have to spend much of this time on the floor so invest in two comfortable cushions –you will need two, because the cat may later decide to sit one while you are in there. Make sure the cat can see you, then yawn, stare into the middle distance (not directly at the cat) and blink slowly. In cat-speak, these are signs that you are friendly and relaxed. With your hands, mime washing your face and hair cat-fashion. It sounds silly, but you must communicate in cat body language it starts understanding humans.
- Once the cat seems relaxed, even if he is still hidden, sit on the floor with one hand outstretched towards him (fingers curled). He may not investigate you for the first several attempts, but eventually he will be curious enough to sniff you especially if he is used to getting tidbits by hand. In most cases, the cat will still be in its favorite hiding place (den) at this stage. If he starts coming out to investigate you or sits in the open, you are making excellent progress as the cat is showing that he considers you to be nonthreatening.

#### **PHYSICAL CONTACT AND PLAYING**

- It is still a long way from 'nonthreatening' to 'friendly.' It is an especially long haul to the next step which is touching the cat. Don't move on to this stage until the cat allows you to place your hands near him without reacting with defensive aggression.
- When the cat is relaxed move your hand slowly towards him. Talk reassuringly. If he hisses or growls then stop, leave your hand where it is until the cat sniffs it or ignores it. Leave it there a little longer then slowly move it away (if you move too fast, the cat will probably swipe at it instinctively). The aim is to touch the cat's fur without him reacting badly.
- Start with top-of-head scratches and progress to back scratches and cheek scratches. Avoid touching his legs and belly as many cats simply don't like these areas touched. Don't ever surprise the cat or touch him suddenly from behind. He *will* defend himself.
- Always move slowly and keep talking. Be alert for any sign of trouble (defensive aggression) – flattened ears, dilated pupils, low growling, swishing tail, prickled fur or an extreme cases, the cat may flatten his whole body against the floor and wall and may even lose bladder or bowel control because he feels cornered. Many cats, even domestic pets, urinate out of fear. If this happens, back off to a point where the cat is comfortable for a few days before trying to move closer again.
- If the cat starts purring at any stage, you know you have turned the corner and the battle is half-won. Once again, the cat will probably still be in his 'den' at this stage. If it has come out to investigate you, you have made excellent progress.
- *Note: Wait until the cat moves to another hiding place before cleaning 'accidents.' Use a specialized cleaning solution and de-odorizer to mop up urine and feces. Do not use chlorine bleach or general disinfectant since some are toxic while others break down into products that smell like cat urine and encourage inappropriate*



*toileting. A dilute solution of white vinegar may help. Bleach based on sodium hypochlorite (e.g. Domestos) may be used in proportions of 1 part bleach to 10 parts water.*

- During the last two stages you have been encouraging the cat to come out into the room with you present. The goal is for the cat to regard you as part of the furniture, which is why you should spend plenty of time with him. Generally, if you can get to the stroking and purring stage you can entice him out. Never make any sudden moves – the cat will still be very wary and will panic and/or run for cover. However, some cats are still in hiding at this point even if they do allow stroking.
- Games with feathers on string, wands, and ping-pong balls may entice your cat out into the open and he may lose some of its inhibitions while playing. If necessary, bat the toy around a little on your own so the cat can watch you. He will soon get the idea that the toy is harmless (sometimes I have had cats forget themselves and join in, even making physical contact with me while they play). Start off slowly, as the cat has never seen cat toys before and may be fearful of them. But few cats can resist a dragged piece of string.
- When socializing fearful cats, I like to leave some balls or soft cat toys in the room with them. The cats have frequently kept me awake during the night with rowdy play.

### **STROKING AND STARTING SOCIALIZATION**

- When you have reliably reached the stroking stage, try sitting on the floor with a towel or some bedding on your lap. Using food treats, encourage the cat to sit on you while being stroked. If the cat has built up a bond of trust, you may be able to pick him up (I recommend wearing leather gloves) and place him on your lap. Many cats (ferals and tame) never learn to like sitting on laps, but will come to sit next to you for some attention.
- If you can pick the cat up, while sitting in a chair try to pick him up and sit him on your lap. Once again, if the cat gets defensive or distressed, back off to the sitting on floor stage for several days before trying again. Always progress at the cat's pace and never rush things. You have made a lifetime commitment to this cat and these initial weeks or months will lay the foundation for your relationship.
- By the end of this stage you should be able to reliably pick up the cat and place him on your lap or on a seat next to you and have him stay there while being petted (you may need to use *gentle* persuasion or restraint if he seems uncertain about staying put, but never attempt to restrain a scared or struggling cat).

### **INTRODUCING THE CAT TO THE HOUSEHOLD**

- You have bonded with the cat, and it is time to introduce the cat to other people and to the rest of your household.
- It's possible that your partner or grown up children (if you have them) have taken part in these early stages. I usually find that the initial taming is done by one brave and committed person and that other members of the household don't get involved until the cat has lost much of its wildness. If they haven't previously been involved, get them to sit in the room talking to the cat and also playing with him with string or wands. At first he will refuse to play with strange people, but sooner or later he will overcome his shyness.
- If you have other cats, they will have figured out that something is going on. They will have smelled the feral's scent. At first, introduce them to one another's scents by exchanging articles of bedding. Rub down the cats with one another's blankets to mix their scents. You need to fit a screen door or other screen barrier to the feral's room – the cats can watch each other and the feral will learn from your pets' behavior.
- Make a point of interacting with your pets in view of the feral, especially picking them up (if they enjoy this), loving them, and putting them back down. Make sure the feral sees how much your cats find this enjoyable (stick to interactions that your cats enjoy otherwise the feral will learn to be fearful of interaction).

- When the feral cat is relaxed, you can leave his room open. Make sure to first cat-proof the rest of the house so the cat can't escape or get into problems. Because the cat may become overwhelmed at having access to the whole house at once, decide which rooms the cat can visit and which ones will be kept closed.
- At first he will make forays out into the rest of the house to explore and find other hiding places. When he returns to his own room or settles into another 'safe place,' spend time with him – this reinforces the taming and socialization work.
- These forays will initially be at night-time; you may find the cat's fur on chairs around the house as he establishes night-time sleeping places. Sometimes, only a dented, fur-covered cushion provides evidence that the cat is out and about in the house.
- If he hides around the house, always talk gently when you are near one of his hiding places. Don't force him out of these hiding places, though you can try the dragged string trick. As he explores and learns more and more of the house, you can start to leave other rooms open.
- Gradually move the cat's litter tray and food and water out of its original room to encourage the cat to spend time in the rest of the house. At first he may hide from you in the daytime, but the combination of night-time forays, moving food bowl, morning feeding, and continual reinforcement will eventually bring him out in the daytime.

### **REHOMING A TAMED ADULT FERAL CAT**

- I consider it best that the formerly feral cat remain with his socializers as he will have built up a strong bond with them.
- Rehoming is a traumatic event for any cat but is doubly traumatic for a cat which has made the transition from distrustful wild creature to a tamed (though probably nervous) feral cat living a house
- If the cat is to be adopted out, the socialization must be repeated in the new home, beginning with confinement to a single room until the cat bonds with the new owners and moving on to exploring the house at night-time.
- Although there may be setbacks, the process is usually quicker the second time around as the cat has already learned a lot about humans and living in a human environment. This time round, it is learning to apply this knowledge to new environment.
- Socialized feral cats should be placed in a household where there is at least one fully socialized and cat-friendly domestic cat since he will learn a lot by observing his tame feline companions. The new owner must also be experienced with cats, especially with nervous cats, and willing to repeat and continue the work you have done.
- Assess the cat's readiness and temperament carefully before he is adopted. The adopter should have spent plenty of time in your home getting to know the cat first since the cat must transfer his bond from you to the new owner. In fact if the adopter can be involved in your taming process a good bond will build up right from the beginning. I have seen cats which fully reverted to the wild state when adopted into a new home; one of these was returned to the socializer with whom she had a strong bond, though some of the others had to be released into managed colonies (some later became tame again over a period of 1 or 2 years).
- I have seen some of the best results with ferals who lived in large enclosures at a cat shelter; the constant presence of people and the opportunities for interaction allowed the cats to approach humans at their own pace. Even so, rate of progress and degree of tameness varied. Some became fully tame, others became semi-tame but progressed no further while a few remained feral.

## SUMMARY

The process of taming an adult feral is much longer and harder than working with kittens and I prefer to neuter and release wild adults. If you are prepared to make a lifetime commitment then it may be worthwhile. Bear in mind the following:

- *If the cat shows no signs of progress over 5 or 6 months, seriously consider returning it to its colony.*
- If the cat is, and remains, extremely aggressive towards humans, then trying to tame it will probably be very stressful and almost certainly unsuccessful.
- If the cat's health suffers as a result of stress, consider trap-neuter-release instead of socialization. I have known feral adults die due to the stress of confinement.

Overall, the most reliable results are with ferals which approach humans of their own volition in the outdoor environment. If the taming process begins outdoors in this way, it can continue over a much longer period of time with much more reliable results as the cat him or herself makes the decision to enter your household.

# American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

## Socializing feral adults

Socializing a feral teenager (older than 3 to 4 months of age) or feral adult can be a time-consuming, difficult task with uncertain results. The older the cat, the more likely he will socialize only to a certain degree and then only to the person taming him and not to anyone else.

### Socialization techniques for adult ferals

- Realistically, the goal for socializing a feral adult is very different from what you are trying to achieve when you socialize a feral kitten. Kittens can become adoptable – for the most part, feral adults cannot. The aim for socializing an adult is not to be able to pick her up, pet her and adopt her out to a stranger. Instead, a more realistic goal is to teach her how to adjust and find her own niche in a domestic environment and avoid having her hide and be in fear for years to come.
- How far the cat progresses towards being a normal house cat will depend on her psychological and emotional capabilities, not you. One day she may decide you're okay and come and sit next to you, allowing you to touch her. But this may take years, if ever.
- More than anything, socializing an adult feral means learning to appreciate and love her for who she is, and allowing her to develop at her own pace and to her own limits.
- The key to socialization is how a feral adult is introduced into your home. All too often, people let them loose right away with the predictable result that the cat finds some obscure, unreachable place to hide. Then she only comes out late at night to eat. This pattern can go unchanged for years. The way to prevent this is to start them off in a cage.
- The cage is vital because it gives the cat a place where she feels safe. Contrary to many people's belief, a feral cat prefers a covered, enclosed space to a wide-open one. That's why they go run under the bed, given the opportunity. By starting the cat off in a cage, you choose their hiding spot, not the cat. This gives you control over the socialization process, including feeding and training the cat to use a litter box. It also gives the cat a sense of security because she'll soon learn she's safe when she's in the cage and separated from you by bars. Keep at least the back portion of the cage covered with a sheet to increase her sense of comfort.
- The cage should be placed in a part of the home neither too isolated nor too busy. This gives the cat a chance to learn the new sights and sounds of a human home without becoming overwhelmed. Remember, she has never heard a phone ring or smelled dinner being prepared. By being in a well-situated cage, she'll also be able to watch you and learn your patterns – such as the fact that you won't attack her when you walk by. Learning all these little things are crucial to the socialization process and won't necessarily happen if you simply let the cat go run and hide anywhere she wants.
- You should talk to the cat often so she learns to know and trust your voice. This period in the cage also allows the feral to get to know and become comfortable with any other animals in the residence. They can interact with her through the bars of the cage.
- The cat should be kept in the cage until she grows visibly comfortable in your presence, but no less than two weeks. The desired comfort level is manifested by the cat no longer darting into the carrier whenever you walk into the room. Instead, she'll remain perched on top of the carrier or she'll come out to eat the food you just placed in the cage while you're still in the room. It may seem like a long time to confine the cat in a cage, but it's worth it considering this early process will shape the cat's relationship with you for years to come.
- Once the cat is comfortable in your presence, leave the door of the cage open, but don't change anything else. Above all, don't try to coax or force the cat out of the cage. Just casually leave the door open one night and let

her come and go as she pleases. Do this at night before you go to bed because she'll feel safer venturing out for the first time when it's quiet and dark. Do not take the cage away but leave it just as it's always been. This is her safe spot and often the cat will continue to use the cage for some time to come to sleep in and use the litter box. You should continue to feed in the cage as well.

- If a month has passed since the cat was first confined in the cage and she is not acting at ease, open the door anyway as described. Past a month, the stress of confinement can take away from whatever progress towards socialization the cat has made.
- When the day comes that the cat no longer uses the cage as a refuge and can easily be fed elsewhere, then the transition into your home is complete and successful. This doesn't mean the cat is going to jump into your arms or not run when you approach. Now she has to learn to adapt to the entire home and that will take time, too, and may cause her to temporarily regress a bit in her behavior. But many of her initial fears have been assuaged and the chances of her finding her own comfort zone and living without constant fear in your home are greatly increased.
- If you move to another house or apartment, you should go through the socialization process with the Fear Cat setup again, though it will likely be a much shorter period of time before the cat appears at ease enough to let her out.

# **San Francisco SPCA**

## **Humane Feral Cat Management Socializing Feral Cats (DVD)**

### **Socializing Feral Cats – Key points**

- ◆ The older the cat the more difficult it will be to socialize
- ◆ Individual cats' different demeanors mean that cats have different limits as to how sociable the cat can ever become
- ◆ Being feral is OK; there's no need to feel sorry for them. A Spay/Neuter/Return program is most important element
- ◆ When beginning to socialize, initially keep cat in large carrier
- ◆ Start socializing using thick gloves for protection
- ◆ When handling, you can divert a cat's anxiety by rubbing food on his mouth
- ◆ The more human contact the better: Holding, Talking, Petting
- ◆ Repeat the socialization sessions twice a day until a trust begins to develop
- ◆ Bring the carrier to other rooms to allow the cat to experience new smells and noises
- ◆ Eventually, release the cat into a secure room
- ◆ Scratching posts and cat toys help to develop a play mode and trust
- ◆ Socializing feral cats takes a lot of patience

# Taming the Feral Cat

Carrol Clancy

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- Many ferals make wonderful companions when they are tamed
- Stray pet cats will often adopt some of the behavior patterns of the feral cat—a point to remember during the identification process in working with colonies
- Many ferals can be tamed quite readily, but certainly not all ferals will be candidates for taming.
- The time investment required for taming the feral is really minimal, and any organization or individual, given the proper equipment and the appropriate amount of time, can tame many—or just one.
- We try to stress that the following are guidelines. You may find that a slightly different approach brings results for you. *Each cat is an individual, and these methods may not suit the temperament of all.* So – be creative. And, above all, be patient.
- The cycle of fear-stress-withdrawal may be repeated during the taming process. When it appears, simply mark time for a bit and don't try to press in any way. Sometimes it is necessary to fall back a step or two before resuming.
- In the early stages of crate training you will need to watch the feral very carefully when he withdraws (retreats and stays retreated out of fear). If he refuses to eat, the feral may become ill because of lowered resistance. This is rare, but it can happen. Urination and defecation may be withheld. This probably will not happen except in extreme cases of withdrawal.
- To counter this behavior, try hand-feeding. In most cases you will not be able to hold the cat, so you may need to use a tool and/or gloves. The use of a calming agent [e.g., Feliway. *Ed.*] may be of benefit. Talking to the cat quietly, reassuring him/her in a soft voice, will often turn the negative (withdrawal) into positive behavior.
- Another ploy is to change the area of confinement to a more open cage.
- All of this creates stress for the cat
- For taming the feral cat, you should have the following items:
  - ◆ Dog airline crate, at least 2' x 2' x 3' in size (the larger the better)
  - ◆ Table (standard 29" high) fro crate to sit on
  - ◆ A small litter tray, approximately 8" x 14" x 3"
  - ◆ Old towels or other soft pad for bedding (must be disposable or washable)
  - ◆ Food and water dishes
  - ◆ Leather gloves
  - ◆ Protective clothing for handler(s)
  - ◆ Broom handle (approx 3' long) or long tong-graspers
  - ◆ Hi-de-hole (towel-lined 18" diam closed-end tube)
- The first and foremost important attribute of a tamer is PATIENCE.
- The tamer must have a schedule that is flexible enough to allow him/her to spend a dedicated amount of time each day on the taming process. Cats *love* routine. The feral will begin to feel secure in the taming *routine* even before the tamer notes any substantial change in attitude.

- A well modulated speaking voice is important. If you have a voice that is normally deep and loud, try to speak more softly and pitch your voice a little higher. Sometimes it helps to whisper.
- NO FEAR! This is most important in the taming process. The cat will sense your fear and react adversely to it. Maintain eye contact, but blink lazily from time to time – just as cats do. A direct, no-blink stare may be construed as a challenge.
- The tamer should be aware of environmental factors that will affect the taming process. The room should be pleasantly comfortable (neither too hot nor too cold). It should be quiet and well, but softly, lit. Quiet music is also conducive to the process, but the volume should be low. No rock or other “nervous” type music. If you are inclined to sing or hum as you do your chores, please do so – softly. This will further accustom the cat to your persona.
- There are some behavior patterns that you will observe during the taming. They will not always be the same for every cat, and they will not occur in any given order. Most ferals, however, will exhibit most of these behavior patterns at some point during the taming. After you have tamed a few cats you will begin to recognize these various behaviors and will find yourself knowing instinctively which cat will tame easily and which one will take longer—and which one will remain always aloof and untrusting.
- The feral will often strike with claws extended, at a hand, glove, pole, or other object or body part within reach. When this happens, never remove the object. Leave it there, very quiet talking to the feral all the time, until he/she perceives that there is no threat. (If it your hand or arm that is struck, this may seem an eternity; however, your stoicism will keep you from adding deep scratches to the punctures already inflicted. When the claws retract, then and only then, slowly remove the offending object.
- If you move more quietly and slowly about the business of your daily routine, the feral will be less fearful and less defensive. Your quiet and deliberate movements will begin to reassure him/her even before the actual taming process begins.
- The inflection and pitch of your voice is also important. Your voice is your instrument of taming. The cat will recognize your step in the room and the sound of your voice and will respond to it. If your step is hurried and nervous and abrupt and your voice is loud or harsh, the apprehension level of the feral will remain very high.
- Listen to cats talk to each other and try to mimic their pitch. If you normally have a very deep voice, this may be difficult. You can, however, speak more softly. Keep your inflection upbeat.
- If you *can* pitch your voice higher, try to approximate the vocalizations of some of your cats. A chirping sound (B-r-r-r-r-t) or typical meow (e-e-e-you) are two of the most common. Sometimes a cat will (very recognizably) say “me-e-e-o-w.” Now, obviously the cat knows that you are not another cat, but if you make the effort, after awhile you may find that the cat will “talk” back to you
- As you go about your routine in the room you may continue your conversation so that the feral will become accustomed to your voice. Your voice will be the single most important tool that you use in the taming process.

### **Week One**

- The feral cat must be in the large (2' x 2' x 3') taming crate for hands-on taming
- When you approach the feral you should meet his eyes. Do not look away. You may blink lazily, as cats do with each other, but never look away during the process. (Remember, a no-blink stare may be construed as a threat. Even when reaching into the crate for the touch, keep your eyes on his in the same lazy, non-threatening manner.



- After the first contact and in the early phases of taming, *you* should be the *only* contact. This will establish the first phase of bonding.
- Build a routine – the same actions at the same time every day. When caring for the feral, cleaning the crate or litter box, feeding, etc, try to follow the same routine. (Cats *love* routine!) The feral will begin to tolerate you performing this routine, and trust will start to build.
- Part of your routine will be regular Training Sessions. The main goal during the first stage of these sessions is to begin to eliminate the “negative” (feral) behavior. You are the “positive” (domestic) reaffirming behavior to this feral. No trust will build unless you replace negative with positive.
- Talk to the feral at all times. Remember to pitch your voice a little higher if you are a man, and always keep the conversation low-key. You can not talk to the cat too much or too often.
- As you continue to talk, and as the cat begins to recognize certain words or certain nuances in your voice, trust will start to build. As trust builds, fear will recede and calmness will start to take its place. To ensure that this cycle of trust continues you should never allow a “slack” period. Hold to your routine so that the “comfort” level of the feral is not interrupted. If you persist in the routine you will reach the state of advanced trust, which will lead inevitably to *the bond*.
- Thumping (smacking front paw down on cage floor near but not hitting an approaching object, such as your hand) is a warning sign, but should be ignored by the tamer. (If the cat thumps instead of striking, it is a good sign that the cat is progressing in his taming.) All negative reactions by the feral should be ignored; positive reactions should be reinforced with praise.
- When reaching in with a gloved hand (or glove on the end of a pole), the feral may bite and hold on the glove (“gnarl the glove”). When the cat is gnarling the glove, compliment him for doing it: “That’s it!” “Wonderful!” “What a good boy!” After a few days of contact, the gnarling usually ceases, because the glove will have become a positive feeling on the cat’s fur.
- Positive reinforcement should take place any time the tamer is passing by or is near the crate for any reason. If you have time, you should reach in with the glove (on a pole or on your hand) and repeat the “first contact” moves.
- At this point I should stress some NEVERS that the tamer should keep in mind during the first contact period:
  - ◆ If you are bold enough to reach into the crate with your gloved hand (no pole) and the cat strikes you, NEVER move your hand away. Hard as it may be for you to do so, leave your hand there quietly, just as you would if it were the glove on the pole. Talk to the cat quietly. When the claws retract, then, and only then, remove your gloved hand. Your reflexes, of course, will be to jerk your hand away. This only reinforces the negative (striking) behavior of the cat. If you hold firm, let the cat examine the glove, he will release it (as when it was on the pole) when it does not move.
  - ◆ NEVER move your eyes away from those of the cat. Doing so may encourage him to strike.
  - ◆ NEVER open the door of the crate all the way during first contact—your back and head could become an illustration for an acupuncture textbook!
  - ◆ NEVER underestimate the feral’s teeth and claws. Always wear protective clothing.
  - ◆ NEVER “play” with the feral with your hands (even gloved); use only a toy on a stick or a string. Even after many positive encounters, the feral’s hunting instinct will be strong, and his idea of “play” may not coincide with yours.
- If the feral exhibits any negative behavior, more “first contact” interaction must occur. Make more visits to the crate; spending more time petting the top of the cat’s head and talking; and, above all, more patience. Some ferals build trust more quickly than others.

- If the feral continues to resist during the first contact period, there is another positive procedure that I have used with success. It is a simulation of the cat's own behavior during the process of washing. If the approach is quiet and careful, as it should always be, and if the cat appears to readily accept your stroking of his head and shoulders with the glove on a pole, then try this:
  - Slowly open the door of the crate and insert the pole with the glove (always watching the cat's eyes), but this time, dip the "stroking" finger of the glove in the water dish. Place the moist finger on the cat's head and stroke in short, "washing," strokes like the cat would use when stroking himself. (Watch the feral's eyes!) If the cat accepts it, go over his head, ears, and neck. You may re-dip the finger in the water bowl once or twice during this process. When you are finished, just remove the pole and glove as usual and close the door of the crate. If the cat accepts this procedure, you may want to add it to your daily routine. When the time comes for you to reach in and stroke the cat with just the gloves (no pole) you may want to continue the "washing" if the cat continues to like it.
- Introduction of a small catnip toy, preferably with a bell attached, is appropriate at this time. Place the toy between the front paws of the cat and gently move it to stimulate a play reaction. You will want to leave it there at the end of the sessions, but be sure to "activate" it in all future sessions—especially if it gets a positive reaction.
- Depending on the nature of the particular cat, you may find that some of the standard precautions are not necessary. Indeed, some ferals may be quite content to observe your cleaning chores from the safety of the rear of the crate without making a move to escape or to attack you. However, until you know the nature of the particular cat you are working with, it is safer to use the safety precautions such as a glove on a pole.
- Routine is always important, but is especially so in the first phase. The routine will start to instill a trust in the cat that this human can and will provide all essentials: food, water, shelter, and a clean, safe environment.

## Week Two

- During this phase we will be trying to eliminate more negative behavior by reassuring the feral that we are not going to hurt him. To do this, you will pick up the cat and hold him for a few seconds. The cat will be nestled in your hands (however briefly) and *may* respond in a positive way, but will be unsure of himself. The time may be extended from day to day, depending upon the response of the cat.
- A Hi-de-hole is very important during this time—the cat will comfortable and secure in this. Place the Hi-de-hole in the back of the carrier with the opening facing the door. Most cats can not resist a "cave." It represents a nesting place, and inevitably they will enter and claim it for their own. Once the feral is established you will increase contact by reaching in to pet him. The cat will learn the association: Go in the Hi-de-hole = get petted. A little extra time may be required at this stage to reinforce the *positive* aspects for the cat.
- Now that you have established the routine and begun to gain the cat's trust, it is time to approach the cage with another cat in your arms. You will talk to the cat you are holding and, by inference, you will be talking to the feral. Watch the feral's eyes as he watches you with the other cat.
- Your choice of time for introduction of the new cat should be based on the stage of progress the feral has achieved. He should be very tolerant of being held and talked to (even if not at the purring stage) and he should be comfortable with being petted in the Hi-de-hole.
- Establishment of a routine is the foundation of the taming process, but during the second phase, closer contact will be your focus. For this purpose, and to give the cat a heightened sense of security, we introduce the Hi-de-hole at the beginning of this phase.
- I have known a few cats who have taken as long as two or three hours to make up their minds, but eventually even the most fearful cat will find it a sanctuary

- After the feral is in the Hi-de-hole, reach into the crate and slowly turn it around until the opening is facing the doorway. The cat will now be closer to you, and his reactions may start to change.
- The cat may retreat as far as he can into the Hi-de-hole to get away from you. If this occurs, use the glove on a pole to pet the top of his head.
- If when you start your daily routine the feral cat is not in the Hi-de-hole, then simply turn it around until the open end is facing the cat and continue with your daily routine. When the cat enters the Hi-de-hole, simply turn it around to face the front once again so that you can continue the process of getting him used to your touch.
- The next step is to pick up the cat, keeping him in the crate. To do this, turn the Hi-de-hole around so that its opening faces the back of the crate. Then *gently* push the cat out and remove the Hi-de-hole from the crate.
- With full gear on—long sleeves, double-gloved, no pole—reach into the crate and pet the top of the cat’s head, watching his eyes and talking in low, soothing tones. Put your hands around the cat’s middle so that you can place him in the center of the crate, turned to face the rear. In this position the feral can not strike you.
- This procedure may take more than one attempt. Do not use force if the cat does not turn comfortably. Merely stop, talk quietly to reassure the cat, pet him (if he is receptive), and generally have patience
- If you do not accomplish the “turnaround” maneuver the first time, just close the door, continue your routine in the room, and then try again a little later. Patience. It will happen.
- After you have accomplished the turnaraound, it is time to pick up the cat for just a few seconds. As he faces the rear of the crate, place your hands around his middle and gently lift up for a few seconds. Then place him down again. He will probably retreat to the back of the cage in a sideways position. Praise him profusely. Replace the Hi-de-hole back in the cage and after the cat re-enters it turn it around so the opening faces towards the front of the cage.
- Perform this routine each day (twice a day, if you have the time) until the cat feels comfortable with this new action. Each time you do this, bring the cat closer to the front of the crate. You are preparing the cat for the next step: removal from the crate and being held.
- When you have removed the Hi-de-hole and positioned the cat to face the rear of the crate, gently put your hand under his chest. Grasp the loose skin/fur over the chest area, hold it firmly (without pinching) and lift the cat out of the crate. You will hold the cat for only four or five seconds, then return him to his crate. Praise, lost of praise. Return the Hi-de-hole to the crate, facing the rear if the cat has retreated to the back of the crate. After the cat re-enters the Hi-de-hole, turn it around to face the front. Pet the cat. More praise.
- Play with the feral using the toy you introduced during the first week. You can also, if the cat is receptive, play a sort of hide-and-seek (or peek-a-boo), using the side slots in the crate. Spend as much time as you can with the cat at this stage and the bond that is developing will become progressively stronger.

### **Week Three**

- At this stage the feral should be used to you, your routine, and other cats around the crate. He should be used to being picked up and held (30 seconds – or until he gets restless). It is important to pick up the cat often during the course of the day. I usually sit on a chair and hold the feral facing away from me. I pet him and talk for a few minutes, then return him to his crate.
- At some time early in this phase, the show cage should be ready to receive the feral. Make sure that the “comfort” items are in place (litter box, water, etc), then make the transfer using the Hi-de-hole.

- The “hands-on” nature of the taming process strives to bring out the best of the domestic nature of the cat and to familiarize them with human behavior. The taming is really not so much “training” as it is “encouraging.”
- At the beginning of this phase, I usually transfer the cat from the crate to the “socialization” cage. Also at this stage I often use a stick lure (a feather dangling from a stick – available at most pet supply stores) to entice the cat to play and exercise. This is especially effective if there are other cats in the room, for they often join in.
- I call this phase the “Socialization” phase. It furthers the bond you are developing with the cat, and it accustoms him to other cats. I often bring other cats to the cage so that they can “sniff noses” with the feral cat. This mimics the socialization that takes place in the feral’s old environment, and it may or may not have immediate positive results. As we all know, cats (just like people) do not always like everyone they meet. It will undoubtedly be so in your little microcosm, so don’t worry if there are a few hisses and spits and growls – especially at the beginning. As you proceed, these signs of animosity and/or aggression will recede.
- You will equip the new cage with the old, familiar litter box, food, water dishes, and, of course, the Hi-de-hole. This is the snug harbor for your feral friend.
- You will repeat the removal and petting procedures from the second phase, little by little extending the time you hold the cat out of the cage.
- At this point you will want to do an evaluation of the cat’s behavior:
  - ◆ Is he/she still running into the Hi-de-hole when you enter the room?
  - ◆ Is fear still the main issue?
  - ◆ Are the ears still back or the eyes still dilated?
  - ◆ Is he/she still assuming the crouched position?
  - ◆ Is he/she still hissing and growling?
- If one or more of these behavior patterns are still manifest, more work is to be done. More soft talk and petting is needed – soothing, reassuring, praise-talk. Remember: *it is not written in stone that you will tame every feral in exactly three weeks. That is a general time frame.*
- Assuming that your behavioral evaluation is positive, it is time to pick up the cat and sit with him in your lap. Place a chair by the cage and sit. Pick up one of the other cats, hold and pet her. Spend some time doing this in full view of the feral cat. When you have held and petted the other cat for several minutes, take her out of the room and close the door. Then, with gloves on, bring the feral out of the cage and gently sit in the chair. The cat may hang on to his bedding from the cage. If the bedding is a towel, there is no harm in placing it on your lap with the cat. It may give him a feeling of security.
- With the cat in your lap, take off one glove (using your teeth) and pet the top of his head, running your hand on down his back this time – long strokes and as many as the cat will tolerate. Repeat this process during the day – as many stroking sessions as you have time for. To avoid undesired interactions on your lap, for the first couple of days exclude other cats from the room while you hold and stroke this cat. You will be the best judge of when this cat is ready to accept other cats while you are holding him.
- There are some signs to watch for that indicate the cat is submitting to your taming:
  - ◆ He may make small, grunting sounds when held
  - ◆ He may lick his lips repeatedly
  - ◆ He may blink his eyes when you talk to him
  - ◆ He may lower his head rather than holding it up and pulled back in a defensive position
- Toward the end of this phase (again, you will be the best judge of when) you will be introducing the cat to the “open cage.” Remove the other cats from the room. Open the door of the cage and leave it open. Return

approximately 15 minutes later. The cat will probably be out of the cage and exploring his surroundings. Make sure the door to the room is closed securely. Go about your usual chores (picking up dishes, changing litter, changing bedding, etc), ignoring the cat at this time. When chores are finished, place food in the cat's cage and leave the room. Come back in one hour. Talk to the cat as usual. Let one friendly cat into the room at a time, so that the feral cat does not feel threatened. Play with the two of them with the stick toy. The feral cat *may* be a little reluctant to join in at first. Don't push him. If you do this every day, it won't take him long to "catch on."

- Keep your petting/talking times separate from the play times.
- At the end of the third week, do another evaluation:
  - ◆ Can you now pick up the cat and pet him without gloves?
  - ◆ Does he still run from you when you enter the room – or does his tail go up when he sees you?
  - ◆ Is there a greeting chirp or meow?
  - ◆ Is there still negative behavior?
- Once again I emphasize "trust." It is the building block of all relationships, human or animal. If the cat does not yet trust you, is it because *you* do not trust the cat? If you are withholding trust, the cat will know it, and will not give you his trust.
- On the other hand, your feral cat may be one who gives trust reluctantly. If this is the case, then you may have to work a little longer to gain that trust. And even if you give 110% of yourself and your trust, this cat may be one of the one to three percent of ferals who will never be truly tame – or domesticated, if you will. He or she may be one of a small percentage who will tolerate humans and will allow themselves to be petted – on their terms – but who will always withhold wholehearted trust.
- If, however, the cat has passed this latest evaluation, let him have the run of the room – with and without other cats – and, ultimately, the run of the house. But always leave the cage door open and the Hi-de-hole in the cage for comfort and security. Walking up to the cat and sitting in the room with him and talking is a never-ending process. When the cat rubs against your leg or jumps into your lap and allows himself to be petted from head to hindquarters – this is the true breakthrough from feral to tame.

#### THE BOND TRANSFER

- Now it is time to prepare the cat to accept another human companion.
- In preparation, it is usually a good idea to start immediately to accustom the cat to the idea of having strangers about. Have friends or co-workers in during your chore routine. Work with the cat to accustom him to the idea of being attended to and/or handled by someone other than yourself.
- Arrange a time when the adopter can visit during one of your routine chores. Have them in the room with you – helping you, if possible. If the adopter can be seen by the cat as being accepted by you – as "belonging" – it will make the bond transfer much easier. Depending once again on the nature of your cat (each one is different), you will have the adopter come and be a presence at least once more – perhaps twice. Introduce the cat to the adopter's touch and smell. Evaluate the reaction.
- If the cat accepts the adopter (and vice versa), then it is time for a home trial. Give the adopter the comfort items you have been using with the cat (Hi-de-hole, bedding, litter tray, food dishes, toy, etc) so that the cat will have a "security blanket" in his new home.
- Stress to the new "parent" that the cat may be very shy at first, but that talking and soft music and adherence to a routine should calm any fears and allow the cat to adjust to his new home.

- The new owner will want to provide a standard size litter box of their own choice, but the old one should be nearby for a week or so merely because it is familiar.
- The cat may want to hide at first. By providing him with the Hi-de-hole, he will have a familiar safe haven from which to evaluate his situation. If/when the adoption becomes permanent, the owner will want to provide a new or different safe house for the cat.
- Because every cat and every potential adopter are different, there is no hard and fast rule about the length of the adoption trial period. In many cases the cat and person know almost at once that this is a good thing; in other situations the time may extend to a week, or even two, before the relationship is established.
- The ideal adoption situation is a one-person or a childless couple.
- If, in spite of all efforts and precautions, the cat can not adapt to the new situation, then he may need to return to your care. This is difficult, as some of the cat's trust may be lost in the process. Just be patient and persevere. It will come back.
- Again, you will introduce as many willing hands and bodies as possible to care for the cat and make him feel secure with someone other than yourself as a caregiver and companion.