

AVA TNR Resource Guide

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Action Volunteers for Animals (AVA) is an all-volunteer-run charitable animal rescue dedicated to helping stray and feral animals live healthy and happy lives.

Introduction

Did you know that two cats left to breed unchecked can produce 80,000 million cats over 10 years?

There are as many as 100,000 feral and stray cats in the Toronto area. According to the Toronto Humane Society, "euthanasia due to homelessness is the largest cause of death in cats."¹ Since then we have made tremendous progress and the [estimated number of feral cats is now about](#) 17,000. It is estimated that 400 feral cats are born on the streets of Toronto every day.

All cats are worth saving.

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) – also called Trap-Neuter-Return-Monitor (TNRM) – is a program designed to manage the overpopulation of cats and reduce rates of euthanization. Cats are humanely trapped, sterilized (females are spayed and males are neutered), vaccines are administered (for examples, rabies shots), returned to their outdoor colonies, and monitored. Monitoring includes feeding and ensuring the cats do not become ill or injured. Kittens and other social cats (strays) who are able to be housetrained and socialized can be taken in through a rescue agency, like AVA, and adopted into loving homes.

TNR works because it breaks the cycle of reproduction. Numerous research studies support the TNR method for reducing cat populations between 16 and 66 per cent, which means fewer cats being euthanized each year.² It also means healthier, friendlier cats in your neighbourhood who have been vaccinated to prevent the spread of disease.

In general, the cost of TNR is less than half the cost of trapping, holding, killing and disposing of a cat. TNR protects public health and advances the goal of reducing the numbers of free roaming cats in the environment. Most of the public supports humane, non-lethal TNR as the long-term solution to stray/feral cat overpopulation.

TNR programs operate largely through the dedicated efforts of committed volunteers. Typically this begins with colony caretaking – take care of outdoor colonies of cats in your neighbourhood, providing them with outdoor shelters and food and water.

Most people do not set out to be cat caretakers. Often, they come across a cat or cats and follow their instinct to help. The first impulse is to feed the cats, which is important because food and water are necessary for their survival. Not feeding the cats and hoping they will “go away” is not realistic. More likely, the cats will starve. Those that do not will continue to reproduce.

¹ <https://www.torontohumanesociety.com/education-and-advocacy/toronto-feral-cats>

² <https://www.alleycat.org/resources/why-trap-neuter-return-feral-cats-the-case-for-tnr/>

This TNR Resource Guide is the next step for colony caretakers.

Getting Started

A strong determination to trap and sterilize is often a caregiver's greatest asset. Although the TNR process is straightforward, it can be intimidating the first time. The idea of "trapping" invokes images of cats being hurt or traumatized and no longer trusting the cat caregivers. This does not happen.

AVA has TNR'd thousands of cats over the years and we wish to share with you some of the knowledge we have learned with you, whether you are attempting this for the first time or are a seasoned veteran.

Before you begin, inform yourself on the concerns of your neighbors who may not want the cats in the area. There is literature available to address unwanted behaviors in cats, how to reduce the nuisance for neighbours, and tips and techniques about how to talk to your neighbours about the work you are doing to help these cats.

Some Background Reading

- [Trapping and Sterilizing the Feral Cats You Feed: The ABCs of TNR](#) (from Alley Cat Allies)
- [TNR Handbook](#) (from Neighbourhood Cats). This is an excellent and comprehensive manual for anyone looking after homeless outdoor cats.
- [Feral Cat FAQ](#): a good overview
- [Maintaining a Cat Colony](#), including a sample/template letter to your neighbours about trapping

Feral or Stray: What's the Difference?

A stray cat is a domestic cat that strayed from home and became lost or was abandoned. Because a stray cat was once a companion animal, they usually can be re-socialized and placed in an adoptive home.

A feral cat is a domestic cat that was lost or abandoned and has reverted to a wild state, or a cat that was born to a stray or feral mother and had little or no human contact. Adult ferals are very difficult to tame and are not usually suitable for adoption. They live in family groups called colonies that form near a source of food and shelter.

Observe the cat's appearance and behavior using these quick tips. These tips are only a general guide. Each cat acts differently.

Stray Cat	Feral Cat
– may approach you	– will not approach you
– may approach food right away that you put down	– will wait until you leave to eat
– may be vocal	– will be silent
– may look disheveled	– will appear groomed
– may be seen at all hours of the day	– usually nocturnal

Hints for Cat Caretakers

Below is general advice about taking care of colonies and beginning the TNR process. See the [Managing Your Cat Colony](#) webpage for more information.

- Always provide fresh water daily as sometimes cats have a hard time finding clean water to drink.
- Locate feeding stations where cats are not visible to passersby or occupants of nearby buildings or heavily populated or trafficked areas (parking lots, footpaths and streets).
- Keep feeding and trapping stations clean and trash free (to prevent neighbors from complaining and attracting other animals).
- Do not put out more food than the cats can finish in one meal. Remove what they do not eat after one hour and clean up the area.
- The amount of food needed by the cats depends on the weather, other sources of food and the size of the individual cats. You can expect an adult feral to eat roughly 6 ounces or a 170 gram can of food and about 1 cup of dry food. Dry food is better in winter as it will not freeze.
- Try to feed the cats at the same time every day to condition them to coming around. This will make it easier to observe them and make it easier for you to trap them.
- Provide adequate shelter for the cats using techniques to minimize nuisance. [Learn more about building or obtaining shelters.](#)

About Humane Trapping

Humane trapping is also called a live animal trap. A box (usually metal) is rigged so that when an animal steps into it, the door closes, preventing the animal from leaving. These traps do not cause the animal any pain and are the only traps that should be used for TNR.

Traps can be purchased for \$70-\$100 at some pet stores, Canadian Tire, Home Depot and Lee Valley. They can be rented through some companies, local pounds and humane societies. They can also be borrowed from many animal rescue groups.

Trap-And-Remove

The old approach to reducing free roaming cats is called Trap and Remove. This may achieve a temporary reduction in cat numbers, but survivors of the campaign breed fast, thus not helping to solve the overpopulation problem. As well, other cats can move in to take advantage of the now-available sources of food and shelter to form a new colony, called the Vacuum Effect. These cats are also more susceptible to being trapped and euthanized.

Relocation

In almost all cases, free roaming cats are better off being returned to their established colonies after sterilization. Cats bond with their territories and with other cats in their colony. Relocation is very difficult, time consuming, and often costly, and comes with no guarantee that the cats will stay in their new location. There is also a very high mortality rate for relocated cats and colonies. If, however, compelling difficulties force the relocation of a cat colony, you must seek help from animal rescue groups or obtain more detailed information on how to do this successfully.

TNR: the Six Basic Steps

With any major undertaking, it's always wise to enlist the help of friends, family and neighbors to help you. Below are the six basic steps to TNR, followed by detailed information and tips on each step.

1. Assess the situation and count how many cats are in the colony you plan to TNR. (AVA has colony record sheets for you to use).
2. Locate and learn how to use the equipment needed to humanely trap.
3. Establish a relationship with a veterinarian or a vet clinic.
4. Develop an action plan and ask for help.
5. Trap, Neuter, and Return the cats.
6. Monitor. Provide the cats of the cat colony with long term care, feeding and monitoring.

Assess the Situation and Count the Cats

Before trapping, observe the cat(s) to determine gender, habits, friendliness and number of cats or kittens. This will help you prepare your action plan where you will prioritize the cats that will be trapped. Consider:

- How many cats are there?
- Are there kittens?
 - If so, how many?
- Female?
 - If so, how long have you been observing her/them for? If there are periods of time when she is not seen she could be tending to kittens. If you have never seen her before, continue observing to monitor whether she has kittens.
- Mother cat and kittens?
 - If so, the decision should be simple. Kittens are readily adoptable, adults often are not (especially if they are feral) and the spaying of known female cats at known points in their cycle is a priority since they can get pregnant even while they are nursing.
 - See the section below about kittens and mother cats for more detailed information about trapping and rescuing these cats.
- Injured cats?
 - If so, they should be a high priority and be taken to a vet as soon as possible. The vet can also inform you as to whether the cat is a nursing female. At that point a decision will be made as to whether she should be released so that the kittens survive. The vet may recommend an injection of a long lasting antibiotic.
- Male/tom cats?
 - It is equally important to neuter male cats, although timing is not quite an issue. They also fight and frequently have abscessed bite wounds.

All of the above questions should help you determine the priority of trapping.

If the cats you are observing are not your neighbour's cat and are tame it/they could be lost. Ensure the cat(s) you are trying to trap is not someone's pet. If the cat seems tame/friendly it may be an "owned" cat. Talk to neighbours and put up signs. Friendly cats should be taken to the vet and scanned for a microchip – vets will do this for free.

Never try to handle or pet a cat that may be wild: they might strike out when frightened or if they feel trapped/unable to run away.

Before you trap, talk to an experienced cat rescuer and/or animal welfare organization for advice on trapping and vet services available.

Helpful Hints on Cat Colours and Gender

- Orange or orange/white cats are primarily males (approximately 80%)
- Calicoes (orange/white/black or white/peach/grey) are almost always female
- Tortoiseshells (orange and black mottled together, or peach and grey mottled together with no white patches) are almost always female.
- Brown tabbies with slight patches of orange (called torbies) are almost always female.
- Tom cats are usually “war torn” with shredded ears and scars and have very round jowly faces.
- Females are usually quite petite, especially when unaltered.

Learn the Equipment

Practice working your traps ahead of time.

Feral cats, like all wild animals will strike out when frightened and unable to run away (as they are in a trap). You must learn correct safety procedures such as always labeling traps and never sticking your hands in a trap. If you follow safety precautions, you will never get close enough for a feral cat to bite you.

Contact a Vet

Establish a relationship with a veterinarian or a vet clinic that will work with ferals. Or you can contact a local cat rescue that will have already done this.

Develop an Action Plan

Ask friends, neighbors or other cat advocates to help. Determine how you and others will care for the cats before, and after surgery and on an ongoing basis. Before trapping begins, prepare an action plan:

1. Talk to friends, family and animal rescue organizations beforehand about adopting out the tame cats or kittens you come across.
2. Talk to friends, family and neighbours about helping with trapping, recovery spaces, donating food, shelter and other resources.

3. Talk to your neighbours and find out if they have indoor/outdoor cats, so that you can alert them that you will be trapping and to keep their cat indoors while this is happening. See the sample [TNR Letter to Neighbours on the AVA website](#).
4. Prioritize the cats you will be taking in.
5. Arrange a warm and quiet environment for the cats to recover from surgery. They can be kept in a covered cage or a garage. Females will need 3 days and males 1-2 days to recover.
6. Arrange vet appointments for their spay/neuter surgery and vaccinations before you start trapping.

TNR Time!

Here are the basic “do’s and don’t’s of TNR:

Do:

- Trap with a buddy (especially at night).
- Try to plan your trapping sessions so that the cats are transported to the vet as soon as possible. If they cannot go to the vet right away, the trapped cats can be covered and put in a warm, safe environment for a few hours.
- Use a clean, sanitized trap so that it does not carry the scent of previous animals.
- Cover the trap immediately after catching a cat with a large towel or blanket. This helps to calm the animal down and reduce its stress.
- Ensure any cats that are ill or injured receive proper treatment.
- Use humane methods to discourage or exclude cats from areas they are not welcome.
- Ear tip all cats when they are vaccinated and sterilized.
- If you trap lactating females, please return to colony approximately 8 hours after surgery so they can be reunited with their kittens. Spayed females continue to produce milk as long as they are nursing kittens.
- Make efforts to place tame cats and kittens with good homes.

Don't:

- Trap on a hillside.
- Trap or return ferals in extremely cold weather.
- Leave the trapped cat outside exposed to the elements and other animals.

- Use dirty traps. The cat you are trying to catch can catch the scent of the previous ones and refuse to enter the trap.
- To maximize your chances of trapping, do not feed the cats 1-2 days before setting out the traps Use smelly bait for the traps (tuna or sardines packed in oil), but don't put too much bait at the front of the trap, or the cat will get filled up before tripping it.
 - Be cautious not to withhold food for more than three days. Cats can actually forget to eat for a few days: this can be life threatening.
- Take trapped cats to municipal pounds: they are very often killed.
- Leave traps unattended for longer than 30 minutes.
- Relocate the cats unless they are in mortal danger staying where they are. If the cats must be moved, please pre-arrange a new home for them in someone's barn and ensure the new caretakers will look after them. Ensure barn relocation procedures are followed, including 4-week confinement.

Monitor

Continue to maintain and monitor the cats in your colony with proper food, water, shelter and medical care as needed.

Trapping Kittens and Mother Cats

When doing TNR, you are very likely to come across young feral and stray kittens and even not-yet-weaned kittens or orphans.

If you find very young kittens that are alone, you must determine if the mother has abandoned them or if she is just off looking for food. The only way to do this is to wait and watch. Observe from a distance or hidden spot for a few hours to be sure she is not returning.

If the mother cat does not come back, you will need to figure out how young they are and then proceed from there. Very young kittens require some specialized care and are usually best placed with an already nursing mom cat for this: try local animal shelters, vet clinics or cat rescue groups. If none are available you must be the kitten's new mom. For care on neonatal kittens check out [The Kitten Lady](#) or other reputable resources, or contact your vet or local rescue group for the information you need.

While it can be a lot of work, taking care of orphaned kittens is done by ordinary people every day. It can be a very rewarding experience to care for them and to watch them grow and thrive.

If you can confirm that there is a mother cat, ask the following questions and follow the advice below:

- Do you know where the nest is? If you do not know, do not go looking for it as a mother cat will relocate her kittens if the nest is disturbed.
- If you know where the nest is, how many kittens does she have?

A few notes on mother cats:

- Don't forget to spay the mother cat or you will have more kittens in the very near future.
- Female cats can start reproducing as young as 5 months and can have several litters per year.
- A cat can get pregnant while still nursing kittens.
- A cat pregnancy is approximately 63 days (nine weeks).

You can trap the mother, pick up the kittens and bring the whole family indoors into a quiet small room or very large crate/cage. This is best done for tame and semi-feral cats, as true feral cats do not generally tolerate being confined. For trappers willing to foster mom and cats, [AVA has prepared a Guide](#).

There are large box traps available that have on occasion trapped entire families, mother included. These should only be used if you know exactly the number of kittens in the nest and if the mother is in the habit of eating alongside her kittens. Remember that there may be a very small kitten in the litter. This kitten will be the last one to start eating on its own so it may be some time before the mother can be caught.

If you cannot bring the entire family indoors and the kittens are old enough to be separated from the mother cat (6-8 weeks is best), scoop up all the kittens and start readying them for adoption. This means socializing and litter training, and getting them to the vet for vaccines, deworming and sterilization once they are at an appropriate age and weight.

Keep in mind that kittens not handled at a young age sometimes remain feral or at the very least skittish and hard to adopt out. The critical period for kittens to be socialized to humans is between 2-7 weeks of age.

Sometimes the early weaning of kittens that seem to be doing well may lead to increased mortality or failure to thrive; they may also develop behavioural or medical issues later on. **Kittens are best kept with their mothers until 6-8 weeks.** If separated from their mother, or if they are orphaned, kittens should be kept in pairs, at a minimum, so they can continue to socially develop and have companionship.

Feral kittens can be socialized with time and patience and the right care. There are wonderful websites, videos and literature on socializing feral kittens:

- [Feral Cat Coalition: Taming Feral Kittens](#)
- [Indy Feral: Taming Feral Kittens](#)
- [The Kitten Lady](#) has a wealth of resources about rescuing and helping orphaned kittens.

Ultimately, you must use your best judgment depending on the kitten's circumstances and your time and resources. The best way to help is to TNR all cats and adopt out all young kittens and tame cats.

How to Determine a Kitten's Age

Alley Cat has a handy resource on Kitten Progression and a visual Guide: [How Old Is that Kitten?](#)

0-7 days (3-8 oz)

- Eyes are shut, ears are folded down and are unable to walk
- They purr and may make tiny noises
- The umbilical cord may still be visible

1-2 weeks (8-11 oz)

- Eyes start to open and are blue
- Ears begin to open
- They can usually crawl, snuggle and sometimes knead

2-3 weeks (8-15 oz)

- Eyes are open and can focus
- They will start to respond to movement and noises
- First wobbly steps are taken
- Baby teeth start to come in

4-5 weeks (10-17 oz)

- Running, jumping, digging and pouncing
- Kittens will start to wean and will be able to lap up formula and eat soft food

- They will start to use the litter box
- Eyes begin to change from blue to their adult colour

6-8 weeks (2 lbs)

- Kittens look like little versions of full grown cats
- They can eat kitten and soft food.

Finding Homes for your Colony's Strays

When caring for a stray or feral cat colony you are likely to encounter one or more cats that are friendly. Strays act differently than ferals: they may approach you, vocalize or even let you pet them. Please do your best to vaccinate, fix and re-home these cats (check to see if there are any low cost spay/neuter vets or programs in your area). They are not suited to the outdoors like feral cats often are.

If you suspect a cat may have lost its way from home, take the following steps:

1. Talk to your neighbours to see if anyone knows of the cat's history. The cat may be someone's indoor/outdoor pet but has wandered farther away.
2. Check for ID tags or have a vet clinic check for a microchip. This can be done at any vet clinic for free. You may also check with all local and regional municipal shelters, pounds and rescue sites and list the animal as "found." Don't forget to check the "lost" ads too.

If this does not warrant any response, try to find a forever home for the cat/kittens.

You can publicize the cat and its story with neighbors, local vet clinics and businesses and friends and family.

Do all of this before contacting local rescue organizations. Most small rescue groups get several calls per day from people needing to surrender their cat or place a "stray" cat up for adoption and these groups are often over capacity. Be wary of taking the cat to a local pound or shelter as some do not have no-kill policies, and will often euthanize cats if their shelter is over-crowded. Do your homework before surrendering a cat to a municipal agency.

When interviewing people as possible new guardians for a cat seek advice from an animal rescue group or person that has done this before to ensure you can find the best forever home for your rescue.

Costs/Budget

Although TNR of a cat colony is much cheaper than killing the cats or letting them breed and just feeding, there are costs involved with TNR and this should be considered before starting.

You should talk to friends, family and neighbours to see if they would be willing to help with the colony. Neighbors or businesses where the colony resides may be willing to contribute because you are taking action from which they will benefit.

Some vet clinics will offer discounts for strays and ferals. There are a few local cat rescue groups (including AVA) that have low cost TNR subsidization programs.

Do your research beforehand. Visit the [Community Cats Toronto website](#) for more information.

You can do small scale fundraisers in the area where the cat colony is to advertise that all monies raised will be spent in this community to reduce the cat population and nuisances associated with the cats.

Garage sales are an easy fundraiser to help raise funds for your TNR program. There is never a shortage of items people (friends, co-workers, family, and neighbors) are want to donate.

Working with others and sharing equipment and resources and moral support will make the work go easier and faster. Recruit whoever you can to help with fundraising, driving, feeding, trapping and recouping cats.

Thank you and good luck!