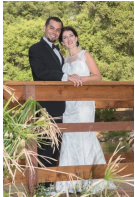




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It's A Cat's Neighborhood

By Angela McLaughlin – Ramona Home Journal • Thu, Jul 14, 2016

You're driving through the neighborhood on the way home from work or perhaps the grocery store, when something darts in front of your car. You slam on the brakes and pray you didn't hit whatever it is.

A cat runs off, and you breathe a sigh of relief.

We've all had a similar experience.

With cats being one of the most popular companion animals in the United States, their presence in our society is taken for granted. Perhaps you have a cat at home, or maybe a few of them have taken up semi-permanent residence in your backyard. Whether you are a cat person or dog person, or none of the above, cats are a constant reality in many of our lives.

You may have noticed cats wandering the streets, sliding under fences and slinking their way around town. The difference between housecats, stray cats and feral cats is often not immediately detected by the untrained eye, and many risk factors may not be considered when the topic of outdoor cats arises.

Many owners choose to let their housecats outside for exercise and mental stimulation. They may watch them while they play, walk them on a leash or let them roam freely until they come back in on their own, ready for their dinner.

Stray cats are former housecats that have escaped, gotten lost or been abandoned by their owners. Strays have a good chance of joining a new family, since they are typically very social with humans.

Feral cats, on the other hand, are the offspring of stray cats. They have never been socialized among people and are therefore incredibly nervous around them. Most feral cats can never be rehabilitated to live as a companion animal, and many that are brought to shelters are euthanized.

One of the best options for feral cats is to remain in the wild, and the most efficient way to control their population is through spay and neuter programs supported by groups such as the Feral Cat Coalition and The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

According to the Feral Cat Coalition website, www.feralcat.com, "Trap-neuter-return (TNR) is the only proven and humane method of managing feral cat colonies." The coalition says that in this process, "Feral cats are humanely trapped, spayed or neutered, vaccinated, 'ear-tipped' and returned to their outdoor homes, where they are monitored by their caretakers."

The group says that this program is more cost-effective than lethal means of control.

HSUS Community Cats Program Manager Danielle Bays adds that sterilizing cats often rids them of the unwanted behaviors people want to discourage, such as unneutered males spraying or cat-calling loudly for females, and it curbs over-breeding issues. She says that TNR is one of the best options for humane population control.

If you see a stray cat, look to see if it has been ear-tipped, that is, one ear has been clipped under anesthesia, Bays advises. That means it has been sterilized and vaccinated, thus making it healthier.

June Matics, director of digital media at Alley Cat Allies, an organization dedicated to the protection and humane treatment of



Feral cats are a familiar sight in the Ramona area. Photo by Carol Kinney

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cats, says, "TNR is proven to stop the breeding cycle of cats — litters of kittens are no longer born — and it improves cats' lives while preventing reproduction. It stabilizes the size of cat colonies.

By ending the behaviors associated with mating, it also answers the needs of the community."

The group says that more than 575 local governments have enacted ordinances or policies supporting TNR, as have a number of communities and shelters across the U.S., including many in California that are successfully carrying out TNR programs. The group offers more information at www.alleycat.org.

Though some are not bothered by the presence of stray or feral cats in their yard, many homeowners do not want them around, for many reasons. Bays says the first step to solving a "cat problem" in your neighborhood is to talk to your neighbors to see if anyone owns the cat, or if it is a community cat that hangs out in that area. If it is a community cat, find out who is caring for it — it could be one or more of your neighbors.

"These are community cats, and often the whole community can get involved with them and help them and work together on solutions," Bays says.

Once it is confirmed that a cat is truly stray or feral, the next step is determining its friendliness. If the cat is a stray and is friendly, a good option may be to contact a local animal shelter for advice — they might recommend bringing the cat to them for re-homing.

Feral cats are often difficult to capture and are less likely to be adopted.

"The number-one priority should be to make sure they're all sterilized so that we are not growing the problem," says Bays.

Groups such as the Feral Cat Coalition provide TNR services, and they sometimes lease humane traps to residents. For those who are uncomfortable with trapping the cat, Bays encourages them to reach out to groups that will come trap them for you. The HSUS website at www.humanesociety.org has a list of organizations all over the country that provide this service.

What if you don't want them in your yard at all?

Deterrents such as ultrasonic motion-sensor devices and the ScareCrow Motion Activated Animal Repellent sprinkler that attaches to a garden hose are available.

Adding rough mulch to gardens and laying chicken wire beneath the soil are good options for keeping cats from digging in the garden, she adds.

Though feral and stray cats deserve protection, people have mixed feelings about their presence in neighborhoods. People and cats have coexisted for ages, with humans directly contributing to the rise of large feral and stray cat colonies.

It is important to reach out to organizations such as these and collaborate on remedying the growing issue.

Bays encourages residents to look at it as a community project — one we can work on together to obtain the best outcome for cats and humans alike.

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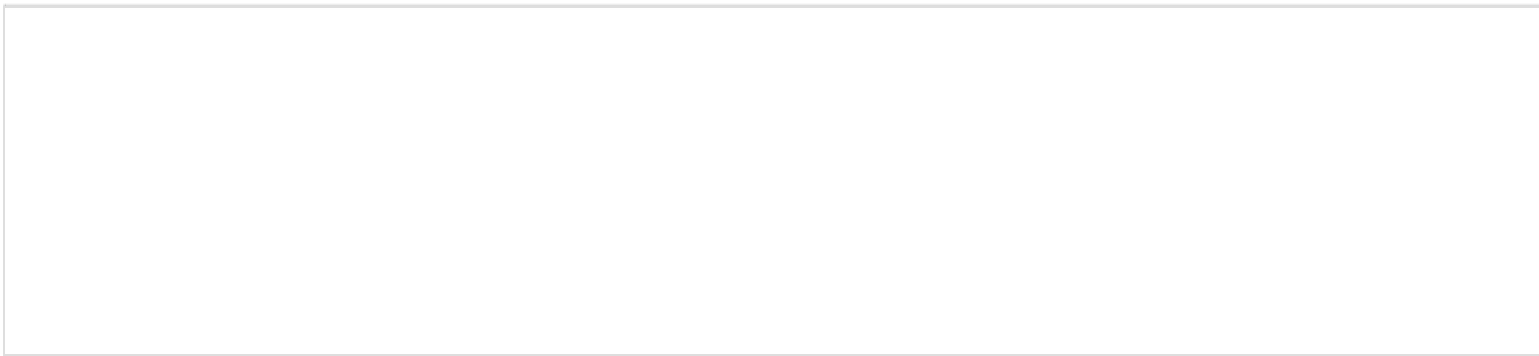
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