

Barn Cat 101:

Starting a Barn Cat Program in your Community

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Table of Contents^ä

<u>Table of Contents</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>Starting a Barn Cat Program</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Which Cats are Eligible</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Determining a Cat's Temperament</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>Finding Homes for Barn Cats</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>Selecting Barn Cat Adopters</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>Housing Ferals at The Shelter</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>The Relocation Crate</u>	<u>14</u>
<u>The Delivery and Relocation Process</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>Follow up</u>	<u>16</u>
<u>FAQ</u>	<u>17</u>

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Starting a Barn Cat Program

So feral cats are being killed at your local animal shelter and you want to do something about it? Great! Hopefully this will give you some ideas, inspiration, or even a template for saving impounded or at-risk feral cats.

Austin Pets Alive!'s Barn Cat program began in 2010 and over the years we've continuously increased the number of barn cats we adopt out. In 2017 we've set a goal to rescue and adopt ___ barn cats and we're well on our way to achieving that number. We've successfully relocated more than ___ ferals in the past ___ years. This document is what has worked for us, what we learned from others, and the lessons we've learned from the mistakes we've made. Please feel free to borrow these ideas and get to work starting your program today!

If you have additional questions, or your shelter is interested in a consult or launching a similar program, please contact ___.

For more information on Austin Pets Alive! please visit austinpetsalive.org.

Which cats are eligible?

We focus on the most desperate of cats - those impounded at animal control who, for one reason or another, *cannot be returned to their original habitat*. This distinction is important. Relocation should never be your first, second, or even third choice. Trap Neuter Return is always preferential. Relocation is not always successful, is very stressful on the cats, and will not solve long term community cat issues. Always seek Return as the first option for community cats.

That said, there are occasions when a cat absolutely cannot be returned to her habitat. If cats are not a candidate for traditional adoption due to temperament, few rescues have the capability to pull ferals. They are almost always quickly slated for euthanasia. These are the cats we pull for our barn program, and they make up over 90% of our barn cat program intake. They have no other option and their risk is imminent.

The other 10% of our program intake is cats from situations in which conflict resolution has been thoroughly exhausted and a colony is in imminent physical danger, cats in our adoption program who we have been unable to socialize, and cats with behavior problems that make them unsuitable for traditional adoption.

To be considered for intake into our barn cat program, the cat should be:

- Unsuitable for traditional adoption
- Healthy
- Reasonably capable of colony life

Unsuitable for Traditional Adoption:

The obvious cat in this category is a feral, unsocialized cat who is beyond the age of socialization. However, this category also includes cats who may be friendly but are miserable indoors, who are incontinent or have litter box issues that cannot be resolved, and cats who have lengthy bite histories of extreme behavior issues that cannot be resolved through medical or behavioral modification.

Healthy:

All cats adopted through our barn cat program are fully vetted. They are sterilized, current on FVRCP and rabies vaccines, microchipped, given Praziquantel, Revolution, as well as a dose of Convenia prior to relocation. They are each eartipped, cleared by a vet, and given any additional medical procedures they require when they present for sterilization.

Capable of Colony Life:

We do not have strict rules for ages of the cats accepted into our program or strict rules on what may disqualify them. Instead, we look at each cat as an individual and work to find a suitable solution for that cat. The cat should be able to survive in a managed colony situation where food and shelter are provided.

You may hear suggestions that certain cats must always be ineligible for barn placement: declawed cats, kittens, cats with disabilities. Instead of outright denying those cats, I encourage you to think outside the box. For example, we have placed many declawed cats, once slated for euthanasia due to temperament or bite histories, in warehouse jobs where they are safe inside and can still easily catch and deter mice. Kittens, by all means, should be socialized if possible. But if the kitten is beyond socialization or extensive fostering is not an option, an extra safe barn home where the kitten is placed with older cats to show her the ropes is a better fate than certain death at the pound. Likewise, we have placed tripod ferals and cats with one eye at carefully selected locations where they have minimal risk of predation and an extra-committed

caretaker. If all other avenues of life saving have been exhausted, I firmly believe that a reasonable chance at life on a farm location is better than certain death at the pound. Searching for the unique adoption location meeting that cat's individual need is all that is required.

Determining a Cat's Temperament: Feral or Frightened?

Nearly every cat who is trapped and brought into an animal control facility will appear feral. Determining the cat's true temperament is as much an art as a skill, but there are some tell-tale signs to look for in a truly feral cat:

- Feral cats do not talk to you. Is the meowing at you? She probably isn't feral. Most feral cats are silent.
- Feral cats may avoid eye contact and bury their heads into/under an object in their crate to hide from you. A feral cat wants nothing more than to be hidden from you. Staying still and silent is a common defense when caged.
- "Airplane ears": ears are low and wide against their head.
- Body position: low and wide, as if they are trying to form a puddle. Or, hunched into a ball to protect the body. Tail tucked in under the body. In an animal control cage, a cat lounging on her side out in the open with feet comfortably outstretched is not feral. A cat sitting with front feet tucked under is confident in her environment; an impounded feral cat will not tuck her front feet under as she is always anticipating danger and the need for escape.
- Disinterest: Feral cats are not interested in interacting with you, toys, or bedding. They will not curiously investigate items in their crate at animal control and may not eat. They will not show interest in common sounds (a can opening, "kitty kitty" noises).
- Escape attempts: If a hiding box is not placed in their cage, a feral cat may shake, climb the walls, bounce off the walls, try to get through the bars, or bloody her nose.
- Time: This is a luxury you may not always be afforded, but if possible, give every impounded cat a few days to calm down and allow her true personality to come out before deciding she is feral. I also strongly advise you to make your own temperament analysis of each cat and not immediately accept an animal control staff's assessment.
- Want toy test: With a long wand toy inserted through the cage bars, you can try softly stroking the cat on its back. Most feral cats will remain still but will flinch every time the wand touches them, or they may squirm further into a corner trying to get away from it. A friendly but frightened cat will usually show subtle signs of enjoying the caress, will turn to look at you, make eye contact, meow, or even move closer. If in doubt, repeat the wand test a few times daily and see if progress is being made.
- Angry, hateful cats - In my experience, the angry, hateful cat who hisses, growls, lashes out, or attacks is not feral at all, but a very unhappy house cat and even potentially a declawed cat. Nonetheless, if the cat is unreasonably aggressive after being allowed time to acclimate, her rescue options are likely very limited and I consider them for barn placement due to temperament.

Tip: Many experienced feral cat trappers I have worked with can sport a truly feral cat at 50 feet. Contract your best local trapper and ask for tips on identifying impounded ferals, or ask him or her to accompany you to animal control to help teach you.

Tip: In a high kill shelter, we are often not given much time to make this analysis. Even with years of experience, we still have the occasional “feral” cat who becomes friendly almost immediately upon exiting the pound, or who friendlies up once at her farm home. If the cat becomes friendly while still in our custody, she is transferred into a traditional adoption program. If the cat becomes friendly once she is at her farm home, if she is thriving there, and if the farm wants to keep her, we allow the cat to stay at the adoptive farm home. If the farm is not interested in a friendly outdoor cat and wants a truly feral cat, we gladly recover the cat and move her to traditional adoption. You will pull feral cats who become friendly and should have a contingency plan in place for them.

Here are photos of impounded cats taken at the animal control we work with most frequently. Each of these cats was considered for barn cat placement. Please note that appearance is only one factor in determining temperament, each cat should still be assessed by trying to interact with her and giving her time to relax.

So now you have identified which cats at your animal shelter need you. Where do you go with them?

We use the term “Barn Cat” largely symbolically. While we do place the greatest percentage of our cats on rural farm properties, there are an infinite number of other locations that are suitable and interested in adopting barn cats:

Warehouses
Junkyards
Auto repair shops
Woodworking shops
Wineries
Stables
Grain handling facilities
Greenhouses / nurseries / garden centers
Churches
Storage facilities

A huge variety of businesses have rodent control issues. You can appeal to all of them that saving the life of a working cat will not only reduce their rodent problem, but it will do so organically, without the use of poisons or inhumane rodent traps, will be good PR for them, will save them on exterminator fees, and it’s typically embraced by employees who often take on the responsibility of feeding and caring for the new workplace mascots.

For finding the rural homes, we use a variety of advertising techniques:

- Website: Your website should advertise your program and have a convenient online application for interested adopters to complete. Several free form builders are available (i.e. Jotform, Google Forms).
- Newspapers: Demographics show that rural populations rely more heavily on newspapers than urban residents. We run weekly ads in several newspapers. Ask your editor if they can run your ad for free or discounted in any extra space they might have.

- Quarterly “Farm Reports” are targeted catalogs distributed to area farmers by the local newspaper. We run a print ad in each report.
- Flyers: We have several different flyers for this program and we hang them in every place we think a rural resident or animal lover might go: feed store, post office, vet clinic, landscape center, hardware store, pet groomer. Flyers cost pennies - hang them everywhere!
- Craigslist: We post creative barn cat ads to several area Craigslist sites every day. We post to the Pet section as well as the Farm section.
- Tap the Equine Industry: Horse people are animal lovers with barns! Every stable in the world wants rodents to stay out of their grain. Consider advertising in local horse publications. Contact your local saddle clubs and ask to speak at their next meeting. Go to horse events (shows, trail rides, swap meets) and set up a table or distribute flyers. Ask them to put a link to your program on their website.
- County Fairs: Set up a table or distribute flyers. Ask for a donated/discounted space.
- Farmer’s Markets: Set up tables there too! Ask for a donated/discounted space. Don’t forget to approach all of the vendors there, most likely farmers themselves, and ask they how many barn cats they’d like to adopt today.
- Radio: Our local radio station has a daily segment for residents calling in advertising items to be sold or given away, and another daily segment to announce community events. Make sure that pet adoption is allowed to be advertised, then call! Every day!
- Word of Mouth: This is probably the most important advertising you can do. Make sure that barn cat adoption is easy, convenient, and that your adopters feel good about their experience. Flat out ask them to spread the word.

Newspaper Ad

Craigslist Ad

Barn cats looking for work!!

Since _____, Austin Pets Alive! Has run one of the country’s most successful and innovative Barn Cat Programs dedicated to saving the lives of feral cats who are impounded at animal control facilities, and for one reason or another, cannot be returned to their original habitats. These cats are healthy, sterilized, vaccinated, and in dire need of a new outdoor home, such as a barn, stable, garage, or warehouse.

These cats are typically not suitable to be indoor pets and have no desire to be lap cats. These are working cats, former street cats who are used to outdoor life, prefer minimal to no human contact, and who will happily tend to your mouse, mole, chipmunk or vermin problem for the small cost of a bowl of cat food and water set out daily in your garage or barn. And because we spay/neuter and vaccinate these cats prior to them coming to your farm, **you never need to worry about endless litters of kittens!**

For more information on how the barn cat program works, please visit our barn cat program page. Feel free to contact us with any questions!

If you could use a good barn cat, please fill out the barn cat adoption form.

Flyers

Selecting Barn Cat Adopters

In selecting outdoor homes, we generally require that the new location be a safe distance from busy roads, have suitable shelter like a barn or shed, require the adopters provide daily food and water, and ensure the adopter has not had coyote predation issues in the recent past.

Our adoption application asks many of these questions, such as “What do you plan to feed the cats?” and “How many, if any, cats have been lost to coyotes in the past year?”.

While we rarely outright deny an application, we will not adopt cats to locations where food and water is not provided, or to locations where coyote or road peril is imminent.

Once an application is received, our first step is to find the address on Google Maps. With the Satellite Map feature we can get a good glimpse of the location, see if there are outbuildings, and see how close the property is to any busy roads.

Next, we email the adopted a standard response thanking them for their interest and explaining, in greater depth, how the program works. We ask them to please reply if this is something they'd like to move forward with.

When they reply confirming their interest in adopting, we call them to set up a delivery date. This also allows us to chat with the adopter on the phone, answer any questions they may have, and make sure we are on the same page and everyone knows what to expect. At this time, many adopters will give us special requests, such as “two females” or “a calico sure would be nice” and we do our best to accommodate. If they indicate they are interested in friendly cats, or very feral cats, we will match them to the appropriate temperament of at-risk cats we are currently trying to save.

Because feral cats are very hard to shelter, and they certainly don't show well for adopters, we do not keep a selection of them 'on hand' for adopters to pick out. Adopters can make requests, but typically they get the cats we select for them and are happy with this arrangement.

One or two days before delivery we send a confirmation email reminding them of the day and time and briefly reminding them, again, that the cats will arrive inside a crate and should be left inside for two to four weeks.

Initial Email

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in adopting barn cats! We'd be very happy to save some feral cats from grim fates and relocate them to your farm.

The cats that we relocate to barns are unadoptable as pets, they are feral and most likely will not approach humans or solicit attention, or they may take a long time to trust you enough for touching. Most of our farms say they only see the cats at night or at feeding time. So for the most part they will avoid you, and come out at night to eat and keep your property free from rodents.

They will need access to suitable shelter like a barn, shed, or garage. And they will need daily cat food and water put out for them. Cats cannot live on hunting alone and feeding them will not reduce their inclination to hunt rodents.

When they are delivered, the cats will be in a large dog crate with food/water bowls, sleeping box, and litter pan. The cats must stay inside this crate (which should be placed inside a barn) for a minimum of 2 weeks. 4 weeks is optimal, 2 weeks at minimum. This time is necessary to teach the cats where their new home is, where their food is, who brings the food, and to get a general lay of the land. If they are not kept confined like this for a minimum of 2 weeks, the cats will immediately run off in search of their former home, get lost, and may likely suffer a sad end. When the cats are delivered, we bring you cat food to get started and enough litter for the confinement period, plus the food dishes, litter pan, bedding, etc. When you have released the cats, you will just give us a call to let us know and we'll come pick up the dog crate.

The cats will be spayed or neutered, vaccinated, microchipped, dewormed, treated for any fleas/ticks, vet checked, and eartipped for identification. There is no cost to you for adopting these cats.

If all of this sounds like something you are interested in and able to provide for the cats, please let us know and we will make the preparations to deliver the cats to you. In most cases, our barn cats come from euthanasia rooms of animal control facilities, so you will literally be saving their lives and should feel very good about offering your home to them!

Please let us know if you have any questions in the meantime, as well.

Thank you,

Austin Pets Alive!

Secondary Email

Hi Kim,

We're all set for delivery this Saturday! I have a note that the driver is going to call you with an ETA once he's on his way to you, and your number as 555-555-5555.

As I mentioned, the cats will come in large dog kennels, complete with a hiding box/bed, litter pan, and food bowls. You'll want to put those crates into a barn/shed for the relocation period so they're out of any inclement weather. Then they will stay inside those kennels for a minimum of 2 weeks. (4 weeks is optimal, 2 weeks at minimum.) They need that time to accept you as the new "food lady" and their new location as home. Otherwise they will take off immediately out of fear and confusion.

We recommend feeding them canned food 1-2 times per day, and talking to them during the feedings so they associate you and the sound of your voice to the delicious foods. We recommend you make a “kitty kitty” call or some special call so they learn that this means food. In case you ever need to summon them, then you can make this call and with luck they will listen!

At the end of the 2-4 weeks you can nonchalantly leave the crate door open and let them come out at their own pace. Often the cats will continue to use the crate for sleeping and you are welcome to keep the crates as long as they are in use.

Let me know if you have any questions! If not, we'll see you on Saturday. Thanks for saving these guys! Hope you love them!

Housing Ferals at The Shelter

We try and get cats from animal control to their new farm home as quickly as possible in order to minimize cage time, which is very stressful on unsocialized cats. Within 48 hours, the cat we pull from animal control is sent into surgery for sterilization, vaccination, eartipping, and given any other needed medical services. After surgery, the cat is placed into their relocation crate for recovery. As soon as they are recovered from sterilization (24-72 hours, best case) and are given medical release, we deliver the cats to their new homes.

During their recovery period, and until we have an adoptive home for them, our barn cats are kept usually housed in our outdoor feral enclosures. Some cats may need to stay inside for health or assessment reasons, and those cats are kept in an isolated area away from the public where only trained staff can work with them. They are housed in the fully outfitted relocation crates that they will ultimately be delivered in, so that we minimize handling, transfer, and stress. The crates are fully covered while at the shelter, again to minimize stress and to help prevent disease transfer.

While they are housed at your shelter, every effort should be made to minimize stress upon the cats by providing them with quiet space away from barking dogs and human traffic. A trained staff member should be in charge of caring for them to minimize risk of the cats escaping their crates and to minimize risk of bites or scratches to well intentioned caregivers who may not be familiar with unsocial cats.

A ‘Hidey Box’ is essential to sheltering feral cats in any type of crate. Not only will this reduce stress on the cat by giving the cat a place to hide, but a Hidey Box prevents the cat from darting out of the crate when cleaning or providing food. TruCatch Feral Cat Dens are my preferred Hidey Box for use inside the shelter, while awaiting transfer. These plastic boxes can be safely closed up with the cat inside for easy crate cleaning while avoiding all physical contact with the cat.

The TruCatch Feral Cat Den can be purchased at animal-traps.com

The Relocation Crate

Our relocation crates are donated dog crates or crates which become too slightly to continue using for adoption events. You can use black wire crates like the popular Midwest series, or plastic airline crates like you would use to fly a dog. I prefer the plastic airline crates as they afford a little more privacy, block more wind in the winter months, and are harder for kittens to escape from.

No matter what crate you use, it should be large enough to humanely house two adult cats. A 42" or larger Midwest crate does nicely.

The crate should be lined with newspaper or bedding. In the winter months I prefer to put down a few inches of straw for added warmth.

In the back corner of the crate, insert a "Hidey Box". The Hidey Box is where your frightened cats will sleep and hide. Put soft bedding inside the Hidey Box for the cats to nest in. The Hidey Box should be big enough to accommodate two adult cats. The Hidey Box can be a broken cat carrier with the door removed or tied open, the discarded top to a covered litter box, a cardboard box, or even a plastic bucket turned on its side. If you have unlimited funds, TruCatch Feral Cat Dens or Hide-Perch-and-Go boxes are excellent for this as well.

I prefer that the opening to the Hidey Box face the side of the crate instead of facing the front of the crate. This is because when I am cleaning and feeding, I do not want the cats to see me. I want them to be able to easily avoid me. If the cats cannot see what I am doing with the crate door open, they are not bothered and will stay inside the Hidey Box hoping I simply go away as quickly as possible. However, if the Hidey Box faced me, the cats would be confronted head-on, possibly feel like I am encroaching upon them, and are more likely to rush past me to escape. With a Hidey Box facing the side of the crate, I can still easily look into the box from the side of the crate and check the cats, but they can't see me during feeding/cleaning, so cats stay inside the crate and I stay unscratched.

In the front of the crate, right up against the door, place a litter pan. Opposite the litter pan, place a food dish. Try and get the food as far away from litter as possible, but still easily within your reach when opening the door.

*Tip- Our favorite litter boxes for relocation are dish pans from the dollar store, and donated deep, round bed pans from hospitals. Our favorite food dishes are rectangle side-by-side, attached food/water bowls because they fit the best in confined spaces. Plastic cottage cheese/sour cream containers also work well and are free!

If you're using a wire crate, cover the entire relocation crate with an old sheet, save a couple inches for fresh airflow. In winter, we cover the crate in heavy blankets to conserve heat. In the summer, have at least one side of the crate uncovered for ventilation.

The Relocation Process

When adopters arrive to pick up their cat(s) we send them off with the cats in the relocation crate, one large bag of cat food, one large bag of cat litter, and one case of canned food. We do this to make the process as convenient as possible for the adopters and to ensure that the cats have everything they need to get off to a good start.

Upon pick up, the adopters also receive medical records on each cat, adoption paperwork, a flyer thanking them for adopting, and, again, advising them on how to care for the cats during confinement, and a donation envelope.

The relocation crate should be placed inside the shelter which will ultimately become the cat's main residence. Place it in a convenient location so the caretaker can access it daily. Try and place it in a location that is free from direct wind and sun, but affords the cats a vantage point to see their new environment so they can begin acclimating.

Our adopters have been advised that the cats must be kept inside the relocation crate for a minimum of two weeks with four weeks being optimal. We explain to them that four weeks is really best and that with confinement for four weeks, there is a much higher probability that the cats will stay. We impress upon them that the cats absolutely must not be let out prior to two weeks or they will run away and put themselves in peril.

Adopters are counseled that the cats must be fed, watered, and litter pan cleaned minimally once daily. We encourage adopters to feed canned food once or twice daily during confinement and to make a special call ("here, kitty kitty kitty") when feeding so that the cats learn this call as their food signal and when eventually released, they can be called back home when needed.

During confinement, the more time an adopter can spend bonding with the cats, the more likely we've found the cats are to remain at their new home. It is common sense, really, but the nicer accommodation and the more the cats come to recognize you as the "food lady" or "food guy" the more they want to stay with you and enjoy your lovely barn. This can be as easy as talking to the cats when you're near their crate or sitting with them and trying to interact if they will allow it. Confinement is also when we recommend you acclimate any dogs to the new cats. Dogs and cats should be allowed to get a scent of one another and get used to the idea of one another without allowing the dog to stress or upset the cats.

When four weeks have passed, the crate door is unceremoniously left open one morning and the cats are allowed to exit at their own accord. The adopter should continue feeding near (but not inside) the crate. Many times cats will continue to sleep in the crate and we allow the crate to stay on site as long as the cats are using it. Once the crate is done being used, we ask that adopters contact us so that we can pick up the empty crates when we're in the neighborhood.

Flyer given to adopter on adoption day.

Follow up

Two to three days after adoption we contact the adopter to make sure things are going well. Four weeks past adoption, if we have not heard from the adopter, we follow up again and see if the relocation crate is ready for pick up. Three months after adoption and one year after adoption, we email a survey to all barn cat adopters asking for the status of each adopted cat and specifics, if available, on any cat who is no longer present. (Our data thus far indicates that 75-90% of our adopted barn cats are present and thriving several months past adoption).

FAQ

Q: Do you charge an adoption fee?

A: No. We strongly advise you do not charge an adoption fee, either. It is our experience that very few adopters would be as persuaded to adopt these cats if there was a fee. About 1/3 of our adopters make a donation toward the program, and almost all go on to become supporters of the organization in one way or another.

Q: Do you charge a crate deposit?

A: No. In 5 years we have had exactly zero crates stolen.

Q: My adopters won't keep the cats confined for two to four weeks.

A: This was our biggest issue in the beginning. Now we drill the two to four week mantra into their heads over and over again, and are very upfront about the fate of the cats if released early. Barn cat adopters want to help these cats. If you explain the consequences of letting the cats out early, they typically listen. Overemphasize and keep repeating the two to four week rule.

Q: But what about coyotes? We have fifteen million bazillion coyotes and they are killing everything and eating babies!

A: Coyotes are a real threat to any small outdoor animal, there is no arguing that. However, I feel strongly that the fear of coyotes, as they become more and more visible to suburban residents, is grossly exaggerated and sometimes the irrational fear is even used as an excuse as to why barn cat programs should not be enacted. Coyotes are becoming as demonized as great white sharks. The farm locations we adopt to range from the extremely rural to the outskirts of suburbia. Texas has coyotes just like other states and undoubtedly the area has suffered some cat loss due to predation. However, in my experience, the loss is nowhere near as great as some fear it to be.

In the post-adoption data gathered to date in 2017, we have only lost one cat to predation. We do not receive calls from adopters wanting more cats as the last were all eaten by coyotes. It is simply not an epidemic for us, in any way, contrary to what some people fear.

That said, we do screen adopters for coyote and predation issues, do not adopt cats to homes where predation is a known issue, and we do advise the community on ways to minimize predation. Further, an outdoor life is a risk to any creature. But what is the risk to the cat left behind at animal control who faces imminent euthanasia due to temperament? Studies from Alley Cat Allies show us that the overwhelming percentage of citizens believe it is more humane to release a cat to nature even knowing that something bad might very well happen to the cat in the future. That is a statistic I agree with and I believe is essential to respecting the nature of a feral cat.

For tips on minimizing risks and protecting outdoor cats from coyotes, please visit my blog on this subject at:

<http://deartab.by/post/47752373709/coyote-predation-on-outdoor-cats>

Q: Do you adopt in the winter too?

A: Yes, we adopt barn cats all year long, even in the midwest. Because the overwhelming majority of the cats who enter our program are already outdoor cats, they have already built up their winter coat and acclimated to the season before they entered animal control. We are also ensuring that their new home provides shelter inside a building, which is a new luxury for many former street cats who find themselves impounded at animal control. If we were adopting a formerly indoor-only cat to a new farm home, we would wait until spring.

Lessons We've Learned

Feral cats are very difficult to shelter.

Sometimes they cannot be vaccinated upon intake at animal control. They may not eat at animal control. Their cages may not get cleaned well at animal control due to their flight risk. Heaven only knows where they came from, and now they're stressed. All of this makes for sick cats.

In the beginning, we pulled cats who had been at animal control a long time and were thus exposed to a multitude of disease, and some became ill. To combat this, we now pull feral cats as soon as possible to lessen their exposure to disease. We house them in a dedicated quiet room, give them Hidey Boxes, and cover them up.

Because feral cats cannot be handled very safely, many are not candidates for extensive or invasive supportive care. We treat any sign of illness very aggressively from the onset to alleviate the necessity of invasive supportive care on a fractious cat. When we are seeing outbreaks of calicivirus at animal control, all cats are given a full mouth exam during sterilization surgery so we can see any early signs of mouth ulcers and begin treatment immediately. If we are seeing panleukopenia outbreaks at animal control, we will hold cats for 10-14 days past vaccination to ensure their health before we send them to their new farm homes.

Feral cats are messy

For reasons unknown to me, feral cats are notoriously messy in confinement. You will need to replace bedding frequently. They tend to make less mess when given pellet litter versus clay. Avoid using very large food/water bowls as those will need to be dumped and cleaned daily.

Who stays and who doesn't

Friendlier cats seem more likely to stay after relocation, as do kittens. It's no surprise that the most likely to run away, no matter how long they've been confined, are the huge alpha toms. When relocating a cat who has clearly been alpha cat on his block for the past several years, it would be good advice to confine him the full length of time and make his new home as inviting as possible through liberal use of tuna, sardines, catnip, and any cat whispering tricks you have up your sleeve.

It isn't a science and every cat is an individual who will ultimately make their own choice, which we have to respect. It is also fairly common for adopters to report that a neighbor has since adopted/stolen their new barn cat because the neighbor puts out tuna/milk/treats for the cats. Cats will always go where the proverbial grass is the greenest.

Match homes and cats

We have several working dairy farms and pig farms who adopt working cats. They can't have poison around their livestock and can't have mice contaminating grain, making the livestock ill. Cats are a natural solution for them, but they do not want kittens and they do not want cats getting underfoot and in machinery. This program is a simple solution for them and these farms often want "super ferals". They want to see eyes at night but no other signs of cats. For these farms, we match them up to cats we are confident are 100% feral and former street cats. Rough, weathered city cats are an excellent choice for these farms. They have no interest in being a pet and a barn filled with hay, a bowl of kibble, and fresh water is a big upgrade for many of them. They will do great here.

Conversely, many of our hobby farms are stables are simply looking for outdoor pets. Many of them have luxe heated barns, heated cat beds, canned food fed twice daily, and accommodations fit for a king. Many of our warehouses, greenhouses, and retail locations want a friendly shop cat who will interact with customers. These are the homes we match to our special needs cats requiring some extra care and the ones who are friendly and really want human interaction but aren't suitable for traditional adoption for one reason or another.

Be Realistic

No farm home, nor any adopter, is perfect and I'd urge you to give up the idea of perfect. Not every farm is going to provide heat in the winter, canned food twice daily, cat beds, and toys. Thankfully, not all cats require those features! Think about the places feral cats are living and thriving right now. They are hardy, resourceful, capable creatures. They are fighters and they are survivors. Give them the credit they deserve, and find quality (if not perfect) adopters, and get them out of animal control alive.

Relocation is not 100% successful no matter how many you've done. Some cats will not stay at their new home no matter what you've tried. Some will run off or fall victim to any of the dangers a wild animal faces. It is part of the feral life.

But, cats also do stay! Cats also go on to lead new lives in their new homes and live happily ever after. What we can do for them is ease their struggle, make them healthy through sterilization and vaccination, implant them with a microchip as a safety net, set them up with a suitable new home, and give their new caretakers the tools for success. After 1,000 relocations, and after spending years advocating for feral cats and Trap Neuter Return, one thing I know for certain is that every impounded feral cat at animal control wants out. I know that if you were to ask any one of them if they would rather be 'humanely' euthanized right now at animal control, or if they would rather take a chance on a new farm, warehouse, or stable where something bad might eventually happen to them, every single cat would take that chance. You are their opportunity. Don't let perfection stand in the way.