



# ISSUES & ANSWERS



## Feral and Free-roaming Cats

2010

*The MSPCA receives numerous calls from individuals with questions who have noticed cats roaming freely in their neighborhoods. Some of these cats may be owned pets that are permitted by their caretakers to go outside unsupervised, some may be tame strays who were formerly owned, but have been lost or abandoned, and some may be feral cats, those with no socialization whose disposition makes them unsuitable as domestic pets.*

*This edition of Issues & Answers addresses the many questions that people have when encountering cats outdoors in their communities, including the differentiation between “free-roaming” and “feral,” the steps that the MSPCA urges all responsible cat owners to take in order to ensure the safety and well-being of their pets, and what actions may be taken to address cat populations while promoting the health and welfare of both people and animals in the community.*

### **What’s the difference between a “feral” and a “free-roaming” cat?**

A free-roaming cat is a tame cat who is friendly toward people, and can either be a cat that has an owner but is allowed to roam outside, or a cat that was formerly owned, but has been abandoned or lost. A feral cat, however, is the wild-born offspring of free-roaming or other feral cats. Feral cats are not socialized and are not suitable pets, as they are often too fearful of people to ever be touched or domesticated. While it is possible for lost strays or abandoned free-roaming cats to be reunited with their families or adopted into new homes, feral cats, because of their lack of early socialization, are generally not able to adapt to living indoors in close contact with people. Feral kittens, depending on their age, may be young enough to tame.

### **Why are free-roaming cats a problem? Why should I keep my cat indoors?**

These are important questions. Risks to

outdoor cats include traffic, predation from larger animals, and altercations with other cats and wildlife which can cause serious injury, disease, or parasitic infection. These risks can be life-threatening. In fact, the average lifespan of cats permitted to roam freely outside is estimated to be only 2 to 5 years, whereas indoor-only cats can live to be 18 years or more. In addition, cats that are permitted to roam outdoors unsupervised can have a negative effect on local wildlife populations; as natural predators, even the common housecat can do an incredibly effective job killing local bird, rodent, and reptiles. This can cause serious environmental problems, especially if there are endangered species present. Furthermore, any unsterilized cats permitted to roam outdoors will almost certainly produce litters of kittens, contributing to the cat overpopulation problem.

For these reasons, , in combination with sterilization, vaccination, and identification (by collar/tag, microchip, or tattoo), the MSPCA recommends that cat owners keep their cats indoors or provide confined and supervised outdoor time with appropriate anti-parasitic treatments for fleas, ticks, and mites. While some people believe that their cats “like” to go outside, it’s important that we, as human beings, not transfer our emotions and desires to our pets, and recognize that there are ample opportunities for stimulation and enrichment play with a wide variety of toys, which allow cats to exhibit and indulge its natural behaviors (stalking, chasing, scratching, stretching) safely indoors. These also help to foster the human-animal bond you share with your cat. Even if you have a cat that is already accustomed to going outside, it’s possible to make the transition to life indoors with just a little patience and your feline friend will thank you with many more years of health and happiness.

### **What about the feral cats I’ve seen outside, who is responsible for them?**

Feral cats, because of their wild disposition, are not suitable to be kept as pets. However, this does not mean that they do not deserve to be treated humanely and with respect. They are frequently overlooked members of the animal kingdom and it is in everyone’s best interest if we, as individuals who care about animals, assume the role of responsible stewards for feral populations where they exist. Left unattended, feral groups can breed unchecked to the point of exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease. Suffering and pain can become daily realities for individual feral cats. Luckily, it is in our power to prevent this unnecessary suffering, and with just a bit of effort and observation, it is possible to stabilize and gradually reduce feral populations naturally over time. Trap-neuter-return (TNR) is a method of reducing the feral cat population humanely by trapping, vaccinating, spaying and neutering and returning feral cats to their environment where a volunteer caretaker monitors (and feeds) the cats in the colony. This method has several benefits: it minimizes the suffering of feral cats and any nuisance behaviors, such as territorial spraying, fighting, or yowling that can disturb local residents; it ensures the vaccination of feral cats, prevents the spread of common diseases, and helps to provide regular food, water, and shelter sources for feral cats that further inhibit potential nuisance behaviors.

### **There is a stray cat in my neighborhood. Who can I call to pick it up?**

Currently, there is no law in Massachusetts stating that cats must be kept indoors (though you should check your local city and town ordinances), and feral and free-roaming cats do not nec-



essarily fall under the jurisdiction of municipal animal control. If you are concerned about a cat or the implications of its presence and have contacted your local animal control agency without resolution, consider contacting a local trap-neuter-return (TNR) non-profit organization in your area. In the Boston metro area, these include the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society and Charles River Alleycats (see *Resources* section at the end of this article for contact information).

#### **If I take in a stray, will someone spay/neuter or vaccinate him/her for free?**

If you decide you're ready to open your home to a new feline friend, it's also important to make sure that you'll have the financial resources to properly care for him/her. While free spay/neuter services are generally not currently available in the Boston metro area, there are reduced cost programs, such as the MSPCA's Spay and Neuter Assistance Program (SNAP) with participating veterinarians throughout Massachusetts and the MSPCA Shalit-Glazer low-cost clinic in Boston. Visit [www.mspca.org](http://www.mspca.org) for more information on these programs.

#### **It's not my cat; it's a stray. Why do I have to cover vet bills if I decide to keep it?**

Veterinary care, like any other medical specialty, involves advanced training and education for its practitioners and, while it's true that compassion is an integral part of veterinary medicine, one must bear in mind that its practice involves significant expenses, and veterinarians, shelters, and clinics, many of which operate solely on charitable donations (and often at a financial loss), cannot be expected to provide their services for free.

#### **There's a cat wandering around my neighborhood. How do I know if someone is missing him/her?**

This is the primary reason that the MSPCA recommends that cat owners provide visible identification tags, microchips, or tattoo identification for their cats, as even indoor-only cats can escape, and just one time outside without identification is one time too many once your cat becomes lost. Again, because there is no state law requiring cat owners to keep their pets indoors, there is no way to know for sure if the cat you saw is lost, abandoned, or just a free-roaming owned cat. Speak with your neighbors to determine if the cat may belong to them. If the cat you see is friendly enough to approach you and is wearing identification, you can attempt to contact his/her owners to determine if he/she is

missing. If you are concerned that someone may be missing the cat, you can try checking the MSPCA web site for lost pets, local classifieds, and your local Craigslist.com's Pets section for lost pet ads, and can even post an ad or put up flyers in your neighborhood stating the cat is in your neighborhood. If the cat you see appears to be feral, please refer to the *Resources* section for information on organizations that can assist with feral cat management.

#### **How can I get neighborhood cats to leave my property?**

There are also a number of safe, humane cat repellent techniques you can employ in order to prevent cats soiling and lingering on your property; see [www.cat-repellant.info](http://www.cat-repellant.info) for more details. Again, you might want to consider contacting a local feral cat care non-profit organization as they may be able to assist with TNR, vaccination, colony feeding away from residential areas, and adopting out friendly strays or young feral kittens.

#### **There's a cat hanging around outside. Should I feed him? Bring him to you? Leave him alone?**

These are important questions with many different implications. Contact your local municipal animal control facility to determine if they would be able to hold the cat and adopt it out or get in touch with its owners (should it have appropriate identification). If you decide to provide food for the cat, check to see if your city or town has an ordinance prohibiting the feeding of strays. Be prepared for the cat to return, and know that you may be signing yourself up to feed him for the long-term, since providing food and then ceasing to do so means that the cat may become dependent on your food source and could be going hungry should you take it away. This could then make the cat weaker and more vulnerable to sickness, parasites, and predation. If you're considering bringing the cat to a shelter, bear in mind that he or she will be temperament tested and screened for disease and, if found to be aggressive, feral, or terminally ill, may be deemed unadoptable and humanely euthanized. If you're willing and able, you can help the cat by fostering it yourself after he or she has had appropriate disease testing and vaccinations, since shelter space is always at a premium. Again, if you'd like to help control the free-roaming cat population in your area, be sure to spay/neuter your pets, keep your cats indoors, and encourage your friends and neighbors to do the same.

#### **There is an injured/sick cat in my yard. Can you come pick it up?**

The MSPCA does not currently have the resources to offer a domestic animal emergency ambulance service. However, the MSPCA's Angell Animal Medical Center does offer 24-hour emergency care for cats, so if the cat is friendly, you would have the option to bring the cat in for a fee. As always, exercise extreme caution should you decide to handle a sick or injured animal.

#### **My child was bitten/scratched by a stray cat. What do I do?**

In addition to proactively warning your children not to touch animals that they don't know that they encounter outside, the first thing you should do is contact your family doctor, who will be able to determine the extent of the injury and whether or not your child may have been exposed to diseases requiring post-exposure care. It is not recommended that you attempt to capture the cat yourself, but if it does appear to be visibly ill or distressed, contact your local animal control department.

#### **Other Massachusetts resources related to Feral and Free-roaming Cats**

**Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society (MRFRS)**  
[info@mrfrs.org](mailto:info@mrfrs.org)  
(978) 462-0760

**Spaymass Hotline & Catmobile**  
1-888-495-7729 (spay)  
[www.mrfrs.org](http://www.mrfrs.org)

**Charles River Alleycats (CRA)**  
Phone - 617-244-0200  
[charlesriveralleycats\\_general@yahoo.com](mailto:charlesriveralleycats_general@yahoo.com)  
[www.charlesriveralleycats.org/](http://www.charlesriveralleycats.org/)