

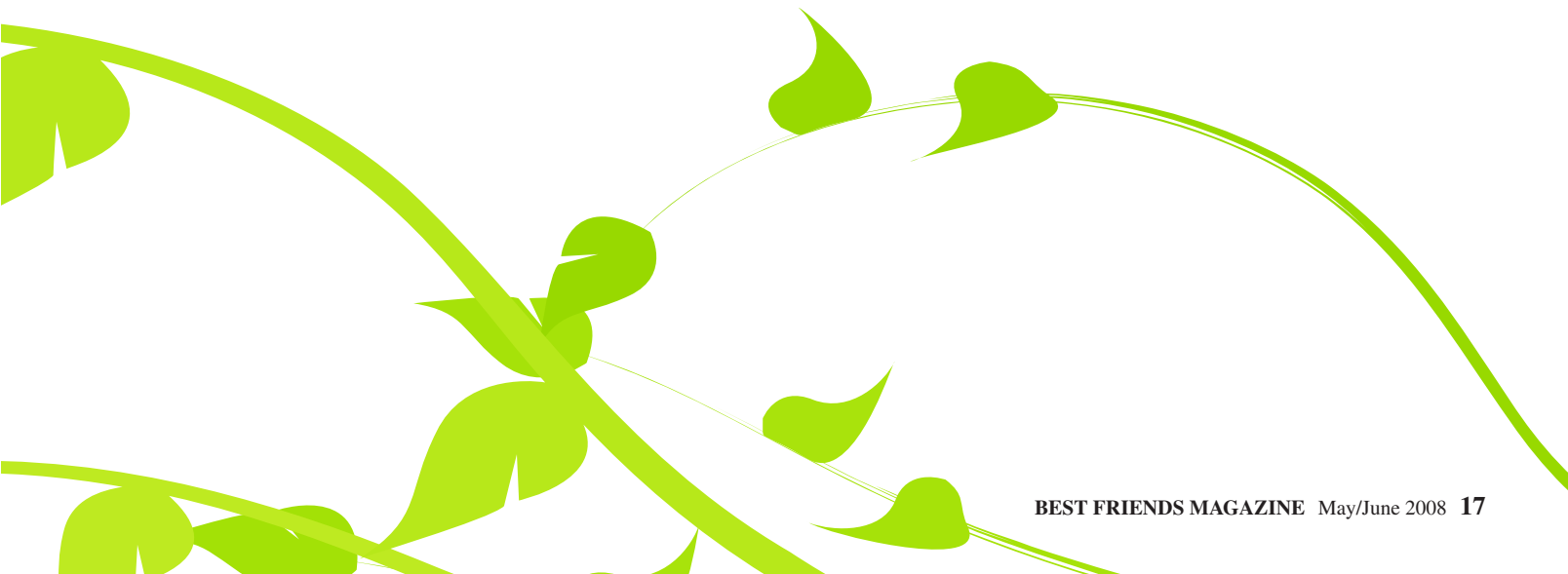
Late one evening in 1991, Holly Sizemore was walking home from her waitress job at a Salt Lake City sushi bar when she noticed a man limping across the street toward a church. As he neared the parking lot, cats darted out from the bushes to greet him. Most of them stayed at arm's length, though a few weaved in and out of his legs. The man bent down and spread some cat food on the ground.

A feral cat colony, Sizemore realized. And it was dinnertime.

Hiding in Plain Sight

Feral cat colonies thrive with TLC and TNR

By Sandy Miller



no more homeless pets

Sizemore had been introduced to feral cats just a couple months earlier when she and a woman named Susan Allred discovered a colony of cats eating out of a restaurant Dumpster. They borrowed a neighbor's rabbit trap, scooped up the cats and took them to a veterinarian to be spayed and neutered. Then they returned the cats to the home the cats had created near the Dumpster. The women didn't know that what they were doing had a name: trap/neuter/return, or TNR.

Sizemore and Allred went back to the church and helped the man to trap, neuter and return his colony of cats. And Sizemore, who was studying theater at the University of Utah at the time, found her true calling: helping homeless animals. Today, she's the executive director of No More Homeless Pets (NMHP) in Utah. Since 2002, NMHP in Utah's Feral Fix program has helped spay and neuter more than 25,000 feral cats.

Cats – yesterday and today

Feral cats are domestic cats. They're the descendants of house cats who were abandoned by their people or who strayed away from their homes. When the cats mated, their offspring were never handled by humans, so the kittens became feral.

Becky Robinson, president and co-founder of Alley Cat Allies, doesn't like to use the word "wild" when talking about feral cats. They're domestic animals, she says. Feral cats might not let anyone get close enough to touch them, but they can't be considered wild because they've been co-existing with humans for 10,000 years.

Feral cat colonies can be found living wherever there is shelter and a stable food source – in abandoned buildings, fields and barns; in alleys behind restaurants; on waterfronts and underneath boardwalks. Rome, Italy, is perhaps the city with the largest feral cat population in the world. An estimated 250,000 to 350,000 feral cats live in Rome, organized in about 2,000 colonies, some of them in famous places like the Colosseum.

Some say that it was a colony of feral cats living in London's Fitzroy Square that inspired author T.S. Eliot to write his 1939 book of whimsical poems, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, which Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber later immortalized in his musical *Cats*. If so, those infamous "Jellicle cats" were all inspired by real feral cats.

The beginning of Alley Cat Allies

Animals have always been a part of Robinson's life, ever since she was a girl growing up in Kansas, where her aunt and grandmother formed the first humane society in McPherson County. Robinson made animals her life's work, and in 1990 she was living in Washington, D.C., and working as a lobbyist for a large animal welfare organization.

She was walking to dinner one evening in the nation's capital when she came across a couple dozen feral cats living in an alley. She began to feed the cats and soon discovered there were no resources to help with feral cats. Meanwhile, she started getting phone calls from other feral cat caregivers who were also frustrated by the lack of information about, and resources for, feral cats. "It was clear a network needed to be put together," Robinson says.

So, in 1991, Robinson co-founded Alley Cat Allies and produced the organization's first *Alley Cat Action* newsletter. Today, Alley Cat

Allies, situated in Bethesda, Maryland, is considered a leader when it comes to caring for, and advocating for, feral cats. Its website at www.alleycat.org is a national clearinghouse for information and resources about feral and stray cats. Alley Cat Allies shows people how to care for feral cats while still allowing them to be, well, feral.

"Feral cats don't need rescuing," Robinson says. "The purpose of Alley Cat Allies is to recognize these cats as they are."

Enemy number 1

It's not disease, cars or harsh weather that feral cats have to fear most. It's human beings.

A shelter is the last place a feral cat wants to end up. More



The program is proving to be a success: By 2007, the shelter's cat intake decreased 35 percent, and cat euthanasia decreased by 40 percent.



When it comes to getting funding, it's vital for caregivers to keep statistics on feral cats.

ethanasia rates. In 1999, 45,842 cats and dogs were killed in Utah shelters. By 2007, that number was down to 32,777. That's 13,000 fewer animals being euthanized in Utah despite the state's steady population growth.

However, the euthanasia rate hit a plateau in 2006 and 2007. The way to break that stalemate and continue the decline in kill rates is to keep feral cats from ending up in shelters in the first place, Sizemore says.

How do you do that? With some dedicated feral cat caregivers and TNR, which feral cat experts all agree is the only solution when it comes to managing feral cat numbers.

Trap/neuter/return

Trap/neuter/return has been around for years. According to Ellen Perry Berkeley, author of the book *TNR: Past, Present and Future*, TNR was first practiced in England back in the 1950s.

How does it work? First, the caregivers humanely trap all the feral cats in a colony, and then take the cats in their traps to a veterinarian (who often works at a discounted rate) to be spayed or neutered and vaccinated. While a cat is still under anesthesia, the veterinarian snips off the tip of one ear to indicate that the cat has been altered. After the cats have recovered from the anesthesia, the caregivers take them back to their established outdoor area, where the caregivers continue to provide the cats with food, fresh water and makeshift outdoor shelters to protect them from bad weather.

As a method of population control, TNR works better than trapping and euthanizing because if a colony is removed and killed, more cats will simply move in and set up camp, a phenomenon feral cat experts call the "vacuum effect." The new cats – who are not spayed or neutered – will start reproducing and will bring nuisances like yowling and spraying with them.

In 2004, NMHP in Utah partnered with a shelter in West Valley City, Utah, to implement a comprehensive TNR program. The shelter provides NMPH in Utah with the locations of neighborhoods where complaints are coming in about feral cats. NMPH in Utah then goes out into those neighborhoods to mediate between feral cat caregivers and angry neighbors, and offers its services to help caregivers trap, neuter and vaccinate the cats, and return them to their areas.

The program is proving to be a success. By 2007, the shelter's cat intake decreased 35 percent, and cat euthanasia decreased by 40 percent, Sizemore says. And there has been no increase in the shelter's calls for service and no increase in cat bites. Neighbors' complaints

than 70 percent of all cats entering shelters in the U.S. are killed. Robinson believes that the word "euthanized" should be reserved for humanely putting suffering animals out of their misery. But feral cats, particularly feral cats in a managed colony, aren't suffering, she says. They're killed for no other reason than being what they are.

In Utah, feral cats make up 75 percent of the total number of dogs and cats killed in shelters, Sizemore says. "Even sweet, domesticated cats have little chance of getting out alive." She says that's because no one really has to go looking for a cat – there are plenty to go around. And feral cats are automatically considered unadoptable, so ending up in a shelter is pretty much a death sentence.

But NMHP in Utah is making a difference when it comes to



no more homeless pets

about things like spraying and noisy late-night mating calls are alleviated by spaying or neutering the cats. And other nuisances are resolved, too. For instance, if someone is complaining about cats using the garden for a cat box, NMHP in Utah might help the person lay some river rock in the garden or make harmless deterrents like motion-activated sprinklers available at little or no cost.

And there's something new on the horizon that could have a dramatic impact on the numbers of feral and stray cats. It's called Gonazon, a silicone implant administered by injection that's been shown to suppress fertility for up to three years in cats. It has already been approved for one-year contraception of female dogs in Europe, and the hope is to eventually bring it to the U.S. for use in feral cats.

The use of Gonazon would be less expensive and time-consuming than spay/neuter surgery. "You could do this in the field: trap an entire colony and very quickly stop reproduction," says Karen Green, director of outreach for the Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs (ACC&D), based in Portland, Oregon. "It could make a huge difference."

The cats would have to be given a short-acting sedative to clip their ears, but they could recover in the field. It would also be less expensive to administer and easier on the cats than surgical sterilization – no transporting to the vet, no sterile surgical suites, no incisions, no long recovery times.

Though the goal of ACC&D is to eventually find a permanent single-injection sterilization method, the three-year contraceptive would still go far in bringing down the numbers of feral cats. "At a minimum, you could buy time with this," Green says.

Saving money – and saving cats

NMHP in Utah did some research and found that West Valley City was saving between \$30,000 and \$60,000 a year by teaming up on the TNR program. Today, the city provides \$20,000 a year toward the project.

Many other cities, towns and counties are also discovering that it's much cheaper to help fund TNR programs than to board and euthanize the ferals. In fact, TNR is saving so much money that more cities and towns are financing it, in part or in whole, with public funds, according to Berkeley. The TNR program of Orange County Animal Services in Florida has been funded by the county

since 1995; by 2001, the program had already saved the county more than \$650,000.

When it comes to getting funding, it's vital for caregivers to keep statistics on feral cats. They have to be able to show public officials and grantors that what they're doing is making a difference, says Bryan Kortis, executive director of Neighborhood Cats, based in New York City. "If they're going to change policy to support TNR or give you money, you have to be accountable. You have to show your successes," Kortis says.

One way to keep track of the numbers is by using the online feral cat database specially designed by Neighborhood Cats. In



The Do's and Don'ts of Feral Cats

DO's:

- Get advice, support and equipment for trap/neuter/return through the feral cat grassroots network in your area. Ask your veterinarian for contacts.
- Line up a vet or spay/neuter clinic to perform free or reduced-rate spay/neuter surgeries.
- Trap the cats yourself. It's easier than you think!
- Return the cats and provide simple, long-term care.

DON'Ts:

- Don't bring feral cats to a shelter. Almost all feral cats are killed in shelters because they are considered unadoptable.
- Don't contact animal control to trap the feral cats and kittens. They will be killed because they are considered unadoptable.
- Don't borrow a trap from a shelter or animal control. You may have to bring the cats in, and they will be killed because they are considered unadoptable.



the database, caregivers in a community keep track of the cats in their colonies, recording how many have been altered and how their numbers change over time. Databases are currently being used in about nine communities around the country, Kortis says.

The databases also help get feral cats who end up in shelters back to their colonies. Thanks to the New York City Feral Cat Database (a project launched by the New York City Feral Cat Council, a program of the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals), only one ear-tipped cat has been euthanized at New York City Animal Control in three years, and that was due to illness.

The benefits of feral cats

It was a cold February morning and Shannon Riddle of Best Friends Animal Society was carefully navigating a van down a very icy highway to Paria, Utah, a tiny town nestled in the shadow of the breathtaking Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Also on board was Shelly Kotter, coordinator of Best Friends' Feral Cat Program. The back of the van was piled high with huge bags of dry cat food, cases of wet food, and several large plastic containers with holes cut out of them (to be used as cozy hiding places and shelter from the cold).

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Sanctuary Workshops

How to Start an Animal Sanctuary

June 8 – 14 • August 10 – 16 • November 2 – 8
WORKSHOPS ARE FULL – CALL TO BE PLACED ON WAITING LIST

An intensive, week-long workshop for people interested in forming their own organization to help animals. Includes starting a nonprofit, fundraising and animal care programs.

Cost: \$650, includes lunches, two dinners and extensive materials.

Dog Behavior & Handling Workshop

September 15 – 19

WORKSHOP IS FULL – CALL TO BE PLACED ON WAITING LIST

This in-depth workshop gives you the tools you need to relate to dogs in a shelter, sanctuary, and/or a rescue setting. Learn about dog behaviors, safety, assessments, creating behavior plans and more. Attendance is limited.

Cost: \$400, includes four lunches and materials.

Art for the Animals: A Creative Retreat

June 15 – 20

Join Cyrus Mejia, Best Friends resident artist, and work first-hand with the animals of Best Friends and in the landscape of Angel Canyon. Explore new methods of thinking and working, creating art for the animals.

Cost: \$550, includes lunches, three dinners and art supplies.

Giving Heart Retreat: A Workshop to Replenish the Animal Lover's Soul

May 16 – 18

Animal lovers face many unique challenges of the heart. Dr. Linda Harper, a clinical psychologist specializing in pet loss, burnout and letting go, will lead a workshop designed to rejuvenate your giving spirit.

Cost: \$300, includes lunches, one dinner and materials.

Kids, Critters & Classroom Success

Brand New! August 1 – 3

This "how-to" workshop covers why tapping into children's innate interest in animals helps motivate them to learn and eventually become thoughtful and active community members who will care for themselves, their families, animals, and the environment.

Cost: \$300, includes lunches, one dinner, and materials.

For more information, visit our Workshop Community at network.bestfriends.org/workshops

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Visiting Best Friends

The Best Friends Welcome Center is open every day except Christmas from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Mountain Time.

The sanctuary covers a large area and some of the animal areas are several miles apart. Guided tours of the sanctuary leave from the Welcome Center four times daily. They need to be booked ahead of time.

To book a tour, or for more information about visiting the sanctuary, e-mail visiting@bestfriends.org or call (435) 644-2001, ext. 0. Your furry friends look forward to seeing you soon!





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Inside pet carriers covered with blankets were three very quiet feral cats. “Feral cats don’t make a sound,” Kotter says. “They don’t want you to know they’re there.”

Two of the cats had once been cared for by an 82-year-old woman, but she was going into a nursing home and had no family or friends to continue caring for the cats. The third cat came from a Utah shelter, where he was scheduled to be euthanized. But thanks to some dedicated shelter volunteers who called Best Friends, the cats were now bound for life on an organic farm, a place where they would have food, fresh water and shelter from the cold. A place where they can live out their lives being just who they are.

Allen Family Farms sits on eight and a half beautiful acres just outside Paria. It’s where Kristie Allen and her husband, Dustin, a heavy-equipment technician for the state of Arizona, have chosen to raise their family, which includes four-year-old David and a baby on the way. The conservation-minded Allens are building a bottle house, and they grow organic carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, peas, okra, corn and other vegetables, which they sell to friends and neighbors, and at farmers’ markets.

Last season, the squirrels and rabbits ate almost all their crops. As luck would have it, Kotter’s husband, Brent, just happened to be building a water tank on property adjacent to the Allens’ land, and he heard about their dilemma. He told the Allens that he knew just the person they should talk to: his wife, Shelly. And that’s

Do Feral Cats Kill Wildlife? The Fur Flies.

When a few endangered birds, including rare piping plovers, were found dead on the beach of the quaint tourist town of Cape May, New Jersey, feral cats were immediately named the prime suspects.

But some argued that there was no proof that cats were the culprits. The town’s mayor, and former public works director, even voiced doubts, saying that although he had seen numerous wildlife tracks on the beach, he’d never seen cat tracks.

Both birds and cats are important parts of this Victorian seaside resort’s landscape. Cape May is nirvana for bird-watching enthusiasts, and tourism pumps millions of dollars into the state’s economy each year. So when the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection threatened to withhold the town’s beach sand replenishment money until the town approved a beach-management plan, business owners got nervous.

But approving the beach management plan as it was originally written would have destroyed a very successful trap/neuter/return program that had already reduced

the number of feral cats from 450 to about 100 over the past decade, according to Becky Robinson, president of the advocacy group Alley Cat Allies. “Cape May is an absolute success story, probably more than any other program in the country,” Robinson says.

So the city council tabled the original beach-management plan and, on March 4, approved a new plan that allows Cape May’s successful TNR program to remain in place. “It was a victory for trap/neuter/return in Cape May,” Robinson says. “City council leaders acknowledged that the 12-year-old program had received national and international recognition for its success in reducing the city’s population of feral cats. The city council members stated their belief that the trap/neuter/return program is vital to Cape May and must be protected.”

Still, the bird advocates have their concerns. The American Bird Conservancy says scientists estimate that free-roaming cats kill hundreds of millions of birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians each year. According to the organization’s website, cat predation is an added stress on wildlife populations already struggling to survive habitat loss, pollution,

pesticides and other human impacts.

But it’s important to differentiate roaming house cats from true ferals. Cat advocates point to a number of other studies that show that cats aren’t detrimental at all to bird and other wildlife species. According to Alley Cat Allies, feral cats are opportunistic feeders – they’re not going to go to the trouble of catching birds if they have Dumpsters to dine from or if they can get handouts from people. When cats do hunt, rodents are their meal of choice. And there are still plenty of rodents around, proving that cats can prey on a population without obliterating it.

Robinson says unfairly targeting feral cats as the destroyers of wildlife ignores the real culprits – human beings – who are decimating wildlife habitats with their urban sprawl and pollution.

To be sure, some cats do kill birds. But the question of whether or not they’re detrimental to bird species is still a matter for debate, with passionate people on both sides of the issue.



how the Allen family was introduced to feral cats. Today, 17 feral cats live on their property, successfully keeping the squirrels and rabbits at bay. In 2008, the Allens will see a full harvest. "This year, we'll be feeding ourselves and 10 families," Kristie says. "Without these cats, there's no way we could grow any food."

The cats, who peacefully co-exist with the Allens' dogs, goats and chickens, saved the family farm. In return, the Allens provide the cats with a peaceful place to live and a constant supply of food, which is delivered by Best Friends. Last year alone, the Best Friends Feral Cat Program provided 53,000 pounds of dry food to feral cat caregivers in southern Utah and northern Arizona.

Kotter and Riddle placed some food and the makeshift winter shelters inside a 10-by-10-foot run on the Allen property, then opened the doors to the cat carriers. One cat scrambled for refuge in one of the winter shelters. The other two huddled in corners inside the run. The cats would stay in the smaller space for a few days before

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being released to join the other cats. Today, the feral cats are “just like our family,” Kristie says.

The Los Angeles Police Department has also discovered the benefits of feral cats. The Working Cats program of Voice for the Animals, an animal advocacy and rescue group based in Los Angeles, has placed feral cats in police stations with rodent problems. The cats keep the rat population in check, sometimes by catching them, but mostly by just leaving their scent. Thanks to the “Rat Patrol,” rats are no longer camping out in the bicycle officers’ equipment bags or scurrying across workers’ desks.

Caregivers: not just cat ladies anymore

Roger Schuster didn’t look like your typical feral cat caregiver. A former U.S. Army captain and helicopter pilot in Vietnam, the brawny Schuster, his wife, Frances, and their two sons moved from their southern California home to the small town of Glendale, Utah, seven years ago when Roger’s health began to decline. They soon discovered two feral cats living on the property.

“He said they were some of the most beautiful cats he’d ever seen,” Frances remembers. “He said they had to be a special breed.”

Roger found out about the Best Friends Feral Cat Program, had the cats neutered, and was soon taking in more feral cats. He spread the word to his neighbors in Glendale, convincing them to take in feral cats and set up feeding stations. Roger made regular runs to Best Friends to pick up cat food to disperse to all the feral cat caregivers in the neighborhood.

“He got 45 people in Glendale to get on board and open up feeding stations,” Kotter says. “He changed a lot of minds there about feral cats and the importance of feeding them and fixing them.”

Roger died of cancer a year ago in May. Today, Frances and their 23-year-old son, Cameron, continue to care for Casper, Harry, Elizabeth, Andrew, Big Fuzzy and Goliath. These cats were socialized as kittens and are no longer afraid of people.

Feral cat caregivers come from all walks of life. They’re veterans, waitresses, public officials and truck drivers. Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper’s wife, Laureen, takes feral kittens into their home to socialize them before they’re put up for adoption in Ottawa’s shelters. Norm Carroll, a cattle rancher in the small town of Orderville, Utah, always had “mousers” on his spread. Then, a few years ago, he started taking in feral cats. It’s not unusual to see a couple of the cats hop into the bed of his truck and ride out with him to feed the cows. Carroll is now a regular at Kotter’s annual appreciation lunch for area caregivers.

Most feral cat caregivers, like the ones in this story, stumbled into the job after a chance meeting with feral cats. Most work full-time jobs. They don’t expect anything in return for their kindness. They do it out of the goodness of their own hearts.

Feral cat caregivers come from all walks of life. They’re veterans, waitresses, public officials and truck drivers.



“These people in the trenches are so amazing,” Sizemore says.

Two years ago, Sizemore received a phone call from the family of the man she had met in that church parking lot some 17 years before. The man had died, they told her, and he had one last wish: that someone would continue to care for the cats. Thanks to some caring people, someone is. 🐾

For More Information

Every day, compassionate people across the country provide care to feral cats and follow the simple steps of trap/neuter/return. For more specifics on how to help feral cats, go to Alley Cat Allies’ website (www.alleycat.org) or Neighborhood Cats (www.neighborhoodcats.org).

To find out more about the Feral Cat Database, visit www.feralcatdatabase.info.

Best Friends Feral Cat Calendar

Best Friends Animal Society will be offering a 2009 calendar featuring photographs of feral cats. Proceeds will benefit the National Feral Cat Initiative. To purchase a calendar, call Shelly Kotter at (435) 644-2001, ext. 4469.

