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## GET THE SCOOP - FERAL CATS VS. STRAY CATS: HOW DO YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE? AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

*By STH Volunteer Jean Capellari*

In rescue, we see a lot of cats who need to find new homes. Because we only pull our foster cats from local animal shelters and municipal animal controls, we also tend to see a lot of cats who end up in cages; many of them cats who should never have been caught and removed from their natural habitats in the first place.

Most folks just want to help by getting a poor homeless animal out of the elements and to a place where they'll receive food and shelter, but taking the time and effort to really tell the difference between a 'stray' cat and a 'feral' cat may make the difference between life and death for that animal which ends up at a shelter.

*Let's first define 'stray' and 'feral':*

Stray cats are cats which are familiar and socialized to humans but may be either displaced from their home, or like many cats, out on a day or weekend trip b/c their owner lets them outside! (Don't always assume that a cat seen outside is 'lost'—especially if it's got a good body weight, is clean, doesn't look sick or injured, and seems to be familiar with and confident of its surroundings. If you truly suspect a cat is lost locally, go to [www.missingpetpartnership.org](http://www.missingpetpartnership.org) for more info on how to help reunite a displaced animal with its owner or check or add a picture to the FaceBook page: For the Love of Louie Michigan Lost Pet Lookers).

Feral cats are cats who either have never been socialized to humans--are, in essence, wild animals--or have reverted to unsocial behavior towards humans after a considerable time being displaced/lost as a stray. Feral cats can function in the wild as any wild animal does, although feral colonies do even better with caretakers and supportive communities. (See [www.neighborhoodcats.org](http://www.neighborhoodcats.org) and [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org) for more info on how to be a caretaker or educator in your community.). Rarely, but on occasion, a feral cat who was once socialized to humans (stray) can be reacquainted with humans, but often it takes much time and effort. Feral cats are generally of a good weight, clean, and appear healthy, as well, b/c they are successful at outdoor living.

If you come across a cat outside, spend a little time observing it--this may take a few days, so don't be in any rush. If it comes near to you, responds to 'here kitty, kitty', or will even eat food in your presence, it's very possible this is a displaced or stray cat (just be careful if the cat is in excellent health--b/c this might signal that it belongs to a neighbor and is just out for a jaunt). Often, 'lost cats' or strays are filthy, thin, and are obviously not as successful at caring for themselves out of doors. Other signs this is a human social cat: it winds around your legs, 'talks' to you, lets you pet it or otherwise acts like a house cat. Only slightly confusing is the fact you may also be interacting with a 'neighborhood' feral with a diligent caretaker who has socialized this animal--so before catching any cat, please do your part to make sure there isn't a locally owned or caretaken cat. Sometimes this is as easy as putting up a poster in the neighborhood or adding a note to a safety release collar asking if this cat belongs to someone.



If a cat continues to stay aloof, hides when you approach or call it, and refuses to eat in your presence, is most often only seen at night or early am, and is clean and not too thin, most likely you are dealing with a feral cat which is not socialized to humans. (For more tips on how to tell the difference, please refer to <http://www.alleycat.org/strayorferal> or <http://www.hshv.org> under their services/community cat program tab). In many cases, whether social or not, you should consider leaving the cat where he is if he appears healthy. If he appears sick, overly thin, injured or slow moving—then it's time to consider catching him to help him or contacting animal control, a local vet, or rescue for help.

Be aware, telling the difference between a stray and a feral AFTER trapping a cat in a humane trap is pretty tough—as is after they are brought to the shelter and caged in new, foreign surroundings. Even stray or displaced/lost socialized cats will sometimes fight, hiss, and appear unsocialized/unfriendly under such stresses—which doesn't help them one bit at a shelter.

If you are lucky enough to note an ear on the cat which looks 'tipped' or partially cut off, this is a sure sign it's a feral who has been 'fixed' and probably has a local care-taker. When a feral cat has been spayed or neutered (aka 'altered' or 'fixed'), most veterinarians will trim the tip of one ear to signal to any person seeing the cat from a distance that that particular cat is already altered. (ie., there's no need to re-trap to check for missing parts or spay scars, or to get such an animal to a shelter—as it most likely already has a home in the out-of-doors.)

Why is all this important? Why do you need to be able to tell the difference between a social cat and one that behaves like a wild animal? While most cats should be left where they are (either as 'owned' wanderers or ferals), it is imperative that feral cats not be trapped and taken to a shelter for their own survival. Generally, 100% of feral cats do not make it out of shelters alive. Feral cats are by definition not familiar with or suited to living with a human family and cannot be adopted out. Many shelters by policy have little recourse other than euthanasia for an animal considered 'domestic' but who won't pass any behavior testing. In the end, it is best for the cats, and for the shelter, if feral cats are dealt with in their natural habitats by the people who find them and the communities who house them—so educating yourself on how to recognize and deal with a feral cat/cats is paramount to saving lives.

Currently, mindsets and policies are starting to show change: some progressive counties and cities across the nation and in MI are no longer accepting feral cats to their Animal Controls or county shelters, but instead are providing Trap-Neuter-Release services to their finders and releasing cats back to the areas where they were found (for more information on the practice of TNR, please see [www.neighborhoodcats.org](http://www.neighborhoodcats.org) or [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org) or [www.sheltermedicine.com](http://www.sheltermedicine.com) or [www.hshv.org](http://www.hshv.org) under community cat program ).