

Adopting Adult Feral Cats

About 24 percent of individuals acquire their cat(s) by feeding a hungry stray who shows up at their door (“Pets by the Numbers,” accessed 2022). The cat probably became lost or was dumped outside to fend for herself. At first, she may be shy and somewhat afraid of people, but usually with lots of love, shelter, and food, she will start to trust people again and can be reintroduced to indoor life.

On the other hand, even though a feral cat may frequent porches and be regularly seen sleeping in garages and sheds, she probably has lived her entire life with minimal human contact and will most likely remain feral. She knows that humans can provide food and shelter, but she will keep her distance and may run and hide if approached too closely. This behavior is true for most feral cats, though some individuals may become comfortable with their caretaker and be able to adjust to life indoors. So while adopting a stray is more likely, it is sometimes possible to adopt a feral cat.

There are two different scenarios in which an adult feral cat can be socialized. In the first scenario, the cat is living outdoors and you simply build on your current relationship through regular encounters. The second scenario involves socializing a feral cat who is confined to a cage in your house. Please note, the first scenario is safer for both parties and is recommended over the latter. In cases where a feral cat requires indoor confinement (if she sustained an injury and requires constant care and medication or you are fostering a pregnant or nursing feral cat), it is possible to socialize the cat while exercising extreme caution. In either case, patience, persistence, and positive reinforcement can help build trust in the relationship.

If it is necessary to confine a feral cat indoors, you will need a large cage and a cat den in which she can hide to feel safe. It is



Nancy North

Feral cat in Buenos Aires

highly recommended that you keep the cage in a spare bedroom or other room that has limited foot traffic. Line the cage with newspaper, provide plenty of clean blankets, and cover the top of the cage with a folded sheet. Prior to bringing a feral cat into your home, make sure you have read over the chapters that discuss proper handling and fostering guidelines to prevent any mishaps.

Building Confidence and Trust

Building confidence and trust with a feral cat is the most important part of the relationship. A bond will not form overnight; it may take months for a feral cat to trust humans. And even then, each cat is different, having her own personal degree of comfort with human closeness and contact. Some feral cats may only bond with their caretak-

er(s) and hide from new people.

It is important not to rush or push a feral cat into trusting you. Forcing the issue will not help, but rather could hinder any progress you have made. Sudden movements and forced contact can scare the cat and reinforce her wariness of humans. Building a relationship must be done at her pace. And always keep in mind that you may never gain a feral cat's trust enough to where you can pet her, let alone bring her into your house. It is helpful to have a plan in mind if you are able to socialize a feral cat; however, it is not wise to become overly attached to any preconceived notions you may have about your relationship — only time will reveal the level of human closeness and contact the cat will tolerate.

Working with a Feral Cat Outdoors

It is most common for an individual to socialize a feral cat by working with her while she is in her outdoor home. Providing a reliable food source and shelter will help build a trustful relationship. It is also important to establish a permanent feeding area and a set schedule; most animals find security in routine. Make sure the feeding station and shelter are in an area with limited foot traffic and keep the area clean. Remove all excess food, especially overnight, to prevent other animals like raccoons, skunks, and opossums from hanging around. Provide a shelter that does not draw attention.

Once a regular feeding schedule has been established and the cat seems to realize this is her new home, you can start to socialize with her by sitting nearby while she is eating. Sit as close to her as she will allow without running away. At first you may need to be quiet, not making any noise, and just be in her presence. Eventually you can start to talk to her in a soft, soothing

voice, and make your way closer to her. Allow her to smell your hands and become familiar with your scent. Some feral cats will permit petting while they are eating, which provides a happy distraction; again, use caution when trying to make physical contact. It may take several weeks or months to reach the point in your relationship where she will seek out your affection and allow physical contact. Remember to take things slowly and try not to let her sense any frustration if this process is taking some time.



Nancy North

Feral cat, Mango, trapped by ACR in Los Angeles, CA.

Moving Her Indoors

Either before or after you have made physical contact with her, you can begin to coax her into your house. It is much easier to help a feral cat become accustomed to being indoors when you have an enclosed porch area, basement, or other room that is closed off from the rest of the house, where you can safely leave a door cracked open to the outside. At first, she will need to know that she can escape if she feels frightened.

Use food to entice her into the new area and set up an additional shelter, using blankets that already have her scent on

them. You will also want to set up a litter box. It can be a balancing act when transitioning a feral cat from one area to another. You do not want to completely remove her original food source or shelter until she is comfortable with the new set up. Making drastic changes suddenly can make her uneasy and can harm the trust you have established, so take it slowly. It is recommended that once she becomes comfortable living in her new area, that you close the door during the night to increase her safety. Cats are nocturnal and most active at night.

Once she has become comfortable with living on the porch or in the basement, you can decide if you want to introduce her to the rest of the house or if you want to simply call this space her home. There are quite a few additional items to consider when deciding whether to introduce a feral cat to living in a house. You will need to take into account your house's dynamics (other animals, small children, how busy and loud), and you should determine if she will want to live fully indoors. Many caretakers have "porch cats" or "basement cats" who are content living on their porches and in their basements with no desire to live in the house. And there is no reason to force the issue. Providing her a warm, safe place she can live for the rest of her life is more than most feral cats have.

If you do decide to try to introduce her to the rest of the house, you can use the same steps of transition as before. Allow the door adjacent to the porch or basement to remain open at first, so she can escape back to her area where she is most comfortable. It is helpful to keep bedrooms and other spare rooms closed to minimize the amount of new space she has to explore and the amount of hiding places available. When feral cats are introduced to new areas they tend to hide. You need to be careful not to allow her to hide for long periods of time, because going without human contact for too long could cause her to revert back

to her wary self. Remember to use caution, only allowing her in the house when supervised. As she becomes more comfortable in the house, you can allow her to have free-range with less supervision. This method of transition is recommended when no other animals live in the house. (However, if you do decide to use this method to introduce her to the rest of the house and you have other animals, it is highly recommended that they be confined, so she can explore the house without intimidation.)

If other animals live in the house, it is best to first confine her to a single room for a short time. This will allow her some time to get comfortable with her new surroundings and living indoors, before the added stress of being introduced to new animals. Adapting to a new territory and adapting to new animals at the same time is not recommended. Introducing too many new elements at one time can be overwhelming and may hinder any progress you have made in building trust with her. The more comfortable she feels around new cats and dogs, the easier it will be to introduce her to the rest of the house; eliminating one stress at a time will be very beneficial to her progress. The following two sections go into greater detail on the process of helping a feral cat become accustomed to living indoors and how to safely introduce new animals to one another.

Please keep in mind, whichever method (s) you use to transition a feral cat to living indoors, be very cautious that any sudden and dramatic changes can be especially frightening. You do not want to traumatize her. So take your time, be patient, and use baby steps when working to gain her trust and grow your relationship.

Working with a Feral Cat Indoors

For a feral cat who is confined to a cage indoors, the routine of providing fresh food

and water, scooping the litter box, and changing the newspaper and bedding will help aid in gaining the cat's trust. These regular visits reinforce to the cat that you are not there to harm her but rather to provide for her. Always remember to be especially cautious when opening the cage door; cats are fast and she may attempt to escape. Move slowly, without any sudden movements, and use a quiet, soothing voice. Also, it is highly recommended that a cat den be added to the cage to give the cat a place to retreat to when you are in her space; providing a den will help her feel more safe.

Allow her to smell your hands, either through the bars of the cage or inside the cage, so she becomes familiar with your scent. You can also feed her meaty human baby food on your fingers. Over time, if she is starting to warm up to you, she may rub her face against your hand and begin to invite physical contact. Again, only proceed to the next step of the relationship when the cat cues you to do so. Reaching into the cage and trying to engage in physical contact before she is ready will most certainly result in a defensive behavior (scratching or biting) and can set back any progress you have made. With time and patience, hopefully she will show signs of interest in receiving your contact.

To ease any stress or tension, you can leave a radio or television playing softly. The constant chatter can help a cat get used to human voices and help her to not feel alone when you are not in the room. Utilizing products, such as sprays and plug-in diffusers, that simulate natural cat hormones can aid in relaxation. And lighting lavender scented candles or wearing lavender essential oil, while you are in the room, can help ease anxiety. Still, never leave a burning candle unattended and do not wear too much oil, as to completely cover your natural scent.



Alley Cat Rescue

Denise, an ACR "office" cat, is guarded around humans when alone, but becomes friendly and affectionate when other feline friends are close by .

Another option is to allow a friendly cat to hang out in the room with you, while visiting the feral cat. Cats are "copycats" and if another cat is purring and being friendly to a human, the feral cat will see this and may become more trusting. Just be sure to keep the feral cat confined and do not allow the friendly cat to be in the room without supervision; this will prevent any inappropriate behavior such as bullying. And always make sure all cats have been vaccinated and neither cat is showing signs of illness (sneezing, running nose, or eyes) prior to making introductions.

To increase your engagement with the cat and also ease stress, you can begin to play with her. Wand-like toys (the ones with strings attached to long sticks) are perfect for prompting play. Again, use slow, non-threatening motions and only continue these actions if she seems interested in re-

sponding; do not force the issue if she seems agitated. You may want to attach a wand toy to the cage or leave a ball in the cage, so she can play on her own, and try giving her small amounts of catnip. Remember to provide positive reinforcement for any and all good behavior, such as giving her a few treats and praising her.

As she becomes more comfortable with you playing and petting her, you can slowly allow her to venture out of the cage. To prevent her from hiding and reverting back to her wary nature, keep her confined to that room. Make sure all doors and windows are closed and, if possible, make sure there are not too many pieces of furniture for her to hide under, (though having a cardboard box or two in the room, where she can “hide” for a bit to feel safe can be helpful). You just do not want her to be able to hide somewhere that you will not be able to coax her out. Take some time to build on this stage, allowing her plenty of time to settle into her room, and remember not to push her too fast onto the next step.

After she has sufficiently settled into her room, if you have other companion animals, now is the perfect time to slowly introduce them to one another. As stated in the previous section, the more comfortable she feels around new cats and dogs, the easier it will be to introduce her to the rest of the house. If you've allowed another cat into her room, as suggested to help with socialization, she may already be familiar and partially comfortable with your other cat and that is a great step. The animals should also be able to smell each other and perhaps even reach each other under the door, which helps.

When introducing another cat or dog to the feral cat, it is safest to re-confine her to a cage to make initial introductions. It is difficult to determine how each animal will react to one another, so it is best to have a barrier at first. Only allow one additional animal in the room with her at a time; you

do not want to overwhelm her or make her feel threatened. After a week or so of introductions through a barrier, you can work up to allowing more intimate interactions. (The next section will go into greater detail on how to introduce new animals safely.)

Once she has made introductions with her other housemates and they seem to get along for the most part (some initial minor fighting is to be expected until everyone has reached an understanding), you can slowly introduce her to the rest of the house. Allow her to explore the remaining rooms for short periods of time, while supervised of course, and then confine her back to her room so she can feel safe. It is helpful to keep bedrooms and other spare rooms closed to help minimize the amount of new space she has to explore and the amount of hiding places available. At first, you might also want to confine your other companion animals to allow the feral cat to explore; this can be a delicate balance, so use your best judgment of the situation. Continue with periods of exploration and periods of confinement until you and her feel comfortable with her having free-range of the entire house.

Tips for Introducing New Cat Safely

The most important tip to remember when introducing new cats to one another, is to ensure all individuals are spayed or neutered and vaccinated prior to initial contact. You do not want to contribute to the cat overpopulation problem due to accidental pregnancies, nor do you want to transmit any disease, so please take all precautions. It is also highly recommended that all cats are tested for disease prior to making any new introductions. And cats should be treated for internal (worms) and external (fleas) parasites to prevent transmission. (Please refer to “Health Care for Feral Cats: Guidelines for Colony Caretak-

ers” for more information.) Make sure there are no visible signs of illness in either cat, such as an eye infection or upper respiratory infection, prior to making introductions; it is much easier to treat one cat than treat two or more cats for an illness. And, again, take it SLOWLY when introducing new animals to one another.

As mentioned above, the best way to introduce a new cat to another cat (or dog) is to confine the new cat to a single room for a few weeks. This will allow her some time to adjust to her new environment without any intimidation from her housemates, while also providing her a place where she can feel safe. The new cat can make her initial acquaintance with a protective barrier in place. It is highly recommended, especially when introducing a feral cat to other animals, that you also use a large crate to help facilitate introductions. Always supervise and only allow one additional animal in the room with her at a time.

Initially, the animals should show interest in wanting to smell each other and they may even reach through the bars to bat at each other. Hissing, growling, and some swatting is to be expected. Promote good behavior and help keep the cats calm by offering treats (meaty baby food, without onion, fed on a spoon or your fingertip is a particularly tasty snack), petting them, and using a soothing voice to praise. Use a wand toy to coax them to play together through the bars. Be consistent in training them on what actions are viewed as acceptable and which are not.

After a week or two of getting acquainted through a barrier, you can slowly allow more intimate interactions. It is advised to have a water bottle on hand to correct any bad behavior and to safely break up any fighting. It may take some time for the cats to work out their hierarchy of who is “top cat.” Sit on the floor in front of the cage and gently coax the feral cat out into the room, while keeping an attentive eye on your oth-

er cat.

At this stage, they should be fairly familiar with each other and engage in a nose-to-nose greeting. As they continue to thoroughly smell each other, some hissing and swatting may occur. Be prepared to correct any behavior before it escalates into fighting. A few squirts from a water bottle should defuse any fighting or you can make a loud noise, such as clapping your hands, to startle them. Never use your hands to break up a cat fight; that is very dangerous and could result in injury. Allow the cats to interact with each other for short periods of time, building up to longer visits. Use your best judgment to gauge each cat’s ability to tolerate the other in deciding how long each visit should last.

Utilizing products, such as sprays and plug-in diffusers, that simulate natural cat hormones can help alleviate stress and tension and aid in relaxation. In addition to a pleasing lavender scent through candles or oils, adding a few drops of a calming agent to the cat’s water can also help. Always read the labels before using any products and provide supervision during initial use to make sure your cat(s) do not have any allergic reactions. (Refer to “Helpful Resources” for a list of companies who make such products and where you can purchase them.)

Again, toys can be a great way to facilitate interaction between cats, while relieving stress. Most cats can be easily coaxed into playing with one another, because it creates a distraction that is positive. When both cats are enjoying themselves and having fun, they are less likely to be bothered by the other’s presence. Wand toys and laser pointers are especially helpful in directing joint play sessions, as well as the circular cardboard scratchers that have a track for a ball; get the ball spinning and watch as the cats dart after it! Use treats, catnip, and praise to reinforce positive behavior.

Things to Consider

Never forget that a cat's wild nature is always there under the surface, and can kick in at any time. Even a feral cat who has been socialized and welcomes human contact will still retain some of her wild instincts. When she feels scared or threatened, she may go into attack mode, as her survival instincts take over, so you must always keep this in mind.

If you are not especially careful and do not take into account the wild nature of the cat, you could become injured. A visit to an emergency room for a cat bite, especially from a feral cat, can get you and the cat into quite a predicament. The anti-cat folks have made careers of telling everyone that feral cats carry rabies and are sick and diseased (which we have discussed is untrue). So, unfortunately, most doctors are always suspicious of cat (and dog) bites.

When first introducing a feral cat to a room in the house, she may try to climb the curtains or the blinds, so it is advised that you remove these at first, until she settles down. Cats do feel safer when they are elevated off the ground, so it can be helpful to add a cat tree in front of a window so she can look out. Just be sure that if you have drop ceilings (the type where the tiles can be lifted up), cat trees and other furniture are not elevated so high that she is able to get into the ceiling.

Most feral cats will use a litter box right away. They have a natural instinct to relieve themselves in material that is easy for them to dig in, such as soil, sand, or mulch. At first, use a material that is similar to what she has been used to outdoors. Play sand works well. Do not use construction sand, which may contain harmful additives. You can then slowly transition to a standard cat litter, but make sure not to use one that is scented. Some litters have

special cat attractants in them to help entice the cat to use it, so those may be helpful.

If you have a dog(s) in the house, it can be helpful to provide an area of the house that is just for the cat. Creating a dog-free zone can really aid in her feeling comfortable living indoors, especially if your dog is very active and/or highly interested in the cat. You might consider installing a cat door so she can access a particular room or use a baby gate to help define particular boundaries for your dog. Use this dog-free space to set up her feeding area, litter box, and a bed or two. Having separate areas for your cat(s) and dog(s) can also help reduce tension and fighting in the house, as well as help to keep them from eating each other's food and to keep dogs out of litter boxes.

Trips to the veterinary clinic can be a challenge. For most cats, it is not that easy to get them into a carrier, especially when they learn a carrier means a trip to the vet; but from a feral cat's perspective, a carrier could mean this is going to be her last day on earth. Therefore, it is helpful to acclimate a feral cat to a carrier before needing to actually use one. Place an opened carrier in the cat's living area with a blanket inside, as an inviting place to sleep. Put treats in the carrier to help entice her inside and practice simply shutting the door while she is in there. Be careful not to scare or traumatize her, but slowly help her get used to the idea of being in there without any threat of danger.

If you are unsuccessful at helping her to get comfortable being in a carrier, you can use a net specially designed for catching cats. You can either use the net to help assist in dropping her into a large carrier or you can place her into the carrier while she is still trapped in the net. I have transported cats in this special net many times to the vet.

You can also use a cat den or transfer cage to safely transport a feral cat. Most feral

cats find these small boxes comfortable and prefer to sleep and hide in them. Place a towel or blanket and a few treats inside the den to help entice her.

If a feral cat is especially difficult to transport, you can ask your veterinarian for a light sedative to put in the cat's food. This will make the cat easier to handle. The veterinarian may have to tranquilize the cat before treating her anyway, so this might be something worth discussing.

The last thing to remember is that not all feral cats are able to be socialized. Every cat responds differently to humans and you should always keep the cat's best interest as a top priority. In the case where you are unable to successfully socialize a feral cat, whether she is outdoors or indoors, you must make the decision as to where it is *best* for her to continue living. Do not keep a feral cat in your house if she has been hiding under the bed for a year and you never see her. Even though she may be eating and drinking, what kind of life is it for a cat to live under a bed for her entire life?

If she is outdoors and there is no immediate danger to her (no one is threatening to trap or kill her and she does not live next to a busy highway), then allowing her to remain living in her outdoor home is her best option. Again, you can see if she would be comfortable living on your porch, basement, or other enclosed area of your house for added shelter and security. But if she does not want to do that, provide her with a makeshift shelter. (Refer to "Winterizing Feral Cat Colonies" for instructions on building simple shelters.) You could also

build her an outdoor enclosure to help provide her with some added protection or in the case where she might be in danger/threatened living outdoors.

Another option is to find her a barn home. It is not usually advised to relocate a feral cat, but if she is in danger and it is not possible for her to continue living in the current location, relocating her would be a more appropriate option. Keep in mind, there are vital steps that must be taken in order to safely and successfully relocate a feral cat. You cannot just release a feral cat at a new site and believe she will stay put. She must be provided with a proper transition period of confinement in order for her to stay put and consider the new site her home. For more information on finding suitable barn homes and safely rehoming a feral cat, refer to the chapter, "Guidelines for Safely Relocating Feral Cats."

Conclusion

If you want to give an adult feral cat an indoor home, with lots of patience, persistence, and tolerance this is achievable with some cats. It's not impossible to adopt some feral cats. Just remember, a feral cat may allow you to pet her when she is living outdoors and wanting food, but this does not mean she will act domesticated if you bring her indoors. Every cat acts differently. While you might be able to tame one cat, another one might be a different story. And always remember to be cautious, take the relationship slowly, and keep the cat's best interest in mind when deciding what living arrangement would be most appropriate.

