

Adopting a Feral Cat? Here's Why You Might Want To and How To Keep Them Safe

If you have issues with mice chewing up your car's wiring or creating havoc in your garden, you should consider a low-cost, non-toxic option: Adopting a feral cat, or preferably two – and they look fabulous lounging in the sun!



By Mark Robison

Cats become feral when they are not socialized to humans by seven weeks of age. This manifests itself mostly by avoiding people, although some may evolve to be indoor cats if you want. We had one feral cat who never let me touch him for the eight years he lived at my place until he died in his sleep, while another began to roll over for belly rubs after a few months.

“Feral” isn’t the most enticing description. Their supporters tend to call them “community cats” or, my preference, “free-roaming outdoor cats.” Many animal shelters and rescue groups call them “barn cats” to appeal to people who have outbuildings that attract rodents. These cats are best off if caught in a humane trap, spayed or neutered, and returned to where they came from – in order to avoid more kittens and to reduce the potentially annoying behaviors of intact cats. Occasionally, they cannot be returned to what they consider their home turf and they need new outdoor homes.

Adopting a feral cat from a shelter or rescue group means they will be vaccinated and altered, which leads to less fighting, marking and far-flung roaming. It’s easy to care for feral cats. Here are some tips.

- **Adopt pairs:** Feral cats are more likely to stick around if they have a friend with them. So if possible, adopt a pair of cats – or more!
- **Confine them at first:** You want to confine the cats for three to four weeks until they get over the stress of the move and become acclimated to their new home. Otherwise they may disappear in search of their old place. One of the best ways is to shut them in a garage, shed, or room without access to the outside where the cats can feel safe and sheltered. Wherever it is, it needs to not get too hot or too cold. An animal shelter may be able to provide a large wire cage or crate where the cat can stay with a small litter tray plus food and water dishes inside; you’ll want to have a cardboard box inside it where the cat can hide when you freshen up everything.
- **Talk to them:** During this settling-in period, be sure to talk or even read to the cats. They’ll learn the sound of your voice and that they don’t need to fear you.
- **Feed them:** A well-fed cat is a more efficient hunter because a cat who must spend all her active time just getting enough to eat doesn’t have the energy for additional recreational hunting.
- **Keep safe from predators:** Bobcats and coyotes are a danger to cats in more rural areas. One way to keep them safe is to put out yummy food after dark every night just inside their garden



shed, barn, or garage and shut them in for the night. Then let them out in the morning. They will quickly get used to this routine of coming inside when they're more likely to be prey themselves.

If you adopt a barn cat, you will likely be saving a life because they are among the animals most likely to be euthanized in shelters for want of a home. It's a win for you because your possessions will be protected from rodents and a win for the cats, who get a renewed chance at life outdoors.

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