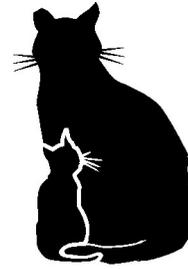


Society for the Friends of Ferals

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TIP'S STORY: THE LIFE OF ONE FERAL CAT

by Chris Callaghan

I don't remember offhand the first time I encountered Tip, although I'm sure it's noted somewhere in the journals I've kept over the years. I do find a reference to him in 2002, so we've "known" each other for at least 15 years. Given that the estimated lifespan of a feral cat (without a caretaker) is about three years, it is remarkable that he's survived that long. I have to admit, he looks every minute of his age. He's scraggly, deaf, and his nearly blind eyes look off in slightly different directions. He has only the odd tooth left. I guess you could say he has a face only a mother could love. (Does that make me his "mom"?)

Back then, I called him Black Tip. He was one of a small colony of four feral cats I was feeding at the old plant at Fish Point. There was also his brother Grey Tip, plus a grey long-hair I called Foggy, and an orange long hair, Sunny. I fed them daily for several years. Eventually Foggy was killed by a car, and Sunny just disappeared. One morning I arrived to see Grey Tip dragging his hind leg. He had been injured, probably hit by a car, and I knew I had to trap him and take him to the vet. I'll never forget coming back an hour later to check the trap. Grey Tip was inside, and Black Tip was sitting beside the trap. I realized that if the leg was broken, Grey Tip wouldn't be coming back, and Black Tip would be alone. Unfortunately, that's how it played out.

The old fish plant was not a great place to feed cats. It bore the brunt of every fierce storm, and the buildings began to collapse. I asked William Allbright if it would be okay if I fed Tip in the shed attached to the house he owns on Cow Ledge Road, and with his permission I set up a feeding station there. I put an insulated cat bed on the upper level, and a nice warm sleeping pad by the window, for sunny day naps. Tip soon learned that Meals on Wheels would arrive at the new location late each afternoon. And if he wasn't there waiting, I worried.

So that became the daily routine. I arrived with dry food, fresh water, and what he really wanted - something yummy, like cooked chicken, fish, or canned cat food. He happily accepted my offerings, but - typical of ferals - never allowed me to touch him. If I found him sleeping in the sun and attempted to very lightly stroke his fur, he would almost fly from his pad in an explosion of alarm. Life went on, but then came a stretch of days when he didn't show up, and his food wasn't being eaten. Eventually, with a heavy heart, I concluded that he had been killed by a coyote, or maybe hit by a car. So I took his stuff from the shed, and stopped my visits, sadly resigned to the likelihood that I would never see him again.

Almost a year later, in March of 2014, (remember that awful winter?) Lavena Crocker happened to mention that a stray cat occasionally showed up at her house, and she would put out food. "Its fur is so matted it can barely move", she told me, and it was very frightened. I asked her to call me the next time she saw it. We could set a trap, take it to the vet, and get the mats cut out. A few days later she called to say the cat was on her deck. "Don't feed it. I'll be right over", I replied. By the time I got there it had disappeared, but we baited the trap with irresistible tuna,

and within an hour Lavena called to say the cat was caught. I couldn't believe it when I peered inside to see Tip staring back at me! How had he possibly survived all that time, through those terrible blizzards? I was over the moon to see my little friend again.

Although I asked the vet tech to just cut the mats off, I arrived to find Tip shaved to the skin, with fur remaining just around his head and at the end of his tail. I believe it's called a "lion cut", but whatever it's called, there was no way I could release him back into the cold, with no coat to keep him warm. You might recall that spring was a long time coming that year, so Tip lived in our spare bathroom for the next couple of months. But I could tell he wasn't very happy, and of course he resisted any attempts on my part to pat him. Finally in May warmer days arrived, and it was time to take him "home". I had to trap him once again in the bathroom, and then we drove back to Cow Ledge Road. As I lifted the cover off the trap, I said, "Do you know where you are, Tip?" For the first time ever, he meowed. (Feral cats do not communicate with humans by meowing). I opened the trap, and off he dashed into the long grass. I put his food in the usual place, his sleeping pad back in the sunny window, and his warm dry bed in the loft, and we resumed our familiar routine.

By this past summer, Tip was definitely a senior cat. He couldn't hear me enter the shed when his back was turned, and it became obvious that his sight was almost gone. However, he started greeting me every day with a raspy meow, which pleased me. (It only took fifteen years, after all!) As the weather turned cold, I asked Andy if it would be okay if Tip came back to live out his life with us. So since December he has once again moved into the spare bathroom, and this time he seems very content just to sleep and eat and use his litter. Sometimes, when I arrive with a special treat, he'll stand on his hind legs with his front paws on my leg, but he still won't let me pat him! One of these days I imagine I'll go in and find him curled up in his bed, having left us in his sleep to cross the Rainbow Bridge. At least I hope that's how it happens, peacefully, warm and safe.

Note: Several times in this article I have used the term "feral" in referring to Tip. In the cat rescue world, we use three descriptions for homeless cats: Friendlies, Fraidies, and Ferals. The Friendlies are very obviously someone's lost or abandoned pet. Friendlies like people and want to be with people. Fraidies are timid and wary, but at some point in their lives they have been around people, and usually with patience they can be won over and gain confidence again. Ferals are cats that were born to homeless cats. Ferals have had little or no positive contact with humans, and are as wild as any creature you will encounter in the woods. With a great deal of patience, a feral cat might eventually bond with a single human, usually the caretaker who has provided it with food over a long period. However, feral kittens that are caught young enough can be tamed and socialized, and will make as wonderful a pet as any cat born into a loving environment. Some of the most rewarding experiences of my life have been working with terrified kittens and watching as they become loveable little clowns. Unfortunately, most feral kittens never have that chance, and end up living short, hungry, frightened lives. Please be kind; spay and neuter your pets. Every single feral cat in the world is the descendent of someone's "pet".

Thanks to William (Billy) Allbright for letting Tip live in his building for all those years, and to the crew on the ferry just for being there, (in case I fell or something). And to Andy, for putting up with a Crazy Cat Lady.