

Warding off catastrophe in Year of the Cat

Animal welfare groups seeking low cost spay and neuter program province-wide

By Heather Killen
TRANSCONTINENTAL MEDIA
NovaNewsNow.com

Animal lovers are hoping taxpayers will help create a province-wide low cost spay and neuter program to reduce the growing number of unwanted cats.

Peggy Valentine, vice-chair of the Digby-based volunteer group Society for the Friends of Ferals, says more help is needed to curb the growing number of feral cats.

Her volunteer-based nonprofit group runs a 'trap, neuter, return' (TNR) program in Digby County and along the western border of Annapolis. The aim of TNR is to humanely control the size of feral cat colonies by implementing a low cost spay and neuter program.

Stray unsprayed female cats can produce at least two litters of kittens a year, quickly resulting in large, uncontrolled cat

colonies. It only takes one generation of kittens to become feral, or wild.

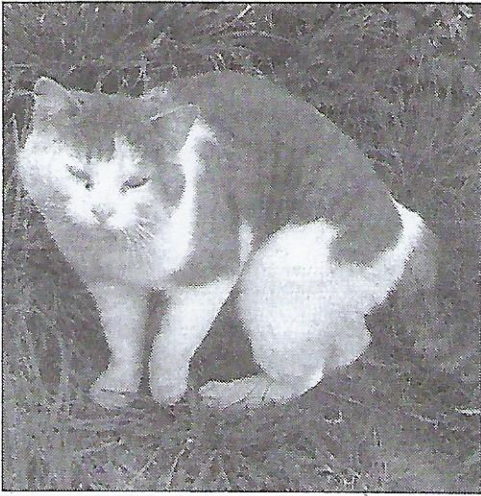
Valentine's group tries to control the numbers of feral cats by offering a low cost spay and neutering program for caregivers of feral colonies in cooperation with local veterinarians.

Cats are painlessly trapped, taken for a check-up, spayed or neutered, and then returned to the colony. Providing there's a willing caregiver, Valentine's group provides the live traps and teaches how to humanely trap the animals for transport and helps cover the vet fees.

Over the past eight years, the program has neutered and returned 500 feral cats in the two counties. The cats live out their natural lives, but populations are controlled. Last year, Valentine had about 40 calls from people concerning more than 120 cats and the majority of these animals were not feral, but abandoned housecats and kittens.

Valentine said TNR volunteers are able to control numbers of existing feral colonies, but until more support is given to assist pet owners to spay and neuter their animals and more support is given to create shelter space, the problem of feral cats will continue.

"The animals are literally dropped off in boxes," she said. "Most of them are females because they cost more to be fixed. And some of them are injured, hit by cars. It happens



Gloria Reid photo

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— Peggy Valentine

because people are stuck, they find homes for the pets and yet they can't keep the animals."

People adopt a kitten without thinking about the financial commitment involved in caring for the animal. Sudden life changes, like a litter of kittens, an unexpected move or a new baby, sometimes prompt pet owners to look for other homes for their pets.

If homes aren't found, some resort to

more desperate measures and simply abandon the animal. Animal shelters do their best to take in and find homes for abandoned animals, but often the number of homeless animals is greater than the shelter's available space.

Valentine's group has received municipal funding over the years, but mainly survives through fundraisers and the generosity of animal lovers.

Gloria Reid of Digby, a founding member of the group, said she was motivated to help after watching seven homeless kittens eating raw potatoes on a cold and snowy November day. Over the years she's seen a lot of abandoned cats trying to survive and keep their paws warm in the winter.

Reid says she's seen a lot of sad endings over the years and this is the reason she sometimes finds herself outside in the cold, patiently waiting to trap kittens in hopes of adopting them out before they turn feral.

The problem of cat overpopulation starts at home and eventually grows into a community problem, Reid said. It's a widespread problem that requires everyone's help to resolve.

SPCA executive director Kristin Williams, says cat overpopulation is a common problem across the province and the country, but is one of the least addressed animal welfare concerns.

"People may have good intentions when they take in the cat, but then something unforeseen happens."

In recognition of 2011 as the Year of the Cat, the SPCA is undertaking an initiative to raise awareness about the lack of resources and protective legislation available to cats.

Williams said cats have little or no protection under the law. Unlike stray dogs that are often picked up by municipal animal control officers, stray cats are either set free or taken in by good hearted people with limited resources.

Volunteer-run shelters like the TLC and CAPS are operating with limited capacity to handle the large number of animals in need. Williams said one of the solutions needed is to introduce a low-cost spay and neuter program in the province.

She is urging governments to support spay and neuter programs in various communities to humanely and cost effectively control the growing numbers of stray cats.

For more information visit the SPCA visit www.spcans.ca. To support the Society for the Friends of Ferals visit their monthly fundraiser at the Evangeline Mall in Digby.