

FERAL AND STRAY CATS— AN IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE

Feral, stray, and pet cats are all members of the same species; they are all domestic cats. But stray cats and feral cats are also different from each other in a very important way—in their relationship to and interactions with people.

Whether you are a shelter worker, veterinarian, or feral cat advocate—or you just share your neighborhood with feral cats—knowing how to tell the difference can help inform how best to interact with a cat or what, if any, intervention would be in each cat’s best interest.

What is socialization?

We use the term “socialized” to mean cats who are friendly towards people—or cats who enjoy companionship with us in our homes.



Kittens become socialized by interacting with people—being held, spoken to, and played with—from an early age. If a kitten does not become accustomed to people holding her and petting her within this crucial window, she will grow up apprehensive of humans and will not be suited to or happy living in homes.

What is the difference between a stray cat and a feral cat?

Pet and stray cats are socialized to people.

Feral cats are not socialized to people. While they are socialized to their colony members and bonded to each other, they do not have that same relationship with people.

Stray

- A stray cat is a cat who has been socialized to people at some point in her life, but has left or lost her domestic home, as well as most human contact and dependence.
- Over time, a stray cat can become feral as her contact with humans dwindles.
- Under the right circumstances, however, a stray cat can also become a pet cat once again. Stray cats that are re-introduced to a home after living outdoors may require a period of time to acclimate; they may be frightened and wary after spending time outside away from people.
- Another definition that may help:
 - “A stray cat is a domestic cat that has been abandoned or has ‘strayed’ from home and become lost. Stray [cats] were once pets and they can usually be successfully rescued and placed in homes.” —*Stray Cat Handbook*

Fact Sheet:

Feral

- A feral cat is a cat who has either never had any contact with humans or her contact with humans has diminished over time. She is fearful of people and survives on her own outdoors. A feral cat is not likely to ever become a lap cat or enjoy living indoors.
- **Kittens born to feral cats can be socialized at an early age** and adopted into homes.

Why does it matter?

- Stray cats can readjust to living with people and can be adopted as companions.
- Adult feral cats are not socialized to people, which means they cannot be adopted. As a result, they are likely to be killed if picked up by animal control or brought to shelters, so it is in their best interest to continue living outdoors.
- Stray and feral cats can be difficult to tell apart, especially when they are trapped or frightened. **Scared stray cats often need time to relax and show their level of socialization.** Learn more at www.alleycat.org/FauxFerals.
- Trap-Neuter-Return takes into account each cat's level (or degree) of socialization to determine the best environment for them. Feral cats are returned to their outdoor home after being trapped and neutered. Socialized cats and kittens can be adopted into homes.

How do I tell the difference when the cats are outdoors?

Since it is difficult to determine each cat's socialization during a stressful event such as trapping, it's a good idea to observe cats on their own outdoors using the guidelines in **Table 1** (located on page 3). Remember that these guidelines are not hard and fast rules and that just one of these traits is probably not enough to draw a conclusion.

Bottom line: If a cat you don't know approaches you or if you can touch her, she is most likely not feral. Not all stray cats will do this though, especially at first—each cat will act differently in a variety of situations. More monitoring using the guidelines found in **Table 1** may be necessary to determine if the cat is socialized.

Alley Cat Allies recognizes that a cat's level of socialization and behavior is not always black and white, particularly for feral cats who recognize their caregiver. They may show signs of familiarity, such as a tail up or hanging out on a caregiver's porch, but these behaviors are usually limited to the cat's interaction with the caregiver and only develop after building a relationship over time. Always remember: this does not mean that the cat is a good candidate for living indoors.



How do I tell feral and stray cats apart once I have trapped them?

When in a frightening or stressful environment—such as a trap or a shelter—a friendly stray cat may act like a feral cat, avoiding people and possibly even showing aggression to avoid being touched. “A lot of cats seem feral in traps but are just afraid,” explains Alley Cat Allies Feral Friend Genevieve Van de Merghel. Who can blame them? The cat is in a new and unfamiliar place.

Table 2 (located on page 4) details some ways that will help distinguish a feral cat from a scared stray cat when they are frightened, confined, or in a new place.

What do I do next?



Once you have evaluated a cat and feel like you have a sense of the cat's level of socialization, the next step is to get the cat neutered. From there, use your evaluation to do what's in the cat's best interest:

- For scared stray cats: **Maximize their chance of adoption into a home.** Visit www.alleycat.org/FauxFerals.
- For calm stray cats: **Find them a good adoptive home.** Visit www.alleycat.org/FindingAHome.
- For feral kittens: **Socialize them for adoption.** Visit www.alleycat.org/Kittens.
- For feral cats: **Return them to their colony home outdoors.** Visit www.alleycat.org/Trap-Neuter-Return.

Fact Sheet:

FERAL AND STRAY CATS - AN IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE, page 3 of 4

Table 1

Stray Cats	Feral Cats
Socialization to Humans	
May approach people, houses, porches, or cars	Will not approach and will likely seek hiding places to avoid people
Socialization to Other Cats	
Will likely live alone, not be part of a group	May belong to a colony
Body Language	
Might walk and move like a housecat, such as walking with tail up - a sign of friendliness	May crawl, stay low to the ground, and protect body with tail
	
Will probably look at you, blink, or make eye contact	Unlikely to make eye contact
Vocalization	
May be vocal, meow, or “answer” your voice	Won’t meow, beg, or purr
Schedule	
Will be visible primarily during the daytime	More likely to be nocturnal; occasionally out during the day
Physical Appearance	
Will probably be dirty or disheveled	Will probably have a clean, well kept coat
Will not have an eartip	<p>A male with a big head and thick neck, muscular body, and/or scars from fighting is more likely to be feral, since these are traits associated with intact males (and only 2% of feral cats are neutered in the U.S.). He may also have a spiky coat from high testosterone levels and less time spent grooming; may also have “stud tail”—hair loss, greasiness, or bumps at the base of the tail due to hormones.</p> <p>Will likely have an eartip if neutered as part of a TNR program</p>
Pregnancy, Nursing, Kittens	
A female who is pregnant or lactating is more likely to be feral, since only 2% of feral cats are neutered in the U.S.	

Fact Sheet:

Table 2

Stray Cats	Feral Cats
Touch Barrier	
It may be possible to touch the cat eventually or she may tolerate a small amount of touching with an object	Can not be touched, even by a caregiver
Cage Behavior	
May come to the front of the cage	Will likely stay in the back of the cage and retreat as far back as possible
	
May eventually rub against the cage in a friendly way	If jolted or frightened, may shake, rattle, or climb the cage, and could become injured banging into the cage
Level of Relaxation	
May relax over time	Will remain tense and unsocial
Responsiveness	
May investigate toys or food placed near the cage	Will likely ignore all people and toys, and possibly even food
May respond to household sounds like cat food cans or bags being opened	Will not show any familiarity or interest in household sounds
Fear and Anxiety	
May hiss or growl to show anxiety	Will be aggressive and lash out if threatened or cornered (signs of aggression include ears back and eyes dilated)
	