

Keeping Feral Cats Healthy

A veterinarian who works with feral colonies discusses the medical issues they present



A row of feral kittens will be less prone to health issues after they're sterilized and vaccinated. BILL COULTER

Twenty years ago, the typical municipal response to public complaints about stray cats fell into one of two categories: The cats were trapped and killed (sometimes humanely, sometimes not), or the calls were simply ignored. Even today, while many municipal animal care and control departments want to provide better outcomes for feral cats, few have the staff or the financial resources to invest in long-term, humane solutions to the issue.

But research has increasingly indicated that trap-and-euthanize programs fail: Because of cat population dynamics, when some cats are removed, those remaining have larger litters, more of whom survive. Animal care and control agencies can't capture enough cats to make a dent in the community's complaints

about them, and those cat lovers who've long sympathized with their local strays and fed them from back porches and front stoops are rightly indignant when their local governments cannot come up with a better solution than mass euthanasia.

More and more communities have come to recognize the humane and practical value of well-managed trap-neuter-release (TNR) programs. With proper implementation and monitoring, TNR can help to permanently reduce cat numbers and improve quality of life for feral cats living in the backyards and alleys and parking lots in our communities. With a good TNR program in place, cats no longer reproduce, their nuisance behaviors (and the accompanying complaint calls) are reduced or eliminated, and costs to the municipality are reduced.

The key to a successful colony is good, responsible management to ensure that cats are fed, sterilized, and provided with adequate veterinary care when needed. Gordon Stull, D.V.M., has a long history working to help and treat feral cats, both through private practice and as the director of the Burlington County Feral Cat Initiative. In this e-mail interview with Nancy Peterson, feral cat program manager at The Humane Society of the United States, Stull talks about the medical issues he sees when caring for feral cats.

Animal Sheltering: You've spayed or neutered about 5,000 stray and feral cats and kittens. How would you describe their health?

Gordon Stull: The full spectrum of health conditions is seen in colonies. Some colo-



Still sleeping off the anesthesia from surgery, one of Stull's sterilized ferals gives an assisted wave. BILL COULTER

nies are quite healthy, while others aren't. Upper respiratory disease is a very common problem, as are underweight and generally unthrifty-looking cats. However, even the most sickly appearing colonies look much healthier several months after being TNRed. I suppose that the health benefit of TNR is partly due to vermifuge (worm treatment) and flea and tick treatments. But, in my opinion, the most benefit comes from spaying and neutering. A month or so after, their coats are shiny, they are gaining weight, and just looking a lot happier and appearing calmer.

In addition to upper respiratory disease, what other medical issues have you commonly encountered with feral cats?

Common medical problems include intestinal parasitism (especially ascariasis and coccidiosis), flea infestation and ear infections (especially due to earmites). A less common condition, but one which has caused some problems with adoptable kittens is dermatophytosis (i.e.

ringworm), which because of the long treatment period, testing and retesting, can cause pre-adoption delays. It should be noted that all of the dermatophytosis cases [we've] encountered came from just one colony.

You founded Burlington County Feral Cat Initiative (BCCI) two years ago. What services do you offer?

Our free services start with a 3-hour caretaker training course after which caretakers may borrow as many traps as needed to trap an entire colony at once. We provide complete physical examinations, vaccinations, fecal flotation examination, vermifuge, flea/tick treatment, feline leukemia/FIV testing, spay/neuter, microchipping, and adoption assistance for adoptable cats and kittens. At the time of spay/neuter, feral cats receive distemper combination and rabies vaccinations, left ear tipping, microchipping, vermifuge, and flea/tick treatment. We take care of minor problems like ear infections, tooth extractions, wound care, and antibiotic treatments when the cats are anesthetized and easy to examine and treat.

Isn't it difficult to catch and treat ferals?

Caretakers trained through our program can trap sick cats who are often shunned by the colony and may be forced out of the feeding stations. This makes for a very hungry cat, and hunger can override any trap phobia. On occasion, there can be a cat who proves to be an extreme challenge, but dedicated caretakers who take the time and effort are usually successful in trapping sick cats. Sick cats can then safely be transported to a veterinarian and given a sedative. Feral cats should arrive, await surgery or treatment, and recover in individual traps that are covered with a cloth to minimize stress. Once sedated, the cat can easily be removed from the trap and examined. If oral medications are recommended, the caretaker can temporarily house the cat and give those medications, which can be formulated or compounded to be especially palat-

able, in the food. BCCI trains caretakers [on] how to safely confine a feral and treat him without actually touching the animal. It takes some time and dedication, but it can be done. Unless there is a so-called "silver bullet" one-shot treatment, we would recommend euthanasia if the cat is wild, very sick, and suffering. There are additional qualifiers when considering euthanasia of feral cats. Caretakers often are overextended financially and have many cats to care for in their colony, so resources have to be carefully allocated.

Do you test all feral cats for feline leukemia and FIV?

We only test adoptable cats and kittens prior to adoption. There are several reasons why we do not routinely test colony cats. The first is logistics. An accurate diagnosis ... of these retroviral immunodeficiency diseases requires two tests at least one month apart to rule out false positives and false negatives. Practically speaking, what do you do with a wild cat awaiting his second test, cage him for a month or let him go and try to retrap him? In lieu of that approach, simply returning the cat back to the colony makes sense since, given the close living situation of feral cats in colonies, most cats in the colony have probably already been exposed to diseases carried by the members. The more important and commanding rationale for not testing is the complex interaction of these diseases with the cat immune systems and the social dynamic of feral colony cats. A cat initially infected with [feline leukemia] has about a 30 percent chance of seroconverting (later testing negative) due to immune response to the initial infection. FIV is not very contagious and generally requires deep bites for disease transmission. Most transmission is usually associated with mating behaviors (males fighting with other males or males biting females while mating). Once the cats are spayed and neutered, transmission is much less likely.

Of the approximately 100 cats and kittens that we have feline leukemia

virus and feline immunodeficiency virus antibody tested, only one kitten tested positive. It also should be noted that the cat that tested positive was from a colony of one, so he may have been dumped because his previous owner knew that he was diseased.

Despite the low incidence of feline leukemia and FIV, is it humane to allow positive cats to live in a situation where they cannot be monitored as closely as pet cats?

Even with persistent feleuk or FIV, most of these cats are asymptomatic. When and if clinical signs appear, the infected cat may exhibit signs of disease. For FIV cats, nonhealing wounds, increased susceptibility to other diseases or tumors are common; for feleuk cats, anemia, unthriftiness, weakness, and weight loss are commonly seen. When and if symptoms appear, it is the responsibility of the caretaker to retrap, treat, or euthanize cats whose quality of life is poor.

How can caretakers best maintain the health of their colony?

In addition to offering shaded, well-insulated shelters and an adequate supply of fresh water and good-quality food, the health of the colony is maintained by careful observation—noting when there is a problem ... such as weight loss, lameness, obvious deformities, and absence at feeding time—before they get more serious. Some feral cats live in the shadows and may be seen from time to time, so keeping track of each cat and ensuring that everyone is eating and healthy can be difficult for caretakers. It is remarkable to me to see how attached many caretakers are to their colony cats—calling each cat by name, knowing their habits, and watching them for hours. Most caretakers know right away when someone is missing or not feeling well.

Annual vaccination, regular deworming and flea and tick control would be of great benefit to feral cats, although few get these treatments due to the dif-

ficulty of catching and treating them. At the time of required rabies boosters, we always try to give as many of these treatments as we can in spite of the limitations of working with a wild cat in a trap. Despite these limitations, most ferals in well-managed colonies look quite healthy and seem to be enjoying their lives.

It used to be estimated that the lives of ferals were much shorter than those of pet cats, feral life spans being on the order of three to six years. But newer surveys and my own observations suggest that well-managed colony cats can live long lives. Saving accidents and infectious disease, most young and middle-aged feral cats are generally healthy until geriatric degenerative diseases and organ failure syndromes are common afflictions. AS

The HSUS is proud to be a financial supporter of BCCI. Read about a feral cat caretaker's experience with BCCI at humanesociety.org/bcci. More resources to help feral cats are available at humanesociety.org/feralcats.

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