



PRETRAPPING PROCEDURE

Set up feeding stations and shelter, and establish a feeding pattern

Regular feeding will improve the cats' health and will also better prepare them for the stress of trapping and surgery. Health problems can often be resolved through improved nutrition alone, including ringworm, parasites and upper respiratory infections. Warm, dry shelter, especially in wintertime, is also a key to good health and a must if spayed females with shaved stomachs are to be released in cold weather. In addition, the location of feeding stations and shelters can help reduce tensions with neighbors. At least two weeks before the trapping, the cats should be fed at the same time and place on as consistent a basis as possible. Establishing a feeding pattern will let you get to know the colony. How many cats are there, what condition are they in, are any adoptable? Knowing all this ahead of time allows you to arrange for special vet care, line up foster homes and find out what your options are.

A consistent feeding pattern will also make the trapping much easier because you will have trained the cats where and when to show up. You won't have to go searching throughout the territory for them – they'll come to you instead.

Preparations for Trapping – the Sequence

1) Establish a feeding pattern

When you're ready to trap, it will be much easier if the cats come to you at a time and place of your choosing, then if you spread traps throughout their territory, wait all day or night and hope they show up. At least two weeks before the trapping, put out the cats' food at the same time and place on a daily basis. Cats are very habitual creatures and will quickly learn the routine. If you can't do this everyday, stick to the pattern as closely as you can.

Remove excess food after the feeding or come back after a couple of hours and take away the leftovers. Don't leave food out all day if you can help it. Your efforts to establish a pattern might be thwarted if the cats know they can come any time they want and find food. If for some reason you have to leave food out all the time, perhaps because otherwise some cats won't get to eat, then establish a pattern of arriving at the site at the same time and place everyday and putting out something tasty like a can of tuna. The cats will learn that when you show up, so does the good stuff. In choosing the time of day for the feeding, anticipate making it easier for yourself when the time comes to trap. Pick a time when the site will be quiet and less trafficked. Also take into account that when the trapping takes place, you'll need time to set up the equipment, transport the cats to their holding space, provide them with food and water, etc.

If the cats are already used to showing up at a certain hour that would be inconvenient for the project, then gradually shift the feeding time to one that's better. Re-training cats in this manner may require you to begin establishing a feeding pattern sooner than two weeks before the trapping. If you don't have that luxury, then just put the food out at the time you want them to come. Before long, they'll probably figure out things have changed and adapt their feeding pattern accordingly.

2) Count and assess the cats

While you're establishing the feeding pattern, get an accurate count of the number of cats in the colony. If necessary, take notes or photos to log and record the cats and help you tell them apart. Knowing the correct number, or at least getting close, is important for scheduling spay/neuter surgery and borrowing the right amount of equipment. There's nothing worse for a clinic (and your reputation with them) if you say you'll be trapping a colony of 20 cats, then it turns out there are only 10 and half the clinic's day goes to waste. Getting a reasonably accurate count avoids this. Unless it's a colony that you are personally familiar with or the caretaker has already gone through this process of carefully counting, don't take anyone's word for how many are there. Most people are not used to seeing more than a few cats at a time. When they see ten cats at once, they're liable to believe there are far more. Most untrained people overestimate the numbers, though sometimes they'll undercount. A reliable figure can be arrived at only by carefully observing the colony over a period of a week or two. In addition to counting the cats in the colony, assess if any are adoptable, either because they're kittens young enough to be quickly socialized or abandoned adults who are still friendly. If adoptable cats are present, try to line up suitable foster homes before the trapping. Whenever good foster resources exist, these cats should be removed from the colony. Observe whether any of the cats appear sick, whether it's from being too thin, having runny eyes or nose, coughing or having an unkempt appearance. Make arrangements beforehand for extra-veterinary care. Be prepared for the possibility that a sick cat may need extra recuperation time, especially if they need a course of antibiotics, and arrange for the necessary holding space.

Trapping

Prior to trapping, a feeding pattern has been established, the cats have been counted and assessed, arrangements have been made for adoptables and sick cats, a spay/neuter date has been scheduled, and equipment and transportation have been lined up. In addition, efforts to foster good community relations have been made. While it's difficult to ever entirely predict what will happen once you start catching the cats, having followed these steps will ensure the trapping goes as smoothly as possible and surprises are kept to a minimum. Proceeding in this type of thought out, strategized manner will mean less stress for the cats and for you.

Advantages of Mass Trapping

Whenever possible, the mass trapping of an entire colony at the same time is preferable over a gradual "one-cat-at-a-time" approach for several reasons. First, the situation at the site is often in crisis with too many cats and kittens, neighbors complaining and threats to harm the cats. By neutering the entire colony at once, the crisis gets quickly resolved from the immediate, dramatic decrease in the amount of noise and odor and the prevention of more kittens. Second, your ability to catch all the cats in the colony is enhanced by doing a mass trapping. When you trap one cat at a time, you run into a problem when you get down to the last few cats and have to pick them out from the rest of the colony. This can be difficult. In comparison, when you're down to the last few cats during a mass trapping, they're the only ones out there plus they're getting increasingly hungry as the trapping period proceeds. Third, in the long run, a mass trapping is much less work. It's more intensive, but in the end you only have to find a holding space once, take care of the cats while they're confined once, transport the cats once, etc. These efforts have to be continually repeated when the colony is slowly neutered.

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The Trapping

1. Withhold food

Most feral cats are wary of entering an unknown, confined space. Hunger is the key for getting them to overcome this wariness and enter a box trap. It is the single most important factor in trapping. You could prepare everything else perfectly, but if the cats are not hungrier than usual, most of them will not go in no matter how tempting the bait. Food should be withheld the entire day before the trapping begins. For example, if the trapping begins on a Friday, then the cats should be fed at their regular time on Wednesday and then not at all on Thursday. The only exceptions are young kittens, nursing mothers, and cats who are clearly ill. If you can feed them separately and not let the other cats get any of the food, then they can eat the day before the trapping, but not the day of. If you can't feed them separately, then withhold the food. Withholding food is often harder on the caretaker who knows her hungry wards are wondering what happened than it is on the cats. They won't like skipping their daily meal, but adult cats can go weeks without food. You have to remind yourself that a day's discomfort is a small price for the cats' life-long benefit. If you're trapping for more than one day, fresh water should be left out at all times. While the trapping proceeds, continue to withhold all food. The importance of withholding food points to the need for locating and coordinating with other feeders. On occasion, you may run up against someone who will not cooperate, no matter how articulately you explain that what

you're doing is for the good of the cats. If this happens, you need to try to work around that person as best you can. Find out when they put food out, then show up soon afterwards and remove it. Or start trapping well before they usually come to feed.

2. Allow enough time for the trapping (two days minimum)

Typically, if preparations have been carefully made, the first day of trapping will net most of the cats and, in smaller colonies, even all of them. In larger colonies, some cats won't show up the first day and others won't enter the traps for whatever reason. The second day usually results in most of these remaining cats getting caught, but sometimes there are one or two stubborn ones who still won't go in. It can take a third day of being deprived of food to get them.

This is why we suggest allowing three days for trapping large colonies of ten or more cats. Three days is also good, but not as critical, for smaller colonies if you want to give yourself the best chance of catching everyone. You should never allot less than two days. It might rain; someone might unknowingly leave out a bowl of food the night before; construction might be going on next door on the planned day; some of the cats may not show up or go in the traps, or any number of unexpected developments could occur which would interfere. After all the planning and preparations, it's not worth risking this for the sake of saving one day.

During the trapping

Once the traps are all in place and set, exit the territory. Tempting though it may be to keep an eye on the action, the cats will be aware that you're watching them. Stay out of sight and don't stare, especially when one is right in front of the trap and thinking about going in. If you're trapping in your own backyard, go inside the house and watch from there. If you're at another location, wait inside your car or stand just around the corner. The less tension and anxiety you exude, the better. Unless the territory is secure from strangers, the traps should never be left unattended and you should always be nearby and able to observe whether anyone is entering the territory. The cats are completely vulnerable once they're trapped and dependent on you for their safety. Traps can be checked every half hour or so, but should not be left unchecked for more than a couple of hours at most. If you're watching the scene from a distance and see a cat trapped or hear a trap door shut, don't immediately go running into the territory to cover the cat up. Remember, you want to keep intrusions to a minimum. Observe how the cat is reacting to being trapped. Most will become frantic and start dashing back and forth. If that's happening, go over and cover the trap with the sheet, then stand back for a minute and give the cat a chance to calm down. But if the cat is eating or sitting quietly, then stay back and wait. When a cat does panic, never release the cat out of fear she'll hurt herself if you don't – she'll be fine in a moment and you may not ever catch her again. In the extremely rare case that a cat does not calm down and continues to thrash about after being covered, use a trap divider to section the cat off into a third or half of the trap and thereby restrict her movements. Then cover the trap again. Bloody noses or torn claws will sometimes occur from cats banging against the sides of the trap, but are not cause for serious concern. After the cat has been covered and quieted down, pick up the trap and move it a few feet away, leaving the cover on. Then place another trap in the same exact spot where the old trap was. You'll often find there are "hot spots" where one cat after another keeps going in. Carry trapped cats out of the territory to a secure spot where you can keep an eye on them. If the cat starts moving back and forth while you're carrying her, tilt the trap at about a 45 degree angle, forcing the cat to expend her energy hanging on to the wire floor instead of moving around. After you put the trap down, put a label on it and write down the location and a trap number on the label (making the numbers sequential). You can enter this information on the logging sheet either at that point or later when the cats are brought to the holding space. If it's cold, drape or wrap the trap with a blanket, but this should only be done as a temporary measure. Cats in traps should be brought to a warm space as soon as

possible. If you have enough help, one or two people can start taking the cats to the holding space while the others continue trapping. At all times, until the release in a few days, a sheet should remain over each trap. If time allows, continue to trap as long as there are any cats still in the area and there's a chance they might go in. Usually on the first day of trapping, if the colony is large, there are a few who either don't show up or simply will not be enticed into a box trap. If it's clear you're down to these last cats and they're just not interested, then shutdown for the day, bringing in all the traps. Continue to withhold food and transport any trapped cats to the holding space who remain at the site. Traps should not be left unattended for stretches of hours at a time. Bad things could happen, such as two panicked cats getting caught in the same trap, a raccoon wandering by or a stranger passing who could harm the cats. Overnight trapping should only be attempted if the traps are in a very secure area where no one and no other animals besides the cats have access and even then only if you can periodically (at least every two hours) check on them. Otherwise, wait for the next day when the holdout cats will be hungrier and more likely to take the bait. If you do trap overnight and will only be checking every couple of hours, drape the sheet over the sides so the cat won't feel totally exposed if caught. If there's a chance of rain, tape a large trash bag instead over the top and sides, leaving the rear door still exposed. Subsequent days of trapping largely follow the same pattern as the first except there are fewer cats to catch. The traps should be set up and placed in the territory as previously, although you could try a different kind of bait in case it's more attractive than the first day's offering. If the same cats show up and still won't go in, then try one or more of the techniques described below under "Hard-to-catch cats." Keep in mind that your best chance of catching those last one or two difficult cats is when the rest of the colony has already been trapped and removed. You don't have to try to pick them out of a crowd because they're the only ones out there, plus they're growing hungrier and more likely to go in a trap with each succeeding day. Because you may never get a better opportunity, we recommend continuing to try to trap any remaining cats as long as the rest of the colony is confined - even after your spay/neuter date has passed. The hassle of having to make special arrangements to get the last cat or two to a veterinarian will probably be much less than the trouble involved in trying to catch that cat later when the rest of the colony is back out in the territory.



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