# //////Shelter Medicine

# **Scaredy Cat or Feral Cat?**

Accurate evaluations help shelter staff provide optimum care

BY BRENDA GRIFFIN, D.V.M.



The tip missing from this cat's left ear is a great clue that he's part of a managed feral colony. But there are more subtle signs to help shelter staff determine if that hissing puffball is truly feral, or just freaked out.

n the shelter, it can be challenging to differentiate truly feral cats from those who are tame but frightened and reactive. Cats who enter the shelter in traps or other feral-behaving cats are not necessarily feral; even the tamest house cats who have been trapped or otherwise stressed may exhibit the same behaviors as feral cats. The way the shelter handles these cats can make all the difference; with time and TLC, the cats will usually show their true colors.

To understand how cats respond to stress, one must first appreciate who cats are biologically and behaviorally.

Cats are truly unique. Descended from the African wildcat (Felis libyca), the domestic cat (Felis catus) likely became such only within the past 9,000 years, much more recently than dogs. Few of cats' structural and behavioral characteristics have been changed by domestication, and they have retained many of the instincts of their wild ancestors

True carnivores and predatory by nature, cats are biologically equipped to sense and avoid danger and are hardwired for escape or defense. They possess astonishing sensory capabilities, including specialized eyesight that is highly sensitive to movement and functions in low levels of light. Their sense of hearing extends into the range employed by bats and mice, allowing them to detect those animals' high-frequency chattering. Cats' senses of smell and touch are also particularly keen, enabling them to perceive many events in the environment that go unnoticed by us.

Today, domestic cats have a wide variety of lifestyles and levels of tracta-



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bility—ranging from the most docile, sociable housecat to free-roaming, unsocialized feral cats who will not allow themselves to be handled. They are richly complex creatures whose behavioral needs and responses frequently remain misunderstood

## What makes a cat "feral"?

Feral cats are "wild" offspring of domestic cats. Since they generally do not allow handling, most must be trapped in order to be presented to a veterinarian for care. Lost or abandoned pet cats and feral cats may form colonies surrounding a "home base," which includes a source of food and shelter. Areas with garbage Dumpsters and/or livestock barns are prime locations, since they offer a supply of rodents and discarded foodstuffs. Cats typically seek shelter in crawl spaces beneath buildings or other nearby structures.

When raised without human contact. cats are extremely wary of humans and



Cats who appear to be relaxing may be evaluated in a secure area outside their regular cage. The process gives evaluators like Rusty Morton (pictured) a chance to assess a cat's behavior, including whether he'll sit in your lap and respond to gentle massage

will flee if approached. Unlike wildlife species, however, cats cannot fully fend for themselves. Unattended, they survive and reproduce, yet frequently suffer from trauma and exposure. The mortality rate of feral kittens is high; fewer than 25 percent typically survive beyond 4 to 6 months of age.

Because of their lack of socialization. feral cats find it extremely stressful to be captured and handled. The stress of even short-term confinement in the shelter can compromise both their behavioral and physical health. For these reasons, every effort should be made to identify feral cats upon entry to the shelter and take steps to mitigate their stress and shorten their stay.

Recognizing and responding to stress signals in cats are key to maintaining proper behavioral welfare. When cats

are deemed truly feral, the most humane option is to enroll them in a trap-neuterreturn (TNR) program. Long-term housing of feral cats in shelters is inhumane and should be avoided

#### Intake of cats to the shelter

Animal shelters are inherently stressful environments, filled with new stimuli, including noises and odors and other stressors that may only be apparent to the animals. Because of their unique biology, cats are particularly prone to experiencing acute stress and fear in novel environments, which readily trigger adrenaline release, preparing the cat for escape or defense. Fearful cats experience racing hearts and dilated pupils; some may be overtly aggressive or "teetering on the edge" of defensive aggression. Such responses compromise cat welfare and staff, and make it difficult to determine the cat's true temperament.

Handling and restraint of cats of varying ages, personality types, social experiences, and stress levels requires skill, knowledge of normal feline behavior and signaling, finesse, and proper equipment. Most cats respond best to gentle restraint and detest being "overhandled." Animal shelters should have protocols in place to minimize feline stress, beginning in the field and continuing throughout their stay at the shelter. Cats should be transported in individual carriers or traps that are covered so that the cat is not exposed, allowing her to feel hidden and more secure. Cats instinctively feel more secure when they can perch at a high point, and studies indicate that feline stress responses are significantly reduced when cats are housed in elevated cages compared to floor-level cages; with this in mind, transport carriers containing cats should never be placed on the floor, and cats should be preferentially transferred to the highest available holding cage. From the time of intake, care should also be taken to minimize noise, particularly that of barking dogs.

#### Special considerations for intake of feral-behaving cats

Shelter intake is stressful for all incoming cats, but especially for those who are poorly socialized, feral, or geriatric. Cats who are exhibiting marked stress at the time of entry should be housed in designated guiet areas away from other animals and foot traffic within the shelter Both feral and highly stressed tame cats may have dilated pupils and be stiff, tense, or completely frozen. They may tuck their feet under them and try to hide in the farthest corner of their enclosure. Some may appear nearly catatonic, while others may strike out defensively if approached, particularly feral tomcats. Once stressed, cats often remain reactive for a prolonged time and may become more reactive if they are stimulated again before they have been allowed a cool-down period. When cats enter the shelter exhibiting signs of marked stress and fear, they should be given strict "chill-out time" to acclimate to the shelter for at least 24 hours.

During this time, cats must have a place to hide and a place to perch; they will feel instinctively safer. Soft bedding should be available for comfort and to help them establish a familiar scent that aids in their acclimation. Their enclosures should be elevated and must be kept covered. Signage should indicate that these cats are not to be disturbed during this period. They should not be in direct view of other animals, including other cats. There should be regular light and dark cycles, noise control, and a predictable schedule of care. Finally, I recommend using Feliway, a commercially available feline facial pheromone, for its anti-anxiety effects

After the strict "chill-out" time is over, evaluation should occur daily over the following three to four days. Care should be taken during cleaning procedures to minimize stress, and cats should be allowed to hide while their cages are quietly tidied and replenished as needed. Feral cat dens (available from Animal Care and Equipment Services/ACES) are ideal for this purpose; they can be secured from a distance so the cat is safe inside during cleaning procedures. Cats should be returned to the same cage, and in order to preserve their own comforting scent, only spot cleaning should be performed. If it becomes necessary to house the cat in another location, the den and towel should accompany the cat to ease the transition.

#### **Evaluation process**

The overarching goal of the evaluation process is to allow cats the opportunity to acclimate to the shelter and "show their true colors." Cats who are identified as "tame" can be moved through normal procedures for holding and adoption. Some timid or shy cats may receive special behavioral assistance—such as assignment to foster care—to help them adapt to the shelter and prepare them for adoption. Cats who are truly feral should be scheduled for neuter and return whenever possible. Finally, cats deemed to be severely stressed and suffering should be humanely euthanized if lifesaving alternatives are truly unavailable.



Feral cat dens give cats a safe place to hide while their cages are being cleaned.

## Physical features that can help distinguish feral cats

- **Ear tip:** Removal of the tip of one ear (usually the left) is the universal symbol for a sterilized free-roaming/feral cat. However, some cats with tipped ears may be tame rather than truly feral. Thus the presence of an ear tip alone should not be used as a designation: The ear tip only truly means that the cat has been spayed/neutered. It may, however, mean that the cat has a caregiver, and efforts should focus on returning the cat to the colony. Take caution not to mistake frostbite of the ear for a
- General body condition and other physical features: Feral cats may be any age, size, or color; however, they are usually young (frequently less than 3 years) and are rarely overweight unless they have already been neutered. Prior to TNR, feral cats are most often lean and wiry. Unless they are ear tipped, feral cats should be assumed to be reproductively intact. Females may be pregnant or lactating, especially between April and October. A large abdomen on a female may indicate pregnancy. If mature, males will have tomcat urine odor, a wide neck, and

big jowls. They often have scars on their face and ears, or torn earflaps.

In contrast, "freaked out" tame cats may be overweight. Also, they may be older; geriatric cats are sometimes the most stressed cats in the shelter environment. They may be recognized by their lack of facial fat, which gives their faces a more angular appearance and mottled irises (the colored part of the eye) or a bluish color to the lens of the eye. These are subtle changes that may be recognized with experience.

# Behavioral features that can help distinguish feral cats

■ Behavioral evaluation: After the cat has been allowed time to acclimate. evaluation should begin. Whenever possible, caregivers should be assigned to care for the same cats on a regular basis. The evaluation proceeds with the caregiver simply approaching the cage and quietly observing the cat's body language. The observer should not stare directly at the cat, but instead look at the cat, then look away before looking back. Some behaviorists have suggested that giving a "slow blink" may be helpful as a calming signal, and although this remains unproven, it is a technique that



Entering a shelter is an inherently stressful experience for a cat, so staff should recognize and respond to stress signals such as stiffness, dilated pupils, and hiding in the farthest corner of the enclosure.

is safe and will do no harm. Evaluations should begin with the cats deemed least likely to be reactive, because when one cat exhibits a stressful response, his behavior can negatively impact the responses of other cats nearby.

- Obvious feral or fractious behavior: The cat may signal right away that he is teetering on the edge or is highly fearful. Caution! Further evaluation is unsafe and will serve to make the cat even more highly reactive. In fact, it could even delay the acclimation process if the cat is not truly feral. There is no need to evaluate further at that time. Return the next day to assess the cat's progress
- Obvious tame behavior: Alternatively, the cat may come right up to the front of the cage and solicit attention by rubbing with his body, reaching with his paws or mewing. In this case, you may deem that it is safe to open the cage door and attempt to pet and even pick up the cat. If the cat is indeed easy to handle and tame, he can be transferred to general cat holding.

#### **Mixed Responses**

Many cats will respond somewhere in between "feral behaving" and "tame." If the cat's pupils relax and do not remain dilated, or if he looks away or his body becomes less tense, these may be signs that he is relaxing. Offer verbal encouragement and be patient. If the cat neither comes to you nor tries to escape or defend himself, you may consider slowly reaching your hand into the cage. Be prepared to retreat should the cat react in an aggressive fashion. You may be able to reach into the cage above the cat's head and slowly pet the head. If you are unsure if it is safe to reach into the cage, use an Assess-a-Hand. If the cat exhibits any aggressive behavior, discontinue the evaluation for the day and return the next day to evaluate his progress.

If the cat is relaxing, further evaluation can take place in a secure location where the cat can interact with you outside of the cage. If the cat relaxes when you gently touch and pet his head—and you deem it to be safe—you may slowly reach behind his ears, gently grasp the scruff of his neck, and pull him toward you on his side. Then, hold/hug him close to your body, supporting and covering him under your arm, and gently release him in the designated evaluation area. Ideally, you could sit with him on your lap, allowing him to hide in a towel or the nook of your arm. In this case, the cat may be fearful and stiff, but should be nonaggressive. Alternatively, a cat den can be used to transfer the cat calmly to the evaluation area.

As the evaluation continues, you will be able to assess his behavior: Does the cat sit on your lap? Does he respond to gentle massage? Massaging the top of the head in a slow, circular fashion may be calming (this is a known acupressure point). Does the cat warm up to petting, or does the cat remain stiff, frozen, or retreat from your lap? If the cat becomes aggressive, the evaluation should stop for the day. If he becomes highly reactive, he can be given some "chill-out" time in the pen before being transferred back to his holding cage.

If the cat jumps down from your lap, take note of his behavior in the evaluation area. As long as he is nonaggressive, continue to evaluate him. Is he interested in exploring the environment, or does he hide and retreat? Does he solicit attention from you? Make eye contact with you? Purr or meow? How does he respond to your reach and touch? Will he allow you to pet him? Only on the head, or can you stroke his back, too? Will he allow you to pick him up again? Is he fearful and stiff, or does he continue to relax? Try interacting with him with a cat dancer toy. Does he show any interest in play?

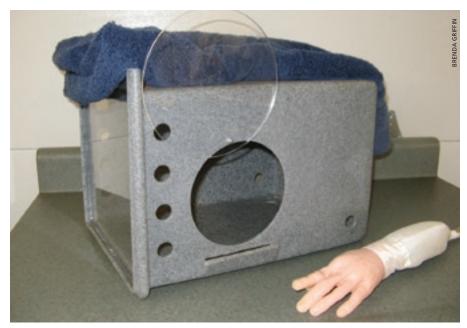
#### Tame cats with special behavioral needs

Cats who allow petting and can be safely picked up and held in the handler's lap by day five, but remain shy/stiff/tense, may be transferred for special socialization and an extended acclimation period. For such cats, it is very important to have a consistent handler to facilitate relaxation and social contact. Multiple handlers can induce stress in shy, tense cats. If available, the cat's history received at the time of intake should be considered in such disposition decisions. If cats are transferred into

the adoption program as either tame or "special-needs behavior cats," the medical staff should be notified so they can closely monitor the cats for physical signs of stress, including such responses as constant hiding and weight loss. Weight loss is very common in stressed cats and can lead to serious illness, including severe URI and even liver failure.

Special-needs behavior cases must be carefully monitored for progress. Consistent daily care by a dedicated caregiver should be provided, along with daily assessment. Housing should include opportunities for perching and hiding. Cats should be rewarded with highly palatable treats for bold and friendly behavior. In addition, clicker training (see "Clicking with Cats," p. 62) may be a useful technique to mark desired behaviors. Interaction with human caregivers through the use of toys should be encouraged. Every effort should be made to prevent long-term shelter stays for cats who remain markedly stressed/fearful and are not responding to treatment/behavioral care. Transfer to foster care, direct adoption, placement as a barn cat, or euthanasia—when no other options exist-should be used to minimize stressful shelter stays. The successful adaptation of cats to novel environments depends on both the quality of the environment and the adaptive capacity of the animal. Although most tame cats adapt to new environments over time, some never adjust and remain stressed indefinitely, ultimately resulting in decline of physical as well as emotional health

Special-needs animals should not be kept in the shelter unless adequate care can be afforded to them. And not all shelters can provide such care. When determining if animals with special needs can be humanely cared for in the shelter, the following considerations should be addressed: Can adequate care realistically be delivered in the shelter or in foster care, and can the shelter afford the cost of and time for care? If the needs cannot be met, cats should not be allowed to languish. Euthanasia decisions are always difficult, but are part of the responsibility of every shelter. When a final decision is made to euthanize a cat, it is imperative that the



To handle and restrain the variety of types of cats who enter a shelter, staff need skill, knowledge of feline behavior, and equipment such as the Sue Sternberg Assess-A-Hand (to help evaluate potentially aggressive cats) and ACES cat den (to hold cats while their cages are being cleaned) pictured here.

procedure be performed humanely and without delay. Delays in action often contribute negatively to population health and prolong the stress of individual animals in the shelter. When one cat is stressed and upset, his behavior can negatively impact that of other cats. In all circumstances, cats should be sedated and scanned again for a microchip using a global scanner prior to euthanasia. This is imperative, as even with the best evaluation protocols, highly stressed pet cats can still sometimes be mistaken for feral cats—and it may not be safe to perform a thorough scan of a feral-behaving cat at intake.

#### Be proactive and think prevention

Understanding the importance of minimizing stress in cats and recognizing and responding to it are keys to maintaining proper behavioral welfare and maximizing the shelter's life-saving potential. Staff should be trained to evaluate cats beginning at intake and to educate relinquishers about TNR and community cat care and control. For cats determined to be feral, staff should make every effort to offer TNR services or referral to other programs. Staff should be trained to recognize indicators of stress in the cats who are admitted to the shelter.

Cats should be routinely classified at intake according to their behavioral characteristics. Suggested designations include:

- Friendly/bold (tame, outgoing, and solicits attention)
- Friendly/shy (fearful, but tame and accepts attention without becoming aggressive)
- Fearful/shy (shy or fearful, teetering on aggressive; can handle with caution)
- Feral behaving (frozen or overtly aggressive: unsafe to handle)

Staff should monitor cats daily to determine their "true colors" as best as possible and to watch for signs of stress or adjustment to the shelter. They should record their findings daily, noting trends and making adjustments in the care of individual cats and the population as indicated.

Shelters must always strive to provide the best possible care for all animals who enter their doors. This is true whether animals remain in the shelter for hours, days, or months, and regardless of their ultimate disposition. When it comes to scaredy cats and feral cats, best practices call for proactive stress reduction and careful evaluation for all cats, and neuterreturn for cats determined to be feral. All of these animals deserve the best care possible during their shelter stay. AS