

Helping Our Feral Friends During Winter

When you see a cat strutting through your neighborhood, your instinct is to catch it and bring it to the shelter. But it is important to learn the types of cats you may encounter outside before making that decision. A wandering cat may be a domesticated stray, someone's pet, or it may be a feral cat. When trying to decide, there are things to look for such as a decorative collar, a flea collar, a tag or a tipped ear. A tipped ear is a sign the cat has been spayed/neutered and released.

Also, look at the body cat's language. Is it friendly? Is it scared? Did it hightail it to the hills? Domestic cats may act frightened and scared, but they are not "feral." With time and support, these cats can be socialized and placed for adoption. Feral cats, however, are unsocialized to humans. They want *nothing* to do with us. Feral cats prefer to live outside and may only come out at night. Feral cats are fully capable of living and surviving in the wild.

During most of the year, feral cats brought into to the shelter are spayed/neutered, and placed with a caretaker who provides for their basic needs. The humane society does not accept feral cats during the winter months. As mentioned above, feral cats do not want to live indoors and can become distressed in a shelter setting, even if only for a few months. Then, after the feral cat spends the winter months indoors and it is time to release them, they have trouble reacclimating to the outdoors.

How Can You Help

It is a hard concept for us as humans to understand why a cat would want to live outdoors, but ferals do. The best thing we can do for a feral cat is to support them during the winter months by providing food, water and outdoor shelter. Online you can buy a heated cat house or you can make a simple DIY shelter as follows:

- Using a plastic bin, cut a 5 ½ - 6 inch wide hole a couple inches above-the-ground to keep out snow and rain
- Place a Styrofoam bin, also with a hole cut out, inside the plastic bin
- Insulate any gaps between the two bins with straw. Do not use hay; straw is a better insulator . Hay absorbs moisture and can rot
- Add straw to the bottom of the Styrofoam bin (no blankets, which can get damp and freeze)
- Tape the plastic lid to its base
- Place the shelter in a location away from wind and elevated off the ground
- If necessary, add a few rocks to make sure the shelter does not move
- Do not place water bowls inside the shelter as they can get tipped over and freeze
- Set out dry food inside the bin in the farthest corner from the entrance
- Clean the shelter as needed

Feral cats are resilient. But we can help make the harshness of winter easier on our feline friends. Always check under your car and hood before driving and refrain from using antifreeze, salt or other chemicals in areas accessible to feral cats. If you have any questions, please contact the humane society directly.