



## Features

### Feral Cats:

An interview with Julie Levy, DVM

#### **Q. What exactly is a feral cat?**

A. I define a feral cat as any un-socialized, un-owned cat; a cat whose temperament makes him afraid of people. Feral cats don't fit into the pet paradigm –they're a hybrid falling somewhere between a domestic cat and wildlife.

#### **Q. What should a community provide for its ferals? In a perfect world, would the level of care for feral cats be the same as companion animals?**

A. Yes, but at this point, feral cats are second class citizens—they don't receive the same level of care as companion cats. Most caretakers don't currently bring sick or injured feral cats to the veterinarian. If they come in to my feral cat trap-neuter-return program at the vet school, I have to weigh cost/benefit ratios before treating significant injuries or illnesses. I could elevate their standard of care if I had more resources. Here's one example: a rip in the diaphragm is one of the most common serious traumas that we find in our feral cats when they are presented for sterilization. Most pet cats with this injury could be saved with aggressive surgery and a few days in the intensive care unit. If ferals come in with this condition, they are euthanized. The after care, which includes oxygen therapy, intravenous fluids, and chest tubes, is difficult to provide to terrified feral cats and is far too expensive for our program.

#### **Q. Assuming the goal is that all healthy and treatable feral cats live out their lives in their own environment, is it even possible to treat ferals? For example, we know of a case in which a feral cat came into a shelter and contracted URI. The shelter attempted to treat the problem, but the stress of confinement caused the cat to decline, and ultimately he had to be euthanized.**

A. At our facility, we're set up for ferals—we keep them invisible in a special ward and give them an opportunity to hide in their cages. We find that we can take care of routine, short-term problems such as wound management, or amputations, for example. We can keep ferals a few days without major difficulty. More chronic conditions like diabetes or long term care are more difficult because they require daily handling. Ferals may require a different type of care—for example, if the cat needs antibiotics you might need to put it in the food instead of administering it directly to the cat.

One thing that helps prevent the whole problem is neutering. If the cats are neutered, there's much less fighting and breeding and this reduces the transmission of contagious diseases and other conditions that require treatment.

#### **Q. When cats come into your clinic for spay/neuter, do you test them for FeLV, FIV and so on?**

A. No, we don't. We've found that feral cats have about the same very small incidence of these diseases as domestic cats, so we don't see it as a concern. The primary way in which

FeLV is spread from infected mothers to their kittens, and FIV is usually spread among tom cats that fight. Simply sterilizing the cats is the single most important action to take to stop the spread of these infections. We do test cats that are debilitated (thin, anemic) to help us decide if their infections have reached a point at which their quality of life is impaired and it would be kinder to perform euthanasia at that point.

**Q. If a feral cat comes into an animal shelter, what should the shelter do with the animal? Should they put the cat back in the community?**

A. In an ideal world, the solution would be non-lethal. This can encompass a variety of responses. The shelter can return the cat to its place of origin if that's acceptable; relocate the cat; or not take in the cat in the first place—this is what I would favor. Most feral cats come into shelters from complaint calls. It's amazing how many people are satisfied and/or willing to live in proximity to feral cats if the complaint is mediated or solved. For example, if cats are defecating someplace that's offensive, we've found that we can dump a sand pile in a spot where it is OK for the cats to defecate. The cats will go there, and the problem is solved. In some cases, solving the problem might be a case of moving a feeding station. And, of course, getting the animals spayed or neutered is important – this reduces a majority of the nuisance behaviors such as spraying, fighting, calling, and kitten production that are often the real reason that the cats are unwelcome. I think it would be great if shelters refused to take ferals in unless solutions like these were tried first.

**Q. How long do you think it will take until ferals are given the respect and treatment they deserve?**

A. As a practical goal, I'd guess we're about ten years away from being able to provide non-lethal solutions for all our nation's feral cats.

**About Dr. Julie Levy:** Dr. Levy is currently an Associate Professor with the small animal medicine service at the University of Florida. Dr. Levy's research and clinical interests center on feline infectious diseases, neonatal kitten health, and humane alternatives for cat population control. She is the founder of two university-based feral cat spay/neuter programs which have sterilized more than 20,000 cats since 1997 (Operation Catnip). These programs form the basis for research on a variety of feral cat issues, including infectious diseases, caretaker characteristics, colony dynamics and anesthesia protocols. Dr. Levy is currently the Principal Investigator of Maddie's<sup>®</sup> Outdoor Cat Program, a targeted feral cat spay/neuter program that will use shelter intake as one measure of effectiveness.

**A footnote:** Maricopa County Animal Care and Control is one example of a large municipal agency taking the path advocated by Dr. Levy. According to Director Rodrigo Silva, "Our officers do not have authority to impound stray (feral) cats unless there has been a bite. Nuisance calls are referred to our partner organization AzCats for follow up with TNR." Other animal control agencies bringing in feral cats are charged \$92 per cat. Individuals bringing in trapped ferals must pay a \$96 fee. In the first ten months of the 2005-2006 fiscal year, only 331 feral cats were impounded at Maricopa AC & C out of a total 44,500 dogs and cats.

