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Feral cat population deserves attention

Pet Pourri

By NATHAN J. WINOGRAD

They were revered as gods by the ancient Egyptians, persecuted as demons in the Europe of the middle ages, and have been watched over by dedicated caretakers for as long as written text prevails. They have even inspired a hit Broadway musical.

No one knows how many there are, or even exactly how to define them. They live in our barns, behind restaurants, in old warehouses, wherever they can find a modicum of shelter, some scraps of food, and a place to bear their young. They are especially common wherever there are transient populations of people: on college campuses, military bases, apartment complexes.

In the lexicon of animal sheltering, they are called "feral cats." Popularly, they are known as "barn cats," "alley cats" or "wild cats." Webster's dictionary defines feral as "having escaped from domestication and become wild," but this definition does not cover all the cats we know as feral.

Cats in our society occupy a spectrum that runs from the cherished pet to ferals who may have had little or no human contact or support. Some of these elusive felines were born in parks and



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alleyways and will never become accustomed to people. Others may be "marginally owned," living in someone's backyard, garage or barn, or traveling from doorstep to doorstep in search of food and occasional shelter.

Whatever one calls them, they have a rich and noble history. The oldest known feral cat colony, dating back several hundred years, sits in London's Fitzroy Square, about whom T.S. Elliott wrote his famous poems that inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Cats," the longest running musical in Broadway history. A visit to the Coliseum in Rome may be inspired by a love of history, but the visit will teach you more about feral cats and the people who feed and care for them -- who outnumber the tourists there -- than about the great emperors of yore. Some feral cats even come with an Ivy League-caliber pedigree. Hundreds of feral cats living on the campus of Stanford University are cared for and fed daily by the university's prestigious faculty, including at least one Nobel Laureate.

In some parts of Italy, feral cats have a right to live where they are born, regardless of property rights. In other parts of the world, these cats are part of a "live and let live" culture, sharing the urban landscape with all kinds of creatures, from pigeons to people. In the U.S., however, feral cats are often seen as a "nuisance" and are routinely trapped and taken to the local shelter where they are killed because they are not socialized to people and therefore cannot be offered for adoption -- a sad and unfortunate outcome for such a magnificent creature.

But a turnaround is in the works. It's called "Trap, Neuter, Return." TNR is widely recognized as the most compassionate and effective strategy for reducing feral cat populations. TNR involves humanely trapping feral cats and transporting them to a veterinary clinic where they are spayed or neutered. While there, the cat may also receive

a health examination, vaccinations and any care they may need. After surgery, the cat recuperates for a day or two and is then returned back to his colony habitat where he will live out his natural life. Since the cats are no longer reproducing, the colony will gradually diminish in size. TNR also improves the health of the cats.

The proliferation of feral cats is a function of many factors, not least of which is our "throw-away" society. "Throw it away," we say, for items that have outlived their usefulness to us. It is disheartening when what we throw away are cats, moving to new cities, new towns, new homes, only to leave the family pet behind. While we work toward the day when every cat will have a loving home, for those too wild to be adopted, TNR is a compassionate way to help them and a fair solution for a "problem" of no fault of their own.

- Nathan J. Winograd is executive director of the Tompkins County SPCA. He can be reached via e-mail at winograd@spcaonline.com or by calling 257-1822. Pet Pourri appears the last Thursday of every month and welcomes pet-related questions from readers.



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