

Does This Cat Need Rescue?



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Background

Every day in animal shelters across the USA, so-called “stray” cats pour into animal shelters, most of them picked up by well-meaning animal lovers concerned for the welfare of the felines being scooped up. More often than not, however, taking an otherwise healthy free-roaming cat found outdoors to an animal shelter is most definitely **not** in the cat’s best interest.

The goal of this document is to help animal shelters and members of the general public to determine the best course of action when a free-roaming cat is encountered.

When “Stray” is Not Stray

The word “stray” is synonymous with “lost” and “homeless.” Fortunately, neither of those terms typically applies to most free-roaming felines, because they are neither lost nor homeless. As a result, they are in no need of “rescue.”

It is perfectly legal for people to allow their cats to roam outdoors in the vast majority of the USA and many people do. Some keep cats that are largely indoors, but that are allowed outside for extended periods. Other people even keep outdoor-only cats, like barn cats. Research has shown that the overwhelming majority of these felines live happy, healthy lives.

Outdoor cats can cover a lot of territory. To quote Nohra Mateus-Pinilla, a wildlife veterinary epidemiologist at the Illinois Natural History Survey who published a study on the territories of free-roaming cats:

One of the [cats], a mixed breed male, had a home range of 547 hectares (1,351 acres), the largest range of those tracked.

While that one cat had the largest home range, all of the cats studied regularly traveled farther than anyone had anticipated. Owners of some of the cats studied were surprised at how far from home their pets were going each day.

Furthermore, the natural ability of cats to find their ways home - even over distances of hundreds of miles - means that the likelihood that a cat found outdoors is actually lost is very low. The average cat is better at finding his or her way home than humans are at finding a cat’s family.

For all of these reasons, it is clear that not every free-roaming feline needs “rescue.” Additionally, there are risks to cats associated with picking them up and bringing them to the local animal shelter, even if that shelter is No Kill. For example, animal shelters are highly stressful places for cats, with loud dogs barking and other things that can be terrifying to cats. This stress causes cats to be more susceptible to feline diseases that are common in animal shelters.

Furthermore, animal shelters are often filled with cats who actually **need** rescue. It is essential, therefore, that they not take in kitties that are perfectly fine being left alone where they are.

Cats that Need Rescue

Identifying cats that actually need rescue is relatively straightforward: Any feline that is obviously injured or debilitated (for example, emaciated or weak) is in need of help and should be taken in and provided care. This does not include cats that are meowing as if to ask for food (hint: cats are really good at asking people to feed them, even if they are well-fed). It also does not include unweaned kittens, if they appear otherwise healthy. Mother cats do not live with their kittens 24/7. They go off to find food and water for themselves, sometimes for extended periods of time. Therefore, the mere existence of a kitten or kittens, with no obvious sign of a mother cat nearby, is not an obvious indication that rescue is necessary.

The only cats that definitively need rescue are those exhibiting signs of injury or illness. All others should generally be left alone, undisturbed.

“Nuisance” Cats

For some people, picking up cats and bringing them to an animal shelter is not about trying to help the cats. They do it because they do not want cats on their property. Doing so may keep that specific cat off their property, but not others. And, given that there are large numbers of free roaming cats in every community in the USA, trying to keep cats off their property by bringing them (usually one at a time) to animal shelters is rarely successful in the long run. On the other hand, there are things property owners can do that are easy and effective to keep free-roaming felines off their properties. These include:

- Remove items that might be providing food, water or shelter for felines.
- Add cat deterrents to the property. These can include plants that naturally repel cats, like Coleus Canina, a beautiful form of the Coleus plant that is sometimes called “The Scardy Cat Plant,” and others. Motion sensitive sprinklers that will give cats a gentle squirt will also usually keep cats away.
- TNR, or Trap-Neuter-Release, is a form of free-

roaming cat management that is humane and highly effective at reducing cat numbers, while also reducing behaviors that result in conflicts with people, such as spraying, howling and fighting.

Cats and Wildlife

While it is true that cats are not native predators, it is also true that humans have, largely, eliminated native predators from our yards and neighborhoods. To a degree, cats are filling a niche that would otherwise be occupied by skunks, weasels, fox, coyote and other native mammals. They help control populations of pest species, many of which are not native, either, including different species of rats, mice and non-native birds, like English House Sparrows and European Starlings.

Conclusion

Healthy free-roaming cats do not need rescue and bringing them to shelters is generally not in their or their owner’s best interest. It is best to simply leave them alone. In cases where cat populations are out of control or where cats are being a nuisance, humane deterrents or TNR are more humane and more effective solutions to those issues.

Cats with obvious signs of injury or illness, on the other hand, do benefit from rescue. For help determining whether or not a free-roaming cat needs rescue, call Pet Help Desk toll-free at (877) 799-9951.

Other Free-Roaming Cat Tips

- Do not feed free-roaming cats, unless it is part of a coordinated TNR effort.
- Use caution when handling cats that are unfamiliar with you. Cat bites and scratches can be serious.
- If bitten or scratched by a free-roaming cat, seek medical attention promptly and try to safely contain the cat involved in the bite or scratch.
- Remember: if a cat is friendly, healthy, uninjured and of good body weight, it almost certainly has food, water, shelter and is almost certainly cared for.