

# **How to Care for a Feral Cat Colony**

## **- A Practical Handbook**

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## 1. Definitions

A **colony** is a group of **outdoor cats** linked by family and friendship ties.

**Feral** means free and living separately from humans. The degree of this separation from humans can vary from one case to another. Cats living in urban areas can be named 'feral' too.

The word **stray** is inappropriate in the case of most outdoor cats, and will not be used in this report. It means that cats have been domestic, and either have been abandoned or have escaped ('went astray'). Despite the word is used extensively, few outdoor cats are stray, most are **feral**.

Though initially "wild", once you assume responsibility for supporting a feral cat colony, it is then referred to more specifically as a **managed colony**.

Domestic cats can be **indoor-outdoor**, meaning that they may wander around but return to their owner's house, where they have their permanent base. However, they remain classified as domestic cats.

The dates and seasons indicated thereafter are based on the Northern Hemisphere/Mediterranean Region. They need to be adapted if you are located in another region of the world.

## 2. Purpose and commitment of the caregivers

Once you assume responsibility for managing a feral cat colony, you must recognize that the feral cats become somewhat tamer and dependent upon you. Once you have started providing for fresh food and care each day, the cats who initially were keeping their distance will soon begin to trust you and depend on your food and care.

Don't let them down! This is a long term commitment. Try to find some help as this should ideally be team work. If you cannot continue taking care of the colony, organize your succession.

If you cannot care about the colony any longer and if you did not find proper succession, the only solution is to wind it down in a very progressive manner. To do this, reduce gradually the pace of your visits to the colony: from twice a day to once a day, from once a day to once every two days... The cats will understand the message and turn to other colonies. That must be done very gradually over an extended period of time.

At some point of time, you will have to address important ethical issues regarding life, death, reproduction, and animal rights. Brace yourself for this.

### 3. Role and tasks of the caregivers

The tasks of the caregivers are multifold:

- ⇒ providing for food and water,
- ⇒ providing for healthcare,
- ⇒ cleaning and maintaining the colony site,
- ⇒ ensuring security,
- ⇒ observing behavior, detecting issues,
- ⇒ raising funds, gaining support,
- ⇒ doing research, stats.

Despite 3,500 years of history in common, humans do not know well the behavior of outdoor cats. Their social life and their ways are complex. It is important to document this to understand the colony you care for. Do not trust excessively, though, the information you can find online and in books or magazines. It often does not have any scientific basis and is influenced by ideological biases and agendas.

It is important, in general, to spend time with your animals in order to know them well, communicate with them.

Not all caregivers shall take on all these tasks, and not all will have the same to perform. Depending on their abilities and the size of the colony, some may focus on particular responsibilities.

One can distinguish several caregiver typical roles, although in practice these roles are often occupied by the same person:

⇒ The **feeder** serves food and water daily. Although the job may seem simple, many feeders lack hygiene, are irregular, serve low quality or inappropriate food, give dry food without water, and do on. It is necessary to improve these behaviors to ensure a good maintenance of a colony.

⇒ The **security agent** evaluates the colony's situation from the point of view of security, makes settlements and improvements to the site, patrols the surroundings, searches for lost cats, orders autopsies, and manages relationships with the neighborhood.

⇒ The **colony manager** is responsible for the definition of the colony's policy, the good execution of all the tasks mentioned above, and the recruitment and training of new caregivers.

⇒ The **veterinary surgeon** is an external provider for medical services. Veterinary surgeons should assist the caregivers from a medical point of view without interfering with the definition of the colony's policy, which is the responsibility of the colony manager.

#### **4. Your key factors of success**

Caretakers should have excellent communication among themselves, meaning that they have contact details of each other, share all important new information, and cooperate effectively to solve issues. Each individual caregiver should give feedback to the other caregivers, in particular to the colony manager. Each caregiver should understand their role in the team and accept the rules/policy of the colony. Basically they should share the same values and understanding of the good of the colony.

Such principles may seem obvious... but are not always respected!

It is necessary that caregivers have a solid personal balance, because their job may be hard at times, and because they will have to make sound choices in the interest of the animals. This requires maturity. Ideally, one should have done a bit of therapy or personal development prior taking care of any animals. Education is necessary what regards hygiene, prior detection of disease, legal issues, etc. It is indispensable to acquire medical and behavioral knowledge about the species.

In terms of behavior, persons involved with a colony should be caring and committed. They should beware of human projections such as imposing upon the animals a particular model of human happiness.

Neither overly optimistic nor excessively pessimistic, they should be aware of the problems linked with the life of an outdoor colony, and be prepared to confront with difficult situations at times.

#### **5. The caregiver's emotional dilemma**

You cannot manage a colony and stay detached, no matter how much you may want to in the beginning.

You may try to stay detached by not touching the cats (if they even let you get close enough to do so) and by not naming them - however you might regret later not to have enjoyed a closer relationship with your cats. To touch them and to name them somehow gives you more ownership and emotional involvement. It also allows you to manage the colony better (see § 6 below).

Cats need and give affection, and will recognize you after months or even years of absence. In time, they will become tame, and you will find yourself being amused at their personality differences, petting them, and worrying endlessly about them when they are missing, or when the summers become mercilessly hot and the winters frigidly cold.

Any loss is a shock. You will have to try and find a balance between the **attachment** you feel for your animals and the necessary **detachment** that will allow you to stomach losses and changes in the colony's life. This is not an easy process! Eventually the cats may force you to develop more resilience. Caring for a feral cat colony is the humane thing to do, but it involves an unavoidable emotional dilemma.

A trap that you must absolutely avoid is to fall in love with the most fragile of your animals. Animal lovers are compassionate people, and they may tend to bear more attention to such animals. But they are precisely those who may leave early, and you will be devastated by this. Instead, it is better to treat all animals on an equality basis. Thus, if some happen to pass accidentally you will not regret to have neglected them.

When they die, your cats must be buried as a matter of decency. It will also help prevent infections among the remainder of the cat population provided that the body is buried deep enough (15-20 cm depth).

## **6. Taking a good start with your colony**

Mapping the colony is the **first step** to take to manage it. You must identify clearly each colony member. Each should have a name, and this same name should be used by all caretakers. This is to be able to speak the same language and to follow up more easily individual colony members. The genealogy of the colony is of particular importance to understand its members' characters and ties.

In a **second step**, it is opportune that caretakers take photos of their cats and that they draw up a cat list, with names, birth year, gender, descent, offspring, preferred location, habits, special remarks, and any information available.

In a **third step**, you should make sure that you have adequate material, which includes, without this list being limitative:

- ⇒ Feeding containers,
- ⇒ Replacement feeding containers,
- ⇒ Spoons,
- ⇒ Opener,
- ⇒ Swiss or outdoor knife,
- ⇒ Small plastic bags for food,
- ⇒ Larger plastic bags for waste,
- ⇒ Kitchen roll,
- ⇒ Rubber gloves,
- ⇒ Pocket lamp/torch,
- ⇒ Hand sanitizer (make sure that it has evaporated before touching cat or food),
- ⇒ Mobile phone/camera.

## 7. Food quality, quantity and distribution

An adult cat needs 400 mg/day **wet** food, equivalent to at most 200 mg/day **dry** food, as wet food contains over 50% moisture.

Wet food is generally more palatable and contains more nutrients, so appears to be better food on the long term; but dry food is easier to preserve, store and keep clean outside. Paradoxically, dry food may be dangerous when the weather is highly humid, because it may cause intestinal problems.

Cats are no big drinkers basically, but they need a little **water**, especially in summer and when they eat dry. They should drink ideally spring water.

Family food is best, however must be exempt of irritating components like tomato, onion and garlic. Fish should be cooked rather than raw, due to the risk of catching tapeworm.

Ideally, several fresh **meals** a day are preferable to one single big meal.

Caretakers have influence on the **cohesion** of the cat group. They should not exclude strangers from food, as this may lead to unfair deprivation, underfeeding, behavioral disorders, and disease. They should encourage integration instead. If some cats begin to fight over food or shelter and chase away timid cats, food should be shared out in several different places and different containers so that all can have access to it.

## 8. Providing for healthcare

No health issue should be left unattended a long time. Of particular significance are a swollen and hard abdomen, diarrhea, skin problems (such as ringworm and other fungal infections), flu symptoms (such as sneezing, fever and flowing eyes), ear mites, eye infections, worms in the feces, dental pain (often correlated with immunosuppressive disease), loss of appetite, and sluggishness. Prolonged and localized scratching generally means a flea or tick infestation.

Ideally, the colony should have a good, permanent vet who takes house calls and knows these cats well. Animal Rescue officers can help, however the conditions of their intervention should be verified beforehand. In effect, they won't necessarily return the cats to their colonies, and may follow debatable policy guidelines that do not match yours.

Basically you need a dozen products and tools to address the most common health issues:

- ⇒ Antibiotics (to fight bacterial infections),
- ⇒ Probiotics (to recreate intestinal flora destroyed by antibiotics, and avoid diarrhea),
- ⇒ De-wormer (should be used on an ad hoc basis rather than for all cats, is of particular importance in case of aggressive types of worms),
- ⇒ Anti-earmites (to be injected in ears to eliminate ear mites),
- ⇒ Cotton buds (to clean ears prior to using anti-earmite product),
- ⇒ Diatomaceous Earth (food grade, for fleas and intestinal parasites),
- ⇒ Eye drops (to fight eye infections),
- ⇒ Vitamins (general, take the shape of palatable paste),
- ⇒ Vitamin (K, as antidote to rat poison),
- ⇒ Baby cat dry milk (should small kittens be abandoned or need supplementation),
- ⇒ Antifungal ointment (for ringworm and other fungal infections),
- ⇒ Antibacterial ointment (for wounds and skin infections),
- ⇒ Syringes (very useless to feed small kittens or give a liquid medication to your cats), to be used of course without a needle,
- ⇒ Eyebrow pliers (for tick removal).

Spending some time with your animals will help you detect changes and abnormalities.

## 9. Maintaining the colony's site

**Hygiene** should be strict, e. g. feeding containers should be cleaned daily. Products used for cleaning should be supported by cats, a bio dish detergent with no fragrance or additional chemical would be ideal. The feeding place itself must also be purged from any litter. The colony's site must be initially cleared of any waste, cutting objects or toxic substances.

Caretakers can make various **settlements** to the colony's site, such as building **walls** or creating **shelters**. Feral cats will take shelter from the elements wherever they can find it. It is common to find them under cars or under trees and bushes, where they can stay reasonably protected from rain and sun. It is a good idea, however, to provide more adequate shelter for them. You can buy a dog house to use as a shelter, or you can build a shelter for them.

If you build a shelter, it is wise to try to line the inside walls with some sort of insulation, which can be just Styrofoam. Cover the roof with shingle tiles or plywood, and make the door big enough for the largest of the cats to get through, but small enough to allow less cold air to get inside. Two doors are ideal for security (one being an emergency exit; in the case of a dog attack, the cats will not be cornered). Keep straw inside the shelters and replace it frequently to keep it dry. Straw is preferable to old blankets, which will draw moisture. Strategically place the shelters in a location protected from wind and sun.

Cats release resilient smells, especially at the love season. This can be embarrassing for your social and professional life. You should ideally wear dedicated outfits for the cat activity, and wash them separately from your other clothes. Various effective laundry products may be available in your country. Failing that, you can use white vinegar to rinse your things - at least one 75cl bottle per drum. The detergent and the vinegar must not be used together, but successively. As for the hardware (mobile phones, etc.), it can be deodorized effectively using surgical spirit.

## **10. Risk management: ensuring security**

A **first step** for ensuring security is to evaluate the risks in the environment of the colony. You can inquire about the quality of the neighborhood, and be aware of possible tensions between those who are “against” and those who are “for”. The colony site should ideally be situated in a car-free area.

In a **second step**, you should strive to exert surveillance and manage potential conflicts or dangerous behaviors. Such behaviors can include the inappropriate practice of local councils who spread rat poison that the rodents will consume. The



cats will in turn consume intoxicated rodents (the antidote for rat poison, vitamin K, is included in the list of pharmaceuticals above).

While your cats are eating, do not omit to inspect the colony site and surroundings, and to note any change that occurred since you came last time. Patrol any time in and around the colony site look at the ground if there is anything left, which in some cases can unfortunately be poisonous food, as cats are often subject to cruelty. Any slain body should be immediately autopsied so as to determine the cause of the death.

You may ask yourself what is better for their security: **tame** your cats, or leave them **untamed**? In fact, in time your cats will all become at least half-tame, and will be so with everyone, not only with you. This half-distance will not offer a sufficient protection against the risk of being trapped, for example, or to be kicked. Better, therefore, tame your cats, and put them a half-rigid collar that they can't easily lose.

## 11. The problem of cat disappearance

At some point of time, caretakers for colonies around the world all have to confront with the problem of **cat disappearance**. It is a shock for caretakers when a cat disappears, especially if they ignore the cause of this disappearance.

When an outdoor cat vanishes, there are basically 10 things that could have happened:

- ⇒ It was displaced into unfamiliar territory (due to bad weather for example),
- ⇒ left the colony for females and territory (frequent in young males),
- ⇒ joined another colony (males and females alike),
- ⇒ was injured or fell sick (cats tend to hide when injured or sick),
- ⇒ was killed by a predator (dog or human, in some areas of the world that can be coyote, cougar, large prey birds; beware of the hunting season that can bring excited hunting dogs around the colony!),
- ⇒ was killed by a car (a major cause of death in kittens and young cats),
- ⇒ was 'rescued' (by some person in good faith who found them at their door),
- ⇒ was trapped and abducted (by a charity),
- ⇒ was stolen (that includes traffickers for fur and meat),
- ⇒ was intentionally transported out of the area (by an angry neighbor),
- ⇒ was unintentionally transported out of the area (cats sometimes board vehicles).

Some specialists have elaborated full questionnaires to help you diagnose the cause of your cat's disappearance. They use, among other techniques, personality

predictors. And in effect, the behavior and character of your cat may play a role in its disappearance. However, the behavior of cats in the wild is not well known. It is generally admitted that young males tend to leave their colonies to run their chance in the big world, but it is less clear whether/why some females also leave their colonies. We have difficulties to determine where cats go when they roam.

Further research using GPS tracking does exist, but unfortunately it follows a policy agenda, such as to demonstrate that domestic cats keep predatory habits and eventually to convince the public that their population must be reduced. Such biased research misses the target as it does not clarify the causes for the large disappearance rate.

On the basis of experience, cats with the following characteristics have a higher probability to disappear at some point of time.

Behavioral characteristics:

- ⇒ young males challenging the status quo, especially when an incident happens, e. g. fireworks or severe weather (triggers departure),
- ⇒ kittens just released by their mother (at around 3 months of age),
- ⇒ kittens who are not yet streetwise (under 1 year of age),
- ⇒ kittens released too early by mother (are both fragile and inexperienced),
- ⇒ any cat roaming repeatedly and increasingly (increases all kinds of risks),
- ⇒ excessively friendly cats (can be abused more easily),
- ⇒ excessively wild, independent cats (may choose another location),

Clinical characteristics:

- ⇒ any cat having a chronic issue or handicap, even if it does not seem major (may worsen unexpectedly in time),
- ⇒ mother just freed from her kittens (may be tired and develop infections),
- ⇒ old cats (6 years old or older),
- ⇒ cats who have been neutered elsewhere (will cease coming),
- ⇒ slow and static cats (may have an underlying condition such as immunosuppressive disease),
- ⇒ excessively skinny cats (may have an underlying condition and be weaker).

Any flaw in the survival program of an outdoor cat may well be paid for by the concerned - one day or another. This survival program can be biological or

behavioral. Excessively friendly cats, for example, are at increased risk of abduction or other abuse. Cats who have not been educated by a mother cat are also more at risk, because they did not learn to detect the danger, flee and hide. Kittens under the age of 1 are not yet streetwise; they are more prone to car accidents.

Regarding the periods of the year, one can say that, although there is considerable variance, some periods are more dangerous than others. A study about Lynx in Switzerland has observed that the death rate among the young is highest just when they just leave their mother. Mothers who are tired because of having just raised a numerous litter are more likely to develop infections and have a car accident. Periods like the love season (where cats roam more) and the hunting season (where cats can be shot or be attacked by dogs) are riskier too.

## 12. Life expectancy of your cats

All these risk factors influence the life expectancy of outdoor cats.

Table 1 presents a hypothetical equivalence between the respective life expectancy of domestic and outdoor cats.

On the basis of experience, domestic cats live twice as long as outdoor cats, as they are much more protected from bad weather, disease and accident.

<b>Domestic cat</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	<b>14</b>
<b>Outdoor cat</b>	.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4	4.5	5	5.5	6	6.5	7	<b>7</b>

Table 1. Domestic Cat/Outdoor Cat Life Expectancy

To express the age of a cat in human years, it is common to multiply each human year by 7. This method however is inaccurate, as kittens grow much faster than children. There is no absolutely exact equivalence between human age and feline age, given that all these variables are context-dependent.

The table below is based on a more plausible, non-homothetic scale based on a tentative observation-based equivalence between cat age and human age. Cats grow much faster than humans in the first years, then the pace of their ageing tends then to slow down, while it remains much faster than the one of humans.

<b>Cat age</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	<b>14</b>
<b>Human age</b>	15	25	32	36	40	44	48	52	56	60	64	70	74	78	<b>78</b>

Table 2. Cat/Human Age Equivalence

It should be kept in mind that, if cats are fertile, there is for this a good a reason: death rates are very elevated among the young, due to incurable viral infections (such as FIP, FIV, FeLv, and many others) and car accidents. It can therefore not be taken for granted that your population will necessarily spin out of control.

You may choose to take steps to control breeding by neutering some of them. This is appropriate in case of overpopulation. There is overpopulation when the numbers on a given territory are such that it becomes impossible to gather reasonable means to ensure their subsistence. In all other cases, neutering is inappropriate.

The population of a colony follows a bell curve; it may seem at times that it explodes, however in a second step it will come down to a lower level - and may eventually come back to its initial level or even below. It is thus estimated that the feral cat population in North America varies from simple to double depending on the season (winter/summer). It is worth noting that the bell curve can spread over more than one year. In effect, young females need experience to deliver and raise successfully viable kittens. Females reach maturity when they are around 2 years old.

The widespread belief that outdoor cats are multiplying is baseless. A much repeated quote in the United States is that one female cat can produce 420,000 kittens in just 7 years. This is unbelievable and ungrounded.

A more 'modest' estimate sits at over 15,000 per female cat! As for the Feral Cat Project in the State of Washington, US, it estimates the offspring of a female to 100 cats in seven years, assuming that all adult cats remain alive for all seven years, which of course is highly hypothetical.

Although this latter figure is less daunting, it is still a blatant overestimate.

A study over thousands of outdoor cats has shown that females had an average of 1.4 litters a year with 3 kittens a litter, 75% of which did not reach 6 months of age. That

leaves roughly 1 kitten per female per year, provided that those beyond 6 months of age survive. This is not many, given that their life expectancy is short, around ten times shorter than ours.

Our own calculations show that the final fertility rate in cats is in reality close to the one of humans, once weighted with life expectancy.

The specter of the multiplying cats is therefore a myth, and there is no reason to panic. Instead, their reproductive capacity is often the last card in their possession to thwart the many risks they have to face.

Should there be local overpopulation at some point of time, it is still possible to place the extra kittens instead of having recourse to neutering.

### **13. Love season and reproduction**

Outdoor animals live according to the pace of the Universe. The love season begins after the Winter solstice, December 21, when the animals receive the signal that the days are getting longer. It will last the three first months of the year then be followed by the kitten season (this may depend on the specific climate of the geographic area where you are located, though, and there are some overlaps). Some females have a second-round litter in autumn.

During the love season, your cats will be more agitated, will roam more - males and females alike - and strangers, mainly males, will visit your colony.

At kitten season, if you are a good observer, you will notice that mother cats often deliver at the full moon plus or minus 4 days. Some 6 weeks after, sometimes sooner, the kittens will start to come out.

You might be troubled by the behavior of the mothers. Mother cats are confusing. One moment they move the kittens, other times they seem to ignore them, sometimes they even reject them. You will be amazed by the spectacle of two females helping each other feed their kittens.

Mother cats move frequently the kittens for security. Doing so, they may lose one on their way. First-time mothers are more anxious than others, and their moving kittens from place to place may endanger them - if they place them in an unsafe location or if they drop them on hard stone, as two examples.

If you are worried about the mother not taking care of the kittens, such as her leaving them alone for prolonged periods of time, not nursing them or even playing rough with them and crushing them, you may want to remove them from that environment. However, only do so if you are sure they are in danger.

When a queen experiences distress trying to feed kittens, she may reject them and refuse to nurse them. This sometimes happens with new mothers. When the kittens are abnormal or sick and that their problem is beyond her reach, the mother may reject them. Alternatively, it happens that she brings the kitten to her trusted caregivers so that they take care of the babies.

#### **14. Saving abandoned and orphaned kittens**

You may have to face one of these situations (rejection and death), and step in as surrogate mother.

Raising kittens that are a few week old is relatively easy; caring for very small kittens is tricky, demanding, and time-consuming. They are tiny, weighing from 1.5 oz. to 6 oz. at birth, and very fragile.

It is highly preferable that the kittens be fed by the mother during at least 24 hours. In effect, the milk that the queen produces includes anti-bodies that provide a protection for the kittens, for about 6 weeks until their immune system can begin to provide its own protection.

Following guidelines apply when feeding small kittens:

- ⇒ use special milk for kittens,
- ⇒ boil all material 5-7 minutes every day if you have several kittens to feed,
- ⇒ use a syringe to feed the kittens,
- ⇒ feed every three hours,
- ⇒ if the kittens lack energy, give them sugary water (2 drops on the tongue),
- ⇒ look at temperature with a small thermometer inserted in the anus; if their temperature is too low (inferior to 38°Celsius), warm them up using a thermos pack that you glide under their cover, NOT in direct contact with their skin,
- ⇒ do NOT force nor overfeed the kittens,
- ⇒ if milk goes out from their nose, suck it out IMMEDIATELY using a small suction ball,
- ⇒ massage regularly the genital area with a warm wet rag so as to stimulate urination and defecation.

The first 8 weeks are critical for survival, and the first 16 weeks determine the long-term health of the kittens. However, they will be stronger already after two weeks, and the period of extreme fragility will start to pass by then. You will be able to reduce progressively the number of their daily meals.

## **15. Good care keeps the charities away**

Caregivers should be aware of the risks inherent to the different forms of **anthropic aggressiveness** toward the animals. This applies to neighbors, farmers, hunters, or any cruel individuals, but also paradoxically to many charities and shelters.

In the United States, animals taken to the shelters are ‘euthanized’ (killed – euthanasia is normally assisted death that has been requested by the concerned, which is not the case here), if not adopted after a certain time. In the US alone, about 2.4 million healthy cats and dogs would be killed in shelters each year – one every 13 seconds.

One can wonder why these animals are taken to shelters instead of being left free while being provided for some help. What is the exact purpose of these dubious charities behind their hollow compassionate words?

While some charities have been involved in cruelty rows, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) declared lately that they ‘cannot in good conscience oppose euthanasia as a humane alternative to dealing with cat overpopulation’ - What a strange ‘ethical’ organization indeed!

Most charities aim at eventually eliminating the free outdoor cats through extensive, systematic spaying and neutering, and forced placement. Their average members may not be aware of doing this, and may just be under influence. In effect, enormous pressure is exerted on the public opinion in favor of universal spaying and neutering (if not killing) presented as a positive thing in itself.

In fact, today, neutering has become a dogma, although this dogma supported by poor empirical evidence.

Animal lovers are blackmailed: either the animals are killed, or neutered/spayed (a form of slow death: they won’t reproduce, and their lineage will stop with them after only a few years).

The persons running these charities are not always very balanced. Some may strive to exert **power over the animals** - that includes possessing the right to judge what is best for them, the right to impede them to have any offspring, the right to snatch them from their neighborhoods, families, and communities – and the right of life and death. A narcissistic syndrome that allows feeling almighty over beings that cannot speak.

Similarly, too few charities consult democratically, as they should, neighbors and caregivers prior to any intervention. Such organizations generally do not refer to any thorough, intelligent **ethics**. They also have too little **knowledge** of the animal world. They project on the animals their own representation of a ‘forever loving home’, while most cats do NOT need a human home – they are attached to their territory, habits, and social group.

Charities do not manage any colonies; they mostly catch outdoor cats for neutering and spaying. They will want to sterilize your cats while this is not appropriate given the fragility of your kittens and their high death rates. They may sterilize cats who would have been splendid reproducers, while they won’t sterilize weaker cats. This is not your aim as a colony manager.

**Charities should definitely be kept away** from the management of colonies, which should remain a community thing, involving exclusively neighbors and volunteers on the ground. Good food and good care to your colony will deprive these organizations of any pretense to intervene in its life.

## **16. Cats and zombies: bought research and outright lies**

By ‘zombies’ we understand here persons or organizations that owe their existence to subsidies or other forms of funding granted to promote a particular agenda, thus not having sufficient independence to offer credible views over a particular subject.

**As surprising as this may seem, potent lobbies are acting against the cats.** These lobbies can be agricultural or hunting interests, the gun industry, the pharmaceutical industry, wildlife professionals, the veterinary profession, or others. Cats will need your active and lucid support to stand to this pressure. Still recently, a culling program based on fake scientific views has been launched against the feral cats of Australia.

As one example, according to a report, American hunters spend 216\$ per bird shot (2018). Well, 216\$, that’s a lot for a single shot. How many hunters in the US? How



many shots a year? The hunters need weapons, cartridges, gunpowder, and other supplies... a lucrative market. And cats are suspected to reduce the number of birds. They are competitors to the high-technology human predator. Less birds, less shots. Less dollars...

Various arguments against feral cats are produced by low-quality research that appears to be often funded by the said lobbies, then are spread in the media to influence the public opinion and/or are used to urge policymakers to act against the animals. This may drive to culling, mass sterilization, or confinement.

Thus, a spurious 2010 study by University of Nebraska suggests that feral cats would represent a risk for public health and safety. The report is extremely biased and demonizes the cats. Means of 'regulation', including the cruelest ones, are quickly discussed with the utmost detail, as it is presupposed that feral cats pose a problem. Further developments show a lack of knowledge of the species.

In reality, most serious diseases that feral cats may have are strictly feline and cannot be communicated to humans or livestock. Let's see more precisely what it is about.

⇒ The authors mention rabies. In reality, the prevalence of rabies is very low (twenty-two human rabies cases documented in the US between 1980 and 1997), and the disease is carried by dogs and other species more than by cats.

⇒ The authors mention toxoplasmosis. More than 60 million humans in the U.S. carry the *Toxoplasma* parasite, but very few have symptoms because their immune system usually keeps the parasite from causing illness. Research has found that cat ownership does not strongly increase the risk of T.Gondii infection, in fact eating unwashed vegetables and undercooked meat is a stronger risk factor.

⇒ The authors mention salmonellosis. In reality, salmonellosis is transmitted by a vast array of animals, notably reptiles, baby chicks, ducklings and small rodents such as hamsters, more than by cats.

⇒ The authors mention ringworm. Ringworm is benign. It suffices to wash your hands after having touched your cats not to catch it.

⇒ The authors mention cat scratch fever. Cat scratch fever is benign.

⇒ The authors mention plague. Transmission to humans is quite rare. Cats are historically known for having limited the spread of the plague carried by rodents.

⇒ The authors mention fleas and ticks. Feral cats do not carry more fleas and ticks than other wildlife or livestock.

The fact to be feral does not influence significantly the risk of transmission, for most of these diseases are more likely to be transmitted by domestic pets.

**It is not true that feral cats pose a threat to human health and safety.** Insinuating that such risk should be taken seriously is manipulative. It is an attempt to influence the population by raising fears.

Other ‘information’ disseminated in the press **inflates the number** of the feral cats. The Nebraska study puts forward an estimated 60 to 88 million cats owned in the U.S. and 60 million more would be feral. No source or calculation method is mentioned. If that was true, one American in five would have his/her feral cat; two Americans in five would have their cat. Soon there will be more cats than humans... Another estimates sits at 6 Mio in winter and 12 Mio in summer, another one at 25 Mio.

Such figures are simple hoaxes destined to influence the population. Truth is, that no one can seriously sustain that they have measured the whole of the population with accuracy.

**Furthermore, the real impact of feral cats on the wildlife is more moderate than the academic zombies suggest.**

The so-called devastating impact of the feral cats over the fauna is an argument put forward by some conservationists to justify their slaughter.

Cats would be responsible for the extinction of at least 33 species of birds around the world. Given that there are some 10,000 bird species in the world, that would stand for the extinction of 0.3%. Regrettable, but marginal. And probably limited to isolated islands where humans introduced the cats quite suddenly.

Even so, a 2001 study identified the greatest cause of endangerment of birds as habitat loss and degradation, with at least 52% of endangered birds affected. While introduced species on islands, such as domestic cats, rats and mustelids, affected only 6% of endangered birds. Other studies caution that removing domestic cats from

islands can have unintended consequences, as increasing rat populations can put native bird and mammal species at risk.

If the guiltiness of the cats can be proved at all. Evidence, please? Proving the cats' guilt is in effect tricky. The populations of many species, such as the house sparrow, are declining. Perhaps cats are partly to blame. But the common chiffchaff is doing splendidly, even though it's at the top of the predators' hit list. Blackbird populations are declining in some regions, but for a different reason: the Usutu virus, which comes from Africa, is raging within its ranks, killing hundreds of thousands. Birds are being killed by the millions when they crash into windowpanes or the rotors of wind turbines, are poisoned by pesticides or are hit by cars or airplanes. Of course, the cat plays a role in the daily killings, but just how fateful that role is when it comes to the prospects of a given species remains a mystery.

According to the Nebraska study, cats would kill an estimated 480 million birds per year in the US (assuming eight birds killed per feral cat per year). Another estimate assumes 4 birds killed per cat and per year, therefore 240 million birds a year (assuming for a moment the highly hypothetical number of 60 million cats in the US). Double to simple. On which basis? What calculation method is used? That remains a mystery.

For all that, for such figures to be useful, one should know what is the total number of birds. Which is...? And how many are killed by hunters? By disease? By other factors? – That is not serious research.

A study by Loss, Will and Marra (2013) suggested a toll of 3.7 BILLION birds annually for the sole US and 23 to 46 birds per year and per cat. No less...in comparison, the Nebraska report may seem moderate. Obviously, these “scientists” should try to find accord on the data and their calculation method.

Loss's study and earlier related studies have inflated estimates of wildlife killed by cats in the U.S., based on unscientific research that extrapolates from tiny samples and projects them onto whole nations. One reviewer stated that Loss's study was filled with "numerous major flaws in the statistical arguments made" that in his view made it "unacceptable for publication". It was unclear how predation rates were obtained, and then "applying these estimates to all cats across the country is highly questionable." Extrapolation was also misused when "based on a small sample of cats over three summer months in one specific geographic area, the authors see fit to extrapolate this predation rate to all cats at all times of the year in all geographic regions in the United States".

In summary, feral cats are subject to intense pressure from lobbies, charities and government bodies alike. In the face of this aggressiveness, the animals will need your constant, lucid, and determined support.