How to Live With Cats in Your Neighborhood

Community cats, also called feral cats, are members of the domestic cat species just like pet cats, but are usually not socialized to people and therefore are not adoptable. Cats have been living outdoors near us for more than 10,000 years. They typically live in groups called colonies and have strong social bonds with their colony members.

What is a Community Cat?

Community cats are non-pet cats that have been living outdoors for at least one year. They are not socialized to people and therefore are not adoptable. They are descendants of domestic cats and can be distinguished from wild cats because they are not afraid of humans and will often allow themselves to be petted and handled.

5 Easy Steps for Deterring Cat Behaviors

1. Talk to your neighbors. Determine whether the cat is a pet, stray, or feral, and if he has been neutered. If not, get it done!
2. Apply nontoxic deterrents around your yard.
3. Put a tight lid on your trash can.
4. Block gaps in the foundation of all sheds and outbuildings.
5. Use a car cover.

Local Organization Contact:

So, you're seeing cats in your yard...

Like all animals, community cats make their home where they find shelter and food, often in close proximity to people. We understand that not everyone enjoys having cats in their yards, and these simple tips will help you divert outdoor cats away from certain areas. You may also want the cats to stick around; some ideas in this brochure will help make areas attractive to the cats. Coupled with Trap-Neuter-Return and ongoing care, these quick steps will help you coexist with your neighborhood cats!

Trap-Neuter-Return

Trap-Neuter-Return is the only effective and humane way to stabilize community cat populations. Cats are humanely trapped and taken to a veterinarian, where they are neutered and vaccinated. Kittens and socialized cats are placed into loving homes. Healthy, adult cats are returned to their colony site, where they are often provided continuing care by volunteers.

The Vacuum Effect

Animal control's traditional approach to community cats—catch and kill—won't keep an area free of cats for long. Catch and kill is cruel, inhumane, and creates a vacuum, as do attempts to "relocate" cats. Once the cats are removed from a territory, other cats move in to take advantage of the newly available resources and breed, forming a new colony. Known as the vacuum effect, this is a documented phenomenon in a variety of animals throughout the world. Catch and kill is an endless and costly cycle.
Cats are lounging in my yard.

Explanation: Cats are territorial and will remain close to their food source.

Quick Solutions:
• Apply cat repellent fragrances liberally around the edges of the yard, the tops of fences, and on any favorite digging areas or plants.
• Install an ultrasonic animal repellent or a motion-activated water sprinkler, such as CatStop® or the ScareCrow®. Available at www.contech-inc.com.
• Keep the feeding area neat and free of leftover food and trash.
• Feed cats at the same designated time each day, during daylight hours. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.
• To combat the urine smell, spray the area thoroughly with white vinegar or with products that use natural enzymes to combat the smell, such as Nature’s Miracle®, Fizzion Pet Stain & Odor Remover, or Simple Solution®. Available at pet supply stores.
• You can find local resources and help at our website: www.alleycat.org. To have a list of local feral cat experts—Feral Friends—in your area emailed to you, use our request form at www.alleycat.org/Response.

Feeding the cats attracts insects and wildlife.

Explanation: Cats are to be fed under proper guidelines. Leaving food out can attract other animals.

Quick Solutions:
• Keep the feeding area neat and free of leftover food and trash.
• Feed cats at the same designated time each day, during daylight hours. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are sleeping under my porch or in my shed.

Explanation: The cats are looking for a dry, warm shelter away from the elements.

Quick Solutions:
• Physically block or seal the location the cats are entering with chicken wire or lattice. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are getting into my trash.

Explanation: Cats are scavengers and are looking for food.

Quick Solutions:
• Place a tight lid on your trash can. Exposed trash bags will attract wildlife as well.
• See if neighbors are feeding the cats. If they are, make sure they are doing so on a regular schedule.
• Start feeding the cats yourself if you find no regular feeder—at a set time, during daylight hours, in an out-of-the-way place. Feeding cats regularly and in reasonable quantities, which can be eaten in less than 30 minutes or so, will help ensure they don’t get so hungry they turn to the trash.
• If they are, make sure they are doing so on a regular schedule.
• Gradually move cats’ shelters and feeding stations away to discourage cats from digging. They have the added benefit of deterring weeds.

Cats are digging in my garden.

Explanation: It is a cat’s natural instinct to dig and deposit in soft or loose soil, moss, mulch, or sand.

Quick Solutions:
• Scatter fresh orange and lemon peels or spray with citrus scented fragrances. Coffee grounds, vinegar, pipe tobacco, or oil of lavender, lemongrass, citronella, or eucalyptus also deter cats.
• Plant the herb rue to repel cats, or sprinkle dried rue over the garden.
• Use plastic carpet runners spine-side up, covered lightly in soil. They can be found at local hardware or office supply stores. Or, set chicken wire firmly into the dirt with sharp edges rolled under.
• Artfully arrange branches in a lattice-type pattern or wooden or plastic lattice fencing material over soil. You can disguise these by planting flowers and seeds in the openings. You can also try embedding wooden chopsticks, pinecones, or sticks with dull points deep into the soil with the tops exposed eight inches apart.
• Obtain Cat Scaft™, a nonchemical cat and wildlife repellent consisting of plastic mats that are cut into smaller pieces and pressed into the soil. Each mat has flexible plastic spikes that are harmless to cats and other animals, but discourage digging. Available at www.gardeners.com.
• Cover exposed ground in flower beds with large, attractive river rocks to prevent cats from digging. They have the added benefit of deterring weeds.
• Establish a litter box by tilling the soil or placing sand in an out-of-the-way spot in your yard. Keep it clean and free of deposits.
• Keep the feeding area neat and free of leftover food and trash.
• Feed cats at the same designated time each day, during daylight hours. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are yawning, fighting, spraying, roaming, and having kittens.

Explanation: These are all mating behaviors displayed by cats who have not been spayed and neutered, and they will continue to breed.

Quick Solutions:
• Spaying or neutering and vaccinating the cats will stop these behaviors. Male cats will no longer compete, fight, spray, or roam. Females will stop yowling and producing kittens. After sterilization, hormones leave their system within three weeks and the behaviors usually stop entirely.
• To combat the urine smell, spray the area thoroughly with white vinegar or with products that use natural enzymes to combat the smell, such as Nature’s Miracle®, Fizzion Pet Stain & Odor Remover, or Simple Solution®. Available at pet supply stores.
• You can find local resources and help at our website: www.alleycat.org. To have a list of local feral cat experts—Feral Friends—in your area emailed to you, use our request form at www.alleycat.org/Response.

There are cat paw prints on my car.

Explanation: Cats like to perch on high ground.

Quick Solutions:
• Gradually move cats’ shelters and feeding stations away to discourage cats from climbing on cars.
• Purchase a car cover.
• Use deterrents listed in the next section.

Cats are sleeping under my porch or in my shed.

Explanation: The cats are looking for a dry, warm shelter away from the elements.

Quick Solutions:
• Physically block or seal the location the cats are entering with chicken wire or lattice. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are to be fed under proper guidelines. Leaving food out can attract other animals.

Quick Solutions:
• Keep the feeding area neat and free of leftover food and trash.
• Feed cats at the same designated time each day, during daylight hours. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are yawning, fighting, spraying, roaming, and having kittens.

Explanation: These are all mating behaviors displayed by cats who have not been spayed and neutered, and they will continue to breed.

Quick Solutions:
• Spaying or neutering and vaccinating the cats will stop these behaviors. Male cats will no longer compete, fight, spray, or roam. Females will stop yowling and producing kittens. After sterilization, hormones leave their system within three weeks and the behaviors usually stop entirely.
• To combat the urine smell, spray the area thoroughly with white vinegar or with products that use natural enzymes to combat the smell, such as Nature’s Miracle®, Fizzion Pet Stain & Odor Remover, or Simple Solution®. Available at pet supply stores.
• You can find local resources and help at our website: www.alleycat.org. To have a list of local feral cat experts—Feral Friends—in your area emailed to you, use our request form at www.alleycat.org/Response.

There are cat paw prints on my car.

Explanation: Cats like to perch on high ground.

Quick Solutions:
• Gradually move cats’ shelters and feeding stations away to discourage cats from climbing on cars.
• Purchase a car cover.
• Use deterrents listed in the next section.

Cats are sleeping under my porch or in my shed.

Explanation: The cats are looking for a dry, warm shelter away from the elements.

Quick Solutions:
• Physically block or seal the location the cats are entering with chicken wire or lattice. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are to be fed under proper guidelines. Leaving food out can attract other animals.

Quick Solutions:
• Keep the feeding area neat and free of leftover food and trash.
• Feed cats at the same designated time each day, during daylight hours. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are yawning, fighting, spraying, roaming, and having kittens.

Explanation: These are all mating behaviors displayed by cats who have not been spayed and neutered, and they will continue to breed.

Quick Solutions:
• Spaying or neutering and vaccinating the cats will stop these behaviors. Male cats will no longer compete, fight, spray, or roam. Females will stop yowling and producing kittens. After sterilization, hormones leave their system within three weeks and the behaviors usually stop entirely.
• To combat the urine smell, spray the area thoroughly with white vinegar or with products that use natural enzymes to combat the smell, such as Nature’s Miracle®, Fizzion Pet Stain & Odor Remover, or Simple Solution®. Available at pet supply stores.
• You can find local resources and help at our website: www.alleycat.org. To have a list of local feral cat experts—Feral Friends—in your area emailed to you, use our request form at www.alleycat.org/Response.

Cats are sleeping under my porch or in my shed.

Explanation: The cats are looking for a dry, warm shelter away from the elements.

Quick Solutions:
• Physically block or seal the location the cats are entering with chicken wire or lattice. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are to be fed under proper guidelines. Leaving food out can attract other animals.

Quick Solutions:
• Keep the feeding area neat and free of leftover food and trash.
• Feed cats at the same designated time each day, during daylight hours. They should be given only enough food for them to finish in one sitting, and all remaining food should be removed after 30 minutes. If another person is feeding, ask them to follow these guidelines too. For a more thorough list of colony management guidelines, visit www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare.

Cats are yawning, fighting, spraying, roaming, and having kittens.

Explanation: These are all mating behaviors displayed by cats who have not been spayed and neutered, and they will continue to breed.

Quick Solutions:
• Spaying or neutering and vaccinating the cats will stop these behaviors. Male cats will no longer compete, fight, spray, or roam. Females will stop yowling and producing kittens. After sterilization, hormones leave their system within three weeks and the behaviors usually stop entirely.
• To combat the urine smell, spray the area thoroughly with white vinegar or with products that use natural enzymes to combat the smell, such as Nature’s Miracle®, Fizzion Pet Stain & Odor Remover, or Simple Solution®. Available at pet supply stores.
• You can find local resources and help at our website: www.alleycat.org. To have a list of local feral cat experts—Feral Friends—in your area emailed to you, use our request form at www.alleycat.org/Response.