



RETURN-TO-FIELD FAQ



What is a community cat?

Community cats are unowned cats who live outdoors. Community cats live outdoors in virtually every landscape on every continent where people live. Community cats, also called feral or outdoor cats, are generally not socialized, or friendly, to people and cannot live indoors. They live full, healthy lives with their feline families in their outdoor homes.

How can I tell if a cat is a community cat or if it has been spayed/neutered?

Look for a missing tip on the cat's ear. The "ear tip" is a universal sign that a cat has been altered. Most commonly the left ear is tipped, but it may be either ear. "Ear tipping" is the humane removal of the tip of a cat's ear to indicate it has been spayed or neutered.

What is Return-To-Field (RTF)?

Return-To-Field (RTF) is the humane, effective approach to addressing community cat populations. Through RTF cats are humanely trapped, spayed, or neutered and vaccinated. The tip of one ear is painlessly removed to indicate the cats are part of a RTF program. They are then returned to their outdoor homes where they live and thrive, ending the cycle of producing new litters of kittens. RTF is good public policy. It reduces animal shelter intake, euthanasia rates and calls to animal control agencies, which saves tax dollars. Hundreds of communities have adopted official RTF ordinances and policies, and thousands more conduct grassroots, volunteer-led RTF programs. Those numbers continue to grow because the programs have proven successful in a wide variety of environments.

What happens to community cats when they are brought to most shelters?

Because community cats are generally not socialized, or friendly, to people they are unadoptable and cannot live indoors. In many animal shelters in the U.S., unadoptable animals like community cats are killed. Euthanasia of community cats has been the go-to practice for many, many years to reduce the number of outdoor cats and has failed as a solution. RTF is a humane solution that has been proven to reduce the number of community cats.

What if this is a lost pet?

Cats with identification tags or microchips will be held while we attempt to contact their owner. While we once thought holding the cat at the shelter was the best way to make sure that cat got back home, we now know that very few—not even 5 percent—of cats are reunited with their families during stray hold periods. We also know that lost cats who do not come into the shelter are 13 times more likely to find their way back home than those who do. Most housecats are found within a three-house radius of where they escaped.

Isn't returning the cat the same as abandonment?

No. There is no cruel intent with RTF; rather, these cats are being returned to their outdoor homes, as their condition indicates they are in good health and were doing well prior to coming to the shelter. It is a myth that these cats are living on their own, as many of them have multiple residents providing food and often shelter. The sterilization and vaccination provided to them before their return help ensure their continued good health.

Won't neighbors continue to complain?

Many of the behaviors that can trigger nuisance complaints (e.g., spraying, fighting, etc.) are resolved through sterilization. Once cats have been spayed/neutered, the complaints often drop off considerably. If there are unresolved issues, various deterrents can be used to keep cats away from where they are not wanted.

Won't returning the cats harm wildlife?

Return-to-field is about returning cats to where they were found, not about adding cats to the environment, or adding to the risk that wild animals may experience. The cats are already living in our community and the important thing is to stop them from reproducing. The number of cats impounded by shelters in most communities is tremendous, yet still too small to have any meaningful impact on predation by cats. In Pinellas County community cats cannot be returned within 150 yards of any park, conservation land, beach, or wildlife area.

Isn't it unsafe for community cats to live outdoors?

Community cats are unowned cats who live outdoors. Community cats live outdoors in virtually every landscape on every continent where people live. Community cats, also called feral or outdoor cats, are generally not socialized, or friendly, to people and cannot live indoors. They live full, healthy lives with their feline families in their outdoor homes.

Why can't community cats be socialized and adopted into homes?

The ideal window for socializing (or acclimating cats to people) is when cats are young kittens. It is very difficult, and often impossible, to socialize an adult community cat who has lived her whole life outdoors. Pinellas Cats Alive! does not recommend attempting to socialize adult community cats and promotes devoting time, energy, and resources to Return-To-Field (RTF) instead. RTF programs are the best way to help the most community cats.

What if I do not want cats on my property?

There are many ways to keep unwanted cats or other animals out of your garden or yard, including motion-activated sprinklers and cat-proof fencing. Using deterrents is more effective for keeping your property cat-free than repeatedly trapping and removing cats.

Why don't you just relocate the cats from my property to somewhere else or euthanize the cats?

While catching and removing cats may temporarily reduce the number of cats in a given area, it is ultimately counterproductive. Removing cats only creates a vacuum that will soon be filled by nearby cats, who move in to use the resources that sustained the cats who were removed. These cats breed and the area is soon populated again. Therefore, catching and removing cats is an endless, ineffective cycle. In addition, Community cats are attached to their outdoor homes and to the other cats they live with. They take comfort in knowing which paths are safe to walk, the coziest places to sleep, and where they can fill their bellies. Relocation rips cats from these homes and places them somewhere unfamiliar. Naturally, the process is extremely stressful and disorienting for them. Relocation is not a solution and is almost never in a cat's or the community's best interest.

What can I do to help?

The more cats in an area who are fixed, the better the sterilization program works. If you are feeding outdoor cats who are unaltered, or if you are aware of them, please let us know. We can advise you how to safely capture them and bring them to Friends of Strays for the Pinellas Cats Alive! Program. Together, we can solve Pinellas County's cat overpopulation crisis while respecting cats' lives and treating them as humanely as possible.