

So you're seeing outdoor cats, now what?

A typical voicemail on the “cat phone” here at Good Mews goes something like this: “Hi, I’ve been seeing a lot of stray cats around my neighborhood lately, and I was wondering if someone can come out to catch them. They’re all really skittish, but I’m sure they can be sweet if they just get into a home. Please call me back if you can come get them.” These calls are clearly well intended, and someone cares about the cats they’re seeing. However, the initial instinct of all pet lovers to pull these furry friends inside isn’t always the best move. Let’s get into the ins and outs of outdoor cats and some best practices for managing these sometimes unwelcome visitors.

Why are there so many outdoor cats, and where did they all come from?

Outdoor cats come from *a lot* of different places:

- Some cats are unfortunately abandoned. Surprise litters can overwhelm people, and kittens will be frequently left outdoors. Similarly, when people are in dire need themselves, it becomes increasingly difficult to care for their pets. It’s important to remember that acts we may not understand, can still come from a place of compassion. If given the choice between starving inside or hunting for food outside, some pet owners have not been given the tools to make a better decision for their cats.
- If these abandoned cats are not spayed or neutered, they can quickly multiply. This leads to cats who are born outside. Cats can have 3-4 litters every year, and colonies can grow fast when not managed with spay/neuter and vaccination practices. It only takes two cats to have a litter of 2-7 kittens. A cat who is born outside and not properly socialized by two months old has a very low likelihood of ever becoming social with humans.
- Some seemingly outdoor cats have homes, but their owners let them roam outside. If these cats are not spayed/neutered, they can mingle with the natives and multiply. Here at Good Mews, we discourage all cat owners from letting their cats outside untethered. Investments like leash-training, indoor enrichment activities, catios, and the like can greatly improve your cat’s quality of life without exposing them to the dangers of free roaming.

Why can't these cats just go to the shelter?

It all depends on the cat!

- Friendly cats who allow petting/handling should be brought to a veterinary clinic or shelter to be scanned for a microchip. Somebody may be looking for their baby! Of course, indoor/outdoor cats exist, so just check with your neighbors before accidentally stealing someone's cat. If a friendly outdoor cat or kitten is not microchipped, efforts should be made to bring the cat inside. If you are the finder of a friendly cat who is not microchipped, please consider fostering and seeking placement. This one, small act has a far greater impact on the animal welfare world than you know. Shelters everywhere are *always* looking for more foster homes, and you will give the cat a chance to find a home and thrive.
- Unfriendly cats, or cats who need to be caught in a trap, should be trapped, spayed/neutered, vaccinated, and returned to their home territory. County shelters and rescue organizations across the US are overwhelmed. In parts of Georgia, municipal shelters are often forced to euthanize *friendly* animals for space. Rescues like ours do everything we can to pull as many cats as possible from animal control facilities, but there's only so much space available. When an unfriendly, scared, or frantic outdoor cat ends up in a municipal shelter, they often lash out or completely shut down. This leaves them first on the worst list possible when space needs to be made. Organizations like ours can prevent these cats from being euthanized with our TNVR programs. Eligible cats can be pulled, spayed/neutered, vaccinated, and returned to their home territory to live out the rest of their lives. Plus, cats who may have been fighting, mating, or exhibiting other destructive behaviors before their surgeries will no longer be driven by the hormones that cause these behaviors when they are returned.

Should I feed new outdoor cats that I'm seeing?

Following the above guidelines, determine what kind of cats have shown up. Are they friendly or unfriendly?

Feeding outdoor cats is a commitment, and many counties have ordinances against feeding any outdoor animal.

That being said, if you move into an area with an existing colony and you are willing to take on feeding them, there are a few things you may want to consider:

- How many cats are you seeing? If you've stumbled upon a colony (4 or more cats) it's important to make sure that everyone is spayed/neutered and vaccinated to prevent colony growth. Studies show that colonies that are spayed/neutered over 90% will begin to see populations decline, so it's important to be prepared to track your cats. We practice "cat counting" here at Good Mews to keep track of our impact on colony populations in our counties. There is a great resource on cat counting by the Humane Society of the United States here: <https://humanepro.org/sites/default/files/documents/acc-d-counting-cats.pdf>
- What will happen to these cats if you can no longer feed them? Do you have neighbors, friends, or family who will commit to caring for them? Is there a local colony-feeding group online that you can join? If so, there are many wonderful resources for managing outdoor cat colonies. Alley Cat Allies is a great starting point: <https://www.alleycat.org/community-cat-care-category/cat-care/colony-care/>
- Are you trying to trap the cats? If so, creating a routine feeding schedule will make the trapping process much easier. If you are looking for information on our Spay/Neuter clinic, you can follow this link: <https://www.goodmews.org/ccp>

My HOA/landlord/neighbors don't want the cats here. What can I do?

The first step is always communication and education. Find out why there is pushback to having community cats in the area. If concerns revolve around destructive behaviors, mating, or defecation in yards, explain how TNVR alters behaviors of colonies. Here are some tips for handling unwelcoming neighbors to your community cats:

- Most people don't realize the impact community cats are having on their local pest populations like rats, mice, and snakes. Sometimes, all it takes to turn the tide is a little reminder.
- Keeping in mind it will take a very long time (possibly years) to remove every single unaltered cat from an area, removal efforts are rarely successful. Removing cat colonies often results in the "vacuum effect", where new, unaltered cats will show up to fill the void left by removing the majority of a colony. Read more here: <https://www.alleycat.org/resources/the-truth-about-the-vacuum-effect/>
- The debate over outdoor cats has many layers and is one that has left seasoned conservationists red in the face for decades. Right now, the only alternatives to mass euthanasia of outdoor cats are relocation and

TNVR. As relocation is proven to be a death sentence, TNVR is the best practice possible for decreasing local cat populations humanely. You can read more about the problems with relocation here:

<https://www.alleycat.org/community-cat-care/relocation-the-last-resort/>

- Folks that still want to keep their yards free of cats can make efforts similar to protecting their properties from raccoons or possums. We have created a list of effective measures to deter cats here:

<https://goodmews.org/wp-content/uploads/Solutions-to-cat-related-issues.pdf>

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about community cats. If you have more questions about outdoor cats in your area, please feel free to check out the Community Cat section of our website for more resources:

<https://www.goodmews.org/tnr>