



# Benefits of trap-neuter-return program for feral cats

How the LA/SPCA keeps the feral cat population under control

By Della Hasselle



Photo by Cheryl Gerber

*Alicia Haefele cuddles a feral kitten treated under the LA/SPCA's trap-neuter-return program.*

At first glance, Flo looks like a normal pet kitten. The domestic shorthair's big, green eyes peer curiously from an orange and white face. Comfortable in her surroundings, she snuggles into a pair of hands nearly her size without so much as a flinch.

But at 12 weeks old, Flo isn't your normal house kitty. As a feral-born cat-turned-friendly, Flo represents the minority in a city with a robust feline population, according to Ana Zorilla, the chief executive officer of the Louisiana SPCA (LA/SPCA).

"You can't tame a feral," Zorilla explains matter-of-factly.

Flo was brought into the shelter under the organization's trap-neuter-return (TNR) program, and has the "ear tip" — a bit

of top ear removed as a marker of sterilization — to prove it. Although Flo is housed in the LA/SPCA's animal shelter as a candidate for adoption, most cats brought in under that program will be released back on the streets.

And that is exactly the point of the program, Zorilla says. With 8 million animals like Flo put to sleep every year because of overpopulation, TNR is the humane solution for feral cats, according to the LA/SPCA.

Literature provided by the shelter explains that cats trapped for TNR fall into three main groups: sickly animals, healthy cats over three months of age and friendly cats, who are grouped along with kittens who fall between 6-12 weeks of age.

Only the latter group stands chance for adoption, and it's the anomaly, according to Zorilla. The key is socialization — the earlier a cat is introduced to humans, the more likely it will be capable of living in a home.

Since most feral cats have learned instinctually to protect their turfs from any other animals besides those in the colony — humans included — they don't get too cozy with curious onlookers, Zorilla says, which makes "friendly" feral cats even less common.

"Unlike companion cats, feral cats are really going out into the wild," Zorilla says. "If they're sweet, they're not really feral. Feral cats aren't socialized, and they get stressed out when you handle them."

But members of the LA/SPCA are quick to add that feral cats aren't necessarily dangerous. In fact, according to Heather Rigney, the center's feral cat coordinator, those felines can be great for a neighborhood. The case is especially true in New Orleans, where pests like rodents and snakes can run rampant without a natural control.

"Where there are cats, there will be fewer dangerous pests which pose a risk to public health," according to the center's TNR brochure.

Rodent control is one reason why so many New Orleanians have decided to care for feral cat colonies, according to Rigney. In her experience, as many as two to three people regularly put out food for cats in any three-block area of the city, she says.

Still, the city's feral cat population poses conflict in New Orleans, where overpopulation tends to be the norm. Experts like Zorilla blame warm weather, abandoned houses and the laid-back nature of feral cat caretakers for the cat population problem.

Although it's difficult to determine just how many feral cats exist in New Orleans at any given time, there's "a lot," according to Rigney. Because of aforementioned factors and the productivity of cats, feral colonies can quickly multiply if there's no intervention or sterilization.

According to information provided by the LA/SPCA, intact cats can have at least two litters per year, with an average of 2.8 surviving kittens per litter, which in turn have kittens of their own.

Within five years, that would multiply to more than 12,000 cats.



PHOTO BY CHERYL GERBER

A feral cat. Its right ear has been tipped to show it has been sterilized. The LA/SPCA performs thousands of these surgeries per year.

For neighbors who are frightened by feral cats – or who just don't want them on their property – that number can be an alarming statistic, Rigney says. Often, residents will ask for the cats to be removed from their property. In that case, removal is another word for euthanization, since feral cats shouldn't be removed from their turf and frequently they aren't adoptable.

The LA/SPCA's TNR solution to the city's cat overpopulation problem is the most humane – and it seems to be working, Rigney says.

"We're seeing a decrease in the number of euthanizations and intakes into the shelter, which is indicative that we're following our mission of saving lives," Rigney says. "I'm thrilled with how receptive the community as a whole has been to TNR."

With such a prolific feline population in New Orleans, the city needs a productive animal clinic and shelter – and the LA/SPCA fits the bill, according to Loretta Lambert, the organization's community clinic director.

The LA/SPCA Community Clinic has performed 25,413 spay/neuter surgeries since January 1st, 2011, Lambert says. Of those, 8,803, or 35 percent, were surgeries on feral cats.

A walk through the clinic on a normal weekday shows just how busy its employees are. On any given day, there are three technicians preparing cats for surgery, and one doctor performing the procedure.

Although done with care, the whole procedure is executed much like an assembly line, for the sake of productivity. One technician gives anesthesia, while another shaves fur for surgery, and yet another transports the furry balls from prep to surgery.

As for the cats, they don't feel a thing. As the anesthesia works its magic, up to five or six cats will lie still in a room together, on their own little pads, hooked up to tiny oxygen masks and pulsometers attached to little toes of left front paws.

"It's not for everyone," Lambert warns before walking into the surgery prep and recovery room, explaining that sometimes the stillness of a kitty under anesthesia will cause an emotional reaction in observers.

After cats are prepped, they are transported into surgery, where a doctor works on one while keeping an eye on another.

Back in recovery, cats rest on what the technicians refer to as "the beach" — named for the heating pads placed under each kennel. Up to three kennels are stacked on top of each other at any given time in the "beach" section.

"We are as efficient as possible, so we can help as many animals as possible every single day," Lambert says.

And the impact is making a difference, Lambert adds.

Assuming that 50 percent of the clinic's TNR client surgeries were female cats, basing it on one year's worth of prevented litters, the clinic projects an impact of 52,818 fewer homeless or feral kittens as a result of TNR services since 2011, according to Lambert.

Although the TNR program is done primarily for humans — usually after a neighbor complains that cats are overtaking a porch or eating plants from the garden, for instance — the surgery benefits the cats, Rigney says. Neutered/spayed cats are less likely to be attacked, become ill or be prone to cervical or testicular cancers without those hormones, the absence of which also stems behaviors associated with mating, such as spraying, fighting and yowling. All of these actions contribute to the spread of unwanted cat diseases among colonies, according to the LA/SPCA.

Plus, as the LA/SPCA points out, it's cheaper to perform the surgery on a cat than it is to remove it from the neighborhood.

"Our tax dollars go toward putting animals to sleep," an LA/SPCA brochure says. "According to the national average, it costs \$60 to put an animal to sleep and only \$25 to get that same animal spayed or neutered."

That \$25 fee includes surgery, a rabies vaccine and an ear tip, Rigney says.

Rigney spends a lot of time talking to strangers about feral cats. She holds free instructional classes on the organization's TNR program four times a year, during which she tells people how to trap cats, keep them off property as well as the merits of TNR.

She also educates people about New Orleans City Council ordinances passed in 2012 that differentiate between a "community cat," a free-roaming cat that has been sterilized, vaccinated and ear-tipped; and a "feral cat," which is abandoned or born in the wild and hasn't been sterilized.

The LA/SPCA has used that City Council definition, as well as internal shelter data, to better identify which ZIP codes needed more help in turning feral cats into community cats. From 2011 to 2013, the organization secured grant funding from PetSmart Charities to offer sterilization for free in ZIP codes 70119, 70114 and 70131.

Still, Zorilla says there's always more that can be done. "Animal welfare in general is constantly evolving," she says. "We would do more if we had more resources."

## Related Stories



### "Dine Out For Paws," benefiting the LA-SPCA, to take place June 11

Restaurants donate 20 percent of their take for the day to the animal welfare organization.

by Kevin Allman



## Speaking of LA/SPCA, feral Cat



### Abita hosts dog-friendly fundraiser for LA/SPCA

Jun 13, 2016



### Give Me Shelter: Louisiana SPCA has a bigger, better home

Aug 31, 2015



### Dining for charity tonight

Nov 25, 2014

More »