

What are Feral Cats?

Feral cats are distinguished by their lack of social interactions with a variety of humans and their tendency to avoid handling.

However, not all cats living or born outside are feral. Any cat who receives significant positive social interactions with humans before they are 12 weeks old is likely to be a friendly, social adult cat. Please see our Kitten Socialization document for details on how to socialize kittens. Friendly cats living outdoors should be scanned for a microchip to see if they are lost pets.

This is not a hard and fast rule, but generally, cats that are older than 12 weeks become increasingly difficult to socialize, and so it is not recommended to try to socialize (or “tame”) feral cats over 12 weeks old. Attempts to do so are frequently unsuccessful, dangerous and subject the cats to immense amounts of stress. It is not considered humane to house feral cats indoors because they become extremely stressed to the point of illness.

Feral and friendly is entirely a behavior-based distinction and some cats do transition from feral to friendly over the course of their lives. If so, that’s great! However, you want to allow any socialization of feral adults to occur naturally while they live outside and interact with humans on their own terms.

Feral vs. Friendly

Do not solicit attention from people
Do not meow
Do not enjoy petting
Appear clean and well-cared for
Cannot be safely picked up
Must be trapped for transport
Should live outside
Should be TNR-d and ear-tipped
Are legally allowed to live outside per Cook County Ordinance 7-O-72
When approached in an open area will move away from people
****May be friendly with 1-2 people who feed them, but not with people in general***

Approach people for attention
Meow
Enjoy petting
May appear dirty and unkempt
Can be safely picked up
Can be placed in a cat carrier for transport
Usually live indoors
May have been TNR-d and ear-tipped in the past (by mistake or before they were friendly)
May be owned, abandoned or lost pets