

TNR Projects & Colony Management

Why TNR?

TNR (short for Trap-Neuter-Return) is a practice where feral cats are humanely trapped, spayed/neutered and returned to their outdoor home. The purpose of TNR is to control the outdoor cat population while providing the most humane living situation for each cat.

Feral cats are distinguished by their lack of social interactions with a variety of humans and their tendency to avoid handling. Any cat who does not receive significant positive social interactions with humans by ~12 weeks old is likely to be a feral adult. It is not considered humane to force feral cats to live indoors because they become extremely stressed to the point of illness.

TNR is the solution which prevents the outdoor cat population from growing while still allowing cats to live their lives outdoors. TNR prevents the births of countless kittens that would face harsh conditions outside and often would not survive to adulthood. It is important to TNR cats living outside as soon as they weigh 2 pounds (the requirement for sterilization surgery), as cats can get pregnant starting at 4-5 months and have 3-4 litters of 6+ kittens in a year!

How to Start a TNR Project

Preparation Phase

Communicate with Community Members. Identify all parties who are feeding the cats and let them know you are planning to do a TNR project. You may need to explain what TNR is, why it is important and the benefits to your community. If you know other feeders exist, you may want to establish a joint-feeding schedule to share in responsibilities and ask that they offer to help pay for veterinary services and collaborate with you to practice proper colony management in accordance with our guidelines and the Cook County Managed Care of Feral Cats ordinance.

Establish a routine feeding schedule. Feed the cats at the same time and in the same place for at least one week prior to trapping. Keep in mind that the time you feed is the time you will also trap – if you're hoping to trap in the morning before surgery, you should feed at the time you will want to trap. If you feed in the evening, you can trap the night before surgery.



Assess the colony. Using a tracking sheet, document the cats and kittens in the colony. Note a description of each cat including their name, gender (if known), color, markings, and any known health factors, such as visible infections, injuries, and pregnant or nursing cats. Note if any are very friendly strays – can they be adopted? Are there any kittens that can be socialized and adopted (these will typically be under 12 weeks old)?

Site Evaluation. If the cats are not on your property, **obtain permission to trap on that property.**

Obtain a humane trap for each cat you plan to trap. It is a good idea to also have at least one trap divider (also called a “fork”) to allow you safer access to the trap when there’s a cat in it. Tree House loans out humane traps and dividers to the public for no cost. Test the trap to ensure the trip-plate mechanism is functional.

Decide when you want to trap and make an appointment with a low-cost spay/neuter clinic. Tree House offers a limited number of surgery slots each week to Registered Colony Caretakers.

Condition the traps to ensure the highest likelihood of success on trapping day. If you can safely leave the traps at the feeding site, you should place them a week prior to trapping day and zip-tie them open. Line the floor of the trap with a layer of newspaper, cover it with an old sheet or towel, and place the food at the opening of the trap. Each day, put the food deeper into the trap by a few inches until the cat is walking all the way into the trap to eat. On trapping day, all you will have to do is cut the zip-ties before you feed. If you can’t leave the traps at the site, bring them with you for each feeding and repeat the above scenario. After the cats finish eating, pick up the traps and take them with you.

Trapping Phase

Pack your supplies. You’ll want newspaper to line the traps, tuna (or another smelly, tasty food), scissors to cut the zip-ties, and extra trap covers (old sheets or towels).

Place traps in same location as you’ve been feeding, cutting any zip-ties that have been keeping them open. Line floor of traps with fresh newspaper and ensure the trap cover is still in place.

Place the tuna directly on the newspaper at the very back of the traps. **Do not put glass or ceramic bowls in the trap.** Once trapped, the cat may thrash, making any breakable object a serious threat to the cat’s safety.

Observe the cats and the traps at a distance. Do **not** leave set traps unattended. Immediately after the trap has been sprung, ensure the trap is covered on



all sides to make the cat feel safe and calm. Remove trapped cats from the feeding location until all cats have been trapped.

If you are holding the cat overnight, be sure to fast them starting at 9p. You can provide wet food prior to that, which serves as their water source as well. If possible use a divider to keep the cat confined to one side of the trap while you carefully place food on a paper plate at the back of the trap. If you don't have a divider, you should slowly approach the trap and pull the cover back slightly so you can see where the cat is. Do not look the cat in the eye. When the cat is at one end of the trap, open the door on the other side and insert the items. Immediately close the door, making sure it's securely locked. Always wear long sleeves and heavy gloves as a precaution when accessing the trap.

Tips for Hard-to-Trap Cats

- Use a drop trap (which can be borrowed from Tree House).
- Line the trap floor with leaves.
- Withhold food for a day as it's easier to attract a hungry cat with tasty food.
- Try a variety of foods to entice them. Warming the food slightly can release the aroma and attract cats more successfully.

Spay/Neuter Surgery!

Transport the cats in their traps to the spay/neuter clinic, keeping the traps covered at all times. Feral packages at Tree House include spay/neuter surgery, vaccinations for rabies and distemper, flea treatment, microchipping and left ear-tipping. The package costs \$30 per cat. Microchipping ensures that if the cat is accidentally trapped you will be contacted and given an opportunity to retrieve the cat. It is also mandatory under the Cook County ordinance to microchip all feral cats that are part of managed colonies. PAWS and The Anti-Cruelty Society also operate low-cost spay/neuter clinics in Chicago.

Pick-up the cats after surgery and transport them to a safe location for recovery. Cats must recover a minimum of 24 hours in their traps after surgery in a warm (at least 65 F), dry, safe location (like a garage, basement or enclosed porch). Provide food & water and ensure the trap remains covered. Change the newspaper as needed.

Return Phase

Release the cat in the same place where they were trapped by standing behind the trap and opening the door on the other end. **Never release a cat into a new area.** Cats should be fully alert before they're released.

Colony Management

- Continue feeding and providing water on the same schedule (at least once a day).
- Remove uneaten food at night to prevent attracting wildlife.
- We also recommend that you provide a covered feeding station and outdoor litter boxes to keep things neat and sanitary. Keep food and litter areas clean and place them in discreet areas to avoid any potential issues with neighbors.
- Monitor the colony and provide updates to your sponsoring organization annually. TNR all new members of the colony as soon as possible. If you are registered with Tree House, we can also provide admission assessment appointments for any kittens or friendly cats that appear in your colony.
- Consider providing feral shelters. Tree House sells small and large shelters for \$25 and \$35, as well as instructions on how to make your own. Be sure to line with straw (also sold at Tree House for \$5 per bag), not hay or blankets as these can mold and freeze. Please see our Winterization Tips fact sheet for more details.
- Communicate with your neighbors to let them know that you are caring for the community cats. Be ready to address any nuisance issues and to counsel neighbors who need help trapping cats on their properties. We are here to assist you if you have any questions or if any issues arise!
- Provide veterinary care as mandated by the Cook County ordinance. Tree House offers re-vaccination appointments for registered colony caretakers. We can also provide you with a list of veterinary practices that will see feral cats.

Thank you for taking this important step to help outdoor cats and your community. You are directly impacting the lives of countless cats. Please do not hesitate to contact us at any time with any questions or concerns!