

Cats and Release



How a woman with a cat allergy and an affinity for canines ended up caring for a gang of feral felines.

By Alicia Garceau

“My legs are starting to cramp,” I whispered. I had been crouched, leaning against the refrigerator in my kitchen, for the better part of an hour. My husband, Jeff, who had assumed an almost two-dimensional stance in the narrow space between the back door and the kitchen counter, took his eyes off of the window for a moment and turned to me. “Maybe this isn’t going to work,” he said, sounding almost hopeful.

As we considered abandoning our post—clank!—we heard the trap snap closed. “We got one!” Jeff yelled. He yanked open the back door, and we ran into the yard. Inside the trap, a long-haired tabby cat spun in circles, frantically looking for a way out. I covered the cage with a sheet, and the animal quieted. Jeff moved the cat to a triage area in the garage, and we returned to our scouting positions. For the next few hours, we repeated these steps: set a new trap, bait it with tuna, and then lie (or, in my case, crouch) in wait as one unsuspecting cat after another wandered into the yard, lured by the aroma. Night fell, ending our operations, but in the garage were the spoils of our day’s work: five free-roaming cats, each in the relative calm of its own sheeted cage.



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Early the next morning, Jeff and I loaded the traps into the newspaper-lined trunk of our car and headed north on Allisonville Road. Plaintive meows emanated from the cages every so often. We were on our way to an Indy Feral Spay Day, where each cat would be neutered or spayed, vaccinated, and given basic medical care for things like eye infections, ear mites, and wounds. Afterward, we would release the cats where we had trapped them and sign on as caretakers of one of Indy Feral's 2,500 managed cat colonies.

I would like to note, for the record, that I am not a crazy cat lady. I don't wear sweaters with cats on them. I do not subscribe to Cat Fancy magazine or have a bumper sticker on my car that says "Cats are prrr-fect." Until I found Claritan, contact with cats made me feel like my eyes were filled with crushed glass and sent me into waves of spastic sneezing. I grew up dotting on a Springer Spaniel named Bogie, and my only feline experience was my grandma's cat, named Cat. Cat was a mean bugger. I spent most visits at Grandma's staying the heck away from him.

So how did a woman with an indifference to cats become responsible for an entire tribe of feral felines? Let's just say I didn't seek out this volunteer opportunity. The cats chose me.

According to Indy Feral, an estimated 178,000 cats roam freely in Indianapolis. Some of them have been abandoned—left to fend for themselves when owners moved or decided they no longer wanted their pets. Some are the offspring of unaltered pets with access to the outdoors.

Others are truly feral—not socialized to people due to either lack of human contact or being born in the wild. Besides breeding out of control, unmanaged, free-roaming cats come with a litany of nuisance behaviors such as rummaging through garbage for food, fighting over mates, yowling, and spraying to mark territory.

Before 2005, a person feeding stray cats in Marion County could be held liable for violating multiple city ordinances. Under the city-county code, that person had assumed ownership of the cats and could be fined for allowing them to roam freely. Because feral cats are not adoptable, those captured by Indianapolis Animal Care & Control faced certain death. Friendly free-roaming cats didn't fare much better: In 2000, the city eutha-nized 70 percent of all animals brought to its facility.

But four years ago, another way of dealing with feral cats took hold in Indy. Trap-Neuter-Return, or TNR, involves trapping free-roaming cats, neutering them, and then—after allowing them a period of recovery—releasing the cats where they were originally trapped. After the initial TNR, a caretaker feeds, waters, provides shelter for, and monitors the cat colony, and sterilization virtually eliminates the yowling and spraying associated with strays. Eventually, the cat population diminishes through natural attrition. Today in Indianapolis, a person caught feeding strays and allowing them to roam freely is still breaking the law and can be fined—unless they work through the TNR program, and the cat is part of a managed colony of ferals.

TNR isn't exactly new. The method emerged about 50 years ago in England, though it didn't reach the United States in a big way until 1990, with the formation of Alley Cat Allies, a cat-advocacy group based in Bethesda, Maryland. As might be expected, the movement first gained popularity on the coasts. But in 2002, a group called Indy Feral formed to tackle Indy's growing free-roaming cat population. The group sold the City-County Council on TNR, and in 2005, it became the city's official policy for dealing with stray and feral cats.

The ordinance placed Indianapolis at the center of the Trap-Neuter-Return movement by making it the first major U.S. city to adopt TNR. The free-roaming cat problem is no better or worse here than in other cities; the numbers are at crisis level nationwide. But Indy, a city known for being more pragmatic than progressive, ended up at the forefront of TNR because its benefits appeal to Hoosiers: It is humane. It is effective. And it even saves the taxpayers money.

We had lived in our Broad Ripple home for just a few months when I first noticed the cats—or at least their paw prints in the snow—on a frosty winter morning in 2004. I pondered whose cat might be running loose in the neighborhood and fretted that the poor thing might use up most of its nine lives darting across the busy street in front of my house or freeze in the frigid temperatures. So, I watched.

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I didn't have to wait long. The next morning I spied a gray tabby with a thick coat trotting up the sidewalk. He disappeared around the corner of the house. Not a minute later, another cat—this time a fluffy black ball of fur with short, stubby legs—followed. Then a pair of tabbies, one with white paws, chased each other up the path. I dialed my husband at work. "I think we have a problem," I said. "We seem to live on some sort of cat trail."

Over the next week, we kept a tally and counted 11 cats using our sidewalk as a sort of feline expressway to an unknown destination. We were bemused until Jeff determined our backyard was the end of the road. The cats were living under our deck.

What does one do with 11 homeless cats? I Googled "stray cat Indianapolis." The top listing was indyferal.org, where I learned that a pair of unaltered cats and their offspring are theoretically capable of producing roughly 80 million cats in 10 years. I shuddered and made a panicked phone call to Indy Feral's hotline.

A few days later, Jayne Eash, my assigned cat captain, arrived at our door, humane traps in hand, and showed us how to nab the cats. She explained that once we trapped, we would transport the cats to an Indy Feral Spay Day. The tip of each cat's left ear would be surgically removed so that they would be easily identified as belonging to a managed colony.

Since Indianapolis passed the TNR ordinance, the Humane Society of the United States and ASPCA have endorsed the method. There is such a demand for TNR in the Indianapolis area that Indy Feral has limited its services to Marion County, and still, some 800 cats are on a waiting list to be sterilized and ear-tipped. "That tells me that people want a non-lethal way to help these cats," says Lisa Tudor, president of Indy Feral.

A 2007 nationwide study by Alley Cat Allies agrees. The survey asked: "If you saw a stray cat in your community and could only choose between two courses of action—leaving the cat where it is outside or having the cat caught and then put down—which would you consider to be the more humane option for the cat?" An overwhelming majority—81 percent—believed leaving a stray cat outside to live out its life is more humane than catching the cat and euthanizing it.

Besides, trapping and killing doesn't work, Tudor says. Instead, it creates a vacuum effect: Remove cats from an area, and more cats will move in to take their place and begin breeding. Trapping and killing is also extremely expensive. The cost for the city to pick up a cat just to take it back to the shelter to hold it and kill it is \$150. According to estimates from Indy Feral, since 2005 the city has saved nearly \$300,000 in costs associated with trapping and killing. The number of stray and feral cats impounded by Indianapolis Animal Care & Control has dropped 37 percent. Euthanasia rates have declined, too—down 29 percent.

Later on the day of the cats' surgeries, Jeff and I retrieved them from a sea of traps lining the waiting room of an Indianapolis veterinary clinic. Woozy from the anesthesia, the cats were much quieter on the way home. When the time came to release after a short recuperation period, each cat took off, running as fast as its little legs could go. Considering what each of them had been through, Jeff and I doubted that we would see any of the cats again, but within a few days, the gang was back.

Four years have passed since we first signed on as cat-colony caretakers. And even though these cats are not our pets and wouldn't make good ones for anybody, they do feel like part of our lives.

Nubber, Big Poppa, Blackie, Blackie II, and Socks—five of the originals—gather each day at the feeding station. Super Fuzzy Low Rider, Blackie III, and Nancy have joined the colony more recently and were also given the Indy Feral treatment. Vienna, Colin Feral, and Sam—the only "friendly ferals" in our group—have been adopted into permanent homes. And in a testament to the Trap-Neuter-Return program working just as it is supposed to, Mama, Frankie, Orange Julius, and Ratty Cat have gone to the big scratching post in the sky.

It's been a couple of years since we've needed to trap cats, and our colony is officially, in the parlance of Indy Feral, "on maintenance." A few days ago, though, I saw a new cat hanging around the kibble that didn't have its ear tipped. Then I spied another. It's kitten season. We're taking no chances.

Here, kitty, kitty.