



The Many Differences Between Feral and Tame Cats

By Lana

Don't judge feral cats unless you have worked with them. I rescue abandoned, feral and outdoor cats exclusively, and also sometimes take feral kittens from shelters to socialize. I do not take cats that have lived indoors (or whose parents did) or owner give-ups. I help manage about a dozen feral cat colonies, which means that I help provide food and veterinary care that the cats would not get otherwise. Some of what I do includes: give shots to the cats I can handle, put worming meds in their food when needed, trap the original and newly dumped cats to be spayed or neutered. I pay for this out of my own pocket. I transport the cats to be spayed or neutered, keeping them in my garage for a few days to recover in their traps and then re-release them where I found them. I also bring food to the people in the neighborhood/barns who feed them.

Feral, outdoor, and barn cats are products of survival of the fittest. The kitten mortality rate is high, but the ones who survive are healthy, smart, agile, athletic and immune to almost everything. Human intervention (feeding, vaccinations, taking care of sick kittens) decreases the mortality rate markedly, but the offspring are then not as healthy as those in the most brutal environments. Many cats survive living in small igloo-like dog houses in the Midwest winters just fine. They are like our pioneer ancestors who settled America – smart, hardy, brave. If people survived the childhood illnesses, epidemics, childbirth, dysentery, human and animal predators on the frontier, as well as the cold and heat and rain, they lived a long life. They can be compared to today's feral cats.

When I started working with feral cats three years ago, I knew nothing about feral, barn or outdoor cats, although I had purebred cats all of my life. I didn't think cats could survive outdoors! Now, I seem to find this hearty stock everywhere, and I appreciate their pioneer-like qualities.

I have read the difference between a wild animal and a tame animal is that wild animals have to be handled and tamed with each generation. If kittens are not exposed to humans and handled by the time they are about 4 months, they are generally afraid of humans and cannot be directly handled. (It is difficult to socialize them after this, although patient and skilled rescuers have done so.) My question; are cats really tame domestic animals or just wild animals that we tame anew each generation by our handling? This is a part of their mystique and fascination.

Behind any house cat is a feral cat ready to survive if the cat is dumped and has to live by its instincts. Some "feral" adults revert to being tame house cats in weeks – obviously they were originally housecats that reverted to feral instincts in order to survive.

FERAL CAT BEHAVIOR vs. TAME CAT BEHAVIOR

In the wild, mom cats are very strict. They train their kittens to be quiet and stay put. Mewing can attract predators. Running and playing is dangerous and often fatal. I see outdoor moms I brought inside growling, hissing, hitting with their paws and biting the necks of kittens who meow a lot or start to play too wildly or too far from them. Eventually, the moms realize they are now in a safe indoor environment and "give" the kittens to me to train. At this point, the kittens would trash my bedroom and have accidents all over my bed if I did not confine them in a cage for a while.

In the barn colonies, the mom cats make their kittens wash and wash and wash, to get the food smell away from the fur that would attract predators. They don't let them play very much either. It is kind of sad, but necessary for survival. That is why adult ferals or barn cats often start acting like playful kittens when



The Many Differences Between Feral and Tame Cats

brought inside; they missed out on play and childhood. It is kind of like children in war-torn countries or on our own frontier in pioneer days. The mom cats also make their kittens roll in manure to disguise their smell too, which explains why I often smell terrible after a day of socializing/trapping in a barn! I have seen outdoor moms play very rough with their dominant male kitten, training him to be an alpha male. They train the kittens to run when they see humans – go to the food dish, look, and run when a human appears. It is a game, but a game of survival. I see them training the kittens this way even with an empty dish.

Former feral kittens taken from feral moms and socialized at an early age (4-8 weeks) retain some of this learned early behavior. They are quiet kittens, playful to a degree with toys and bugs and other cats, but they don't knock things over, fly through the air over furniture and trash a room like kittens born inside. These cats are scrupulous about using litter pans, as I have found all ferals to be. It is instinct to keep their presence unknown to predators.

The moms don't feel they need to do all the work of disciplining and teaching safe indoor kittens, so they don't seem to bother. Even the feral moms seem to "give" the kittens to me -- sending them walking up to me like, "you trapped us, well, here are the kittens; take care of them – be careful what you wish for!" There is such a difference in kitten behavior between kittens born in the house, even to feral moms, and kittens taken from feral moms at a young age and socialized. These last ones are my favorites; they are fun, but the moms already did all the work and training; they stay in one place easily (like your lap).

Outdoor cats are also lair oriented; they stay in a small space that will confine their kittens. This small space makes them feel secure, which is why I personally feel some caging and confining is not cruel; it imitates their natural scheme of things. To me, caging a mom cat with kittens is providing a lair for them where they are safe from being stepped on, etc. However, I know this can also be done without caging if you are willing to do a lot more work. Dogs like wide, open spaces; cats like security. The moms make their kittens follow them in a row like ducklings, and discipline those who get out of line, another survival instinct. They play a little at dawn and dusk when the night predators are not around but it is light enough for them to see well, but they make their kittens go into a safe place at night. In one barn, the kittens had their own crib in the horse-feeding dish filled with hay that they climbed into at dusk.

FERAL CAT HEALTH vs. TAME CAT HEALTH

Once feral colonies have been spayed or neutered and vaccinated, the cats tend to live as long as or longer than housecats. In one of the colonies I care for, the cats dying in the past couple years were all over fifteen (from cancer – maybe from breathing and ingesting the pesticides on the farm where they live?). These cats were spayed and neutered just three years ago, and until then had never been vaccinated. One cat in a colony with which I am familiar is over 15 years old and is missing a leg and an eye from a run-in with an animal about ten years ago. She has three litters of healthy kittens a year, which I trap, socialize and adopt out. She has eluded traps for years. She could not be trapped to be treated even after her accident. She recovered on her own! Until I took three kittens recently from a shelter that were sick with an upper respiratory infection, I had never encountered a URI in three years of rescue.

I don't advocate cats living outdoors. I keep my own house cats inside. However, living outside is a good alternative for feral, semi-feral (friendly only to their caretakers who feed them) or even unadoptable skitterish cats. The alternative is death. I don't believe we should play God and decide that the cats would rather be dead than live outdoors. I do believe that friendly cats should NOT be placed as barn cats, shed cats, etc. but adopted out as indoor pets. My personal pet peeve is farmers who want their barn cats to



The Many Differences Between Feral and Tame Cats

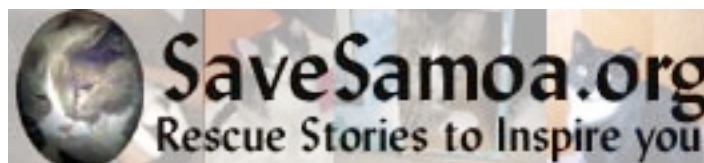
be pettable. The cats I relocate to barns are basically the same as any wild small animal like a raccoon, squirrel, opossum, except that they need to be fed by the farmer.

If the outdoor cats are fed even a cheap dry food to supplement their mice, they are strong enough to handle the parasite load and pass it. Generally, the colonies don't show any signs of parasites, although they catch and eat mice daily. If the farmer or caretakers do not feed feral cats, then the parasite load will weaken most of them and they can fall prey to viruses and bacterial infections that could kill them. This is why some farm colonies die out from distemper or other feline diseases and viruses. It is imperative that the farmers feed the feral barn cats, or only the very hardiest will survive.

"SPAY AND STAY"

When I have to relocate feral cats (I don't like to do this, only when their barns are being torn down or the people refuse to allow the cats to stay in their yards), the rule is that the farmer must feed them, provide a heated water dish (in cold climates which I often buy this myself and give to the farmer) and have a heated or insulated barn with a wood or concrete floor and doors that are closed at night and in the winter and is stocked with hay/straw. Corn cribs without doors are not acceptable. Farm dogs must be cat friendly too. For suburban/city garage or shed cats, similar guidelines apply. Also, any relocated cat has to be confined at least a week in a secure cage in the barn and then kept confined in the building for at least another week. They need to be fed wet food during this time to make them stay or they will wander back to their old home grounds and most likely be killed in the process, which is why relocation can be so difficult and why "spay and stay" is the rule. The cats don't wander after they are spayed or neutered and well fed for a time, and they often live as long as housecats. In fact, these "working cats" are probably far less bored than my own housecats.

*This article was adapted with permission
©www.straypetadvocacy.org 2003*



For personal use only. Please seek permission for commercial or educational uses from admin@straypetadvocacy.org.