

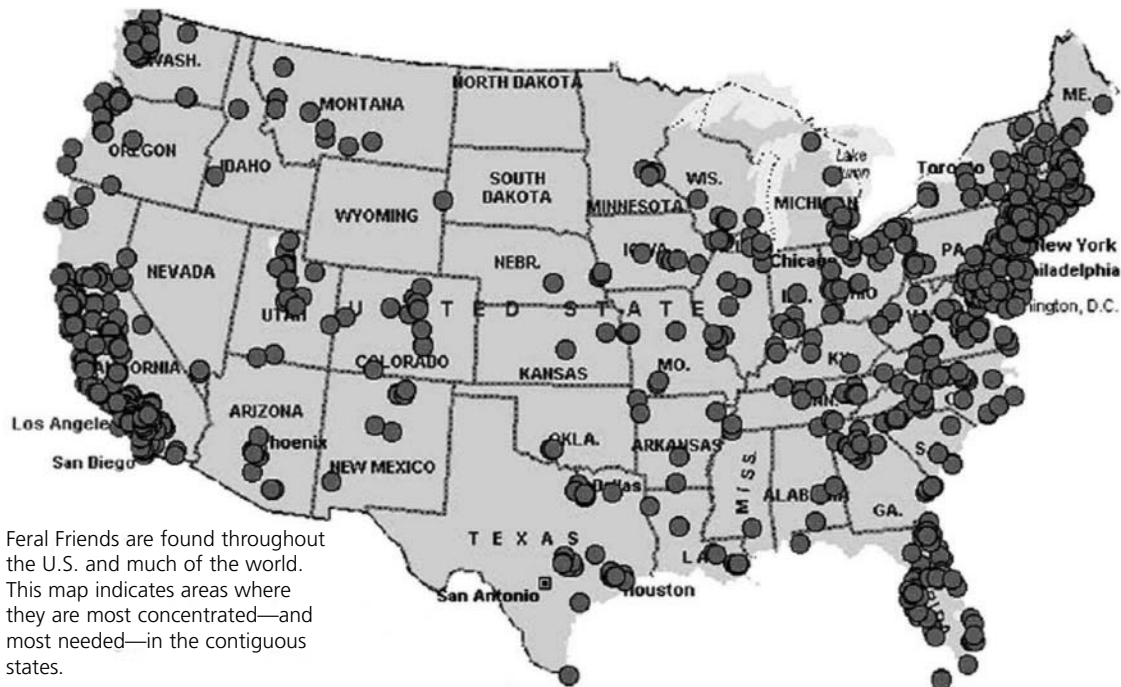
Alley Cat Allies

The National Feral Cat Resource

Reprinted from *Alley Cat Action*, Spring 2003

ACA'S FERAL FRIENDS NETWORK

Helping People Help Feral Cats



Feral Friends are found throughout the U.S. and much of the world. This map indicates areas where they are most concentrated—and most needed—in the contiguous states.

ALLEY CAT ALLIES (ACA) is a small organization working in a huge arena: the U.S. and Canada. In 12 years, ACA has influenced public policy, educated animal control agencies and shelters, and supported the work of thousands of individual feral cat advocates. We are the National Feral Cat Resource. This article is about our most important, and least heralded, resource: the Feral Friends Network. We could not do this work without them.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

When Alley Cat Allies was founded in 1990, affordable spay/neuter for feral cats didn't exist in Washington, DC. The first ACA volunteers, like Sharon Lawson, shuttled feral cats to many private veterinarians around the area. But prices were too high, and schedules too rigid, to accommodate large numbers of feral cats. The volunteers also encountered, among the vets, little

knowledge of how to handle wild animals and, too often, little sympathy for their efforts.

In the process, ACA volunteers also met dozens of people who were feeding feral cats and struggling to get the cats spayed or neutered. Facing hostility and even ridicule, these people had been forced underground, but they helped each other with advice, knowledge, equipment, and most important, moral support.

Those Washington, DC, cat feeders were the first Feral Friends. But people were feeding feral cats in other communities as well. ACA's founders believed that people working together would power the drive to improve conditions for feral cats everywhere, so ACA sought those people out. The premier issue of *Alley Cat Action*, June 1991, listed five groups in three states conducting programs for feral cats and issued a call for more. Those groups anchored the national Feral Friends Network (FFN).

Alley Cat Allies developed the FFN by consistently asking people with feral cat experience to volunteer their time. Casework became a steady source of Feral Friends. “We helped them,” says ACA National Director Becky Robinson, “and then we solicited them to help others.”

Today, there are 1,400 Feral Friends registered in 47 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, 5 Canadian provinces, and 11 other countries: Bermuda, China, Costa Rica, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Singapore, the U.K., and the West Indies. But because an FFN member can be either an individual or a group, there are, in fact, many more than 1,400 people in the network.

Alley Cat Allies receives 150 to 200 requests for a Feral Friend each month by e-mail, phone, letter, or through www.pets911.com.

“The one comment we constantly hear is, ‘Animal control told me when I trap the cat, I must call them, they’ll take care of it, they’ll put it to sleep. I’m not going to do that.’ People know that they have to help the cats themselves, and they look to people like themselves for help.”

—Becky Robinson

WHO ARE THE FERAL FRIENDS?

Feral Friends are caretakers, feral cat groups, veterinary professionals, and animal control agencies and shelters who know that more than feeding must be done to help outdoor cats. Feral Friends all advocate **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)**; have agreed to be identified in a national database of their peers; and assist other feral cat advocates with advice, practical assistance, advocacy, and/or moral support.

Beyond that, they are a diverse group. TNR takes root in many environments—from cities and towns to the most rural areas—and across the socio-economic scale. People who commit to solving feline overpopulation are as varied as the citizens of North America.

Who are the Feral Friends? Here, from the rolls of the FFN, is a representative sample of the 1,400 caring and committed individuals and groups helping others help feral cats:

- **Large groups** with the volunteers and resources to sterilize hundreds or thousands of cats yearly, to lend

traps and supplies, to run foster and adoption programs, and/or to advocate change in public policies toward feral cats: Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society, Neighborhood Cats, AzCATs, Metro Ferals, SPAY/USA Operation Catnip, Feral Cat Coalition-San Diego, Homeless Cat Management Team, Alley Cat Advocates, SCATStreet Cat Rescue Program. There are many more.

Every one of these groups was founded by one or a few committed individuals willing to do the work of building an organization.

“I am amazed at all the support I have been getting from you and others regarding feral cats! I am also amazed at how many people are willing to sacrifice so much for ferals!”

—Pamela M., Maryland

- **Veterinary professionals** who offer low- or no-cost spay/neuter services. Vets often contribute their clinics or mobile spay/neuter vans for feral cat spay days: Tait’s Every Animal Matters (T.E.A.M.), Northern Virginia No-Cost Spay/Neuter Clinic, Feral Cat Coalition-Oregon, Fix Our Ferals, Dr. Darby Thornburgh, Dr. John Grillo.

- **Advocates** able to respond quickly to local cat crises: Val Schweikhardt, Metro Animal Resource Services; Anne Zepernick, Best Friends Animal Sanctuary.

- **Individuals** who share expertise: Ruth Johnson, Maryland; Jennifer Conger, Virginia; David and Leslie Gale, Florida.

- **Caretakers who became professionals:** Holly Sizemore, No More Homeless Pets-Utah; Angie Thomas, KittiCo Cat Rescue; Aimee St. Arnaud, Best Friends Animal Sanctuary; Margo Johnson, Alley Cat Allies.

- **Small groups** focused on their immediate neighborhood: Troy Industrial Street Cats, Kitty Kops.

- **Enlightened humane societies and shelters:** PACT Humane Society, Illinois; Tompkins County SPCA, New York; Wisconsin Humane Society, Milwaukee; Iosco County Animal Shelter, Michigan.

- **University and college students** nationwide who manage campus cats, change campus policies, and help each other via ACA’s campus listserve (a steady source of current, practical information for ACA, as well): Aggie Feral Cat Alliance of Texas (AFCAT), Stanford Cat Network, University of Central Florida, Emory University.

“Why do this work? To watch my colony of feral seniors (all over 10 years old)—one sunning himself eyes closed in comfort, one toying with a catnip mouse, one grooming his loved sibling—I value these lives based not on what they can do for me, but on the spectacular and wonderful creatures they are in and of themselves. That’s why I do it.”

—Holly S., Utah

PROGRESS TO THE TENTH POWER

People working together—sharing information, methods, expertise—have helped thousands of other people trap, neuter, and return tens of thousands of feral cats, socialize and find homes for an equal number of kittens, and stop the cycle of reproduction. Innovations such as drop trap designs, shelter and feeding station plans, and Sunday Spay Days became available to groups across the nation because Feral Friends shared their knowledge.

The Feral Friends Network makes it possible for ACA to affect the lives of feral cats across North America. But the truth is the FFN is only a portion of the people involved. All those who help others trap, sterilize, feed, organize, do the everyday work, and learn are feral friends—whether or not we know their names.

Time and again, we observe that TNR programs can organize, grow, and succeed with very little money and few resources, but never without a full and open commitment from people. There are many times 1,400 feral friends out there. ■

ARE YOU A FERAL FRIEND? ALLEY CAT ALLIES WANTS YOU!

Join the Feral Friends Network and help people help feral cats! Feral Friends share their knowledge about trapping feral cats and managing colonies. They can also share resources, such as names of veterinarians working with feral cats, programs for free or low-cost spay/neuter, sources of traps, locations of bulk food bargains, and much more. You choose the level and type of help you can offer.

Feral Friends must have experience with **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)** according to the method that ACA promotes. Applicants are asked to complete a questionnaire and provide contact information. Interested? Write to Alley Cat Allies, 1801 Belmont Road NW, Suite 201, Washington, DC 20009-5147 or alleycat@alleycat.org.