

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

A "feral" cat is unsocialized and tends to be fearful of people and keep a distance. Ferals are most often found living outdoors in groups known as colonies. The cats in a colony share a common food source and territory and may include not only ferals, but also strays - former pet cats who were recently lost or abandoned and are still tame. Most feral colonies originate from unneutered stray cats. Ferals, as well as strays, are increasingly referred to as "community cats" or "free-roaming cats."



- While they live outside human homes and exhibit wild behavior, feral cats are not wildlife. The vast majority rely on some form of human-based food source for their sustenance, whether it is a caretaker who feeds daily, a dumpster behind a supermarket or scraps left on fishing docks. Very few subsist on hunting alone.
- "Feral" is a behavioral characteristic, not a biological one. As a result, the same cat can be feral and not feral at different points in its life. An outdoor kitten may be born feral, then be taken indoors, socialized, and adopted out as a friendly pet. Or an adult cat may be a gregarious pet for years then become lost and, after a few months of living on his own, start to act unsocialized. In addition, feral is not a black or white quality, but different cats will be feral to different degrees.

Just how feral a cat is will depend primarily on four factors:



1. **Age** - Kittens less than eight weeks old, even though born to a feral mother, can usually be socialized within a matter of days. Beyond that age, socialization becomes a longer and more uncertain process with each passing week. After reaching four months old, a kitten will likely retain some typical feral characteristics for the rest of his life, such as fear of strangers or change. A fully adult feral cat may require years to socialize if they ever do.
2. **Number of feral generations** - the more distance, in terms of generations, that separate a cat born outdoors from her original stray, once-socialized ancestor, the wilder that cat will be. In other words, feral behavior will tend to increase with each successive feral generation.
3. **Amount of human contact** - cats who regularly interact with people are more likely to show at least some signs of socialization than cats who have little or no contact. With a gestation period of only 63 days, females reproduce quickly and prolifically. If kittens are not rescued by eight weeks of age, socialization and potential adoption becomes more difficult.
4. **Individual personality** - cats, like all animals, are individuals with their own personalities. Some ferals are naturally friendly and will warm up to people quickly. Many colony caretakers have also observed that some ferals, after being spayed or neutered, begin to behave more like pets.