Alley Cat Allies
25 Years of Advocacy

Printer Friendly Guide - How to Conduct Trap-Neuter-Return

Every day, compassionate people across the country are providing care to stray and feral cats. They're following the simple steps of Trap-Neuter-Return. They are improving the quality of life for cats. Successfully trapping, sterilizing, vaccinating, and returning feral cats begins with a plan. There are basic steps you must take to prepare for trapping.

Here you will find guidelines for humane trapping, lists and links of suggested trapping equipment, and a video of a successful feral cat trapping.

These instructions are general and do not necessarily take into account your colony's specific circumstances or environment. No trapping is performed in a vacuum. Each location—a college campus, a warehouse, an alley, a small business parking lot—may have unique elements for you to consider. Since these instructions are not exhaustive, you will need to use your discretion to determine any add-on steps. For instance, you may need to work with college administrators, connect with other caregivers who are not readily available, or take measures to ensure your safety. Please use the following guidelines and expand upon them as your circumstances require.

Three further notes before you continue.

1) **Never use darts or tranquilizers to attempt to catch a cat.** These methods are dangerous and stressful to the cats. Nets are also not recommended for the same reasons. Use humane box traps. (See Equipment List)

2) **NEVER attempt to pick up a feral cat, particularly to put her in a carrier or trap.** No matter how sweet she seems, handling a cat who has never—or not recently—been touched will frighten and stress her. She may struggle to get away and harm you in the process. With no vaccination records, she is bound to be killed or put into quarantine. Use the correct trapping practices outlined below and ensure the safety of both you and the cat.

3) **Keep in mind that your trapping will be most effective if you employ targeted trapping.** (See Target Trapping)

Overview:

Before You Trap

Familiarize yourself with the Trap-Neuter-Return process and plan your trapping day in advance. Throughout all of your trapping

endeavors, plan ahead to ensure the safety and well-being of the cats and reduce your own stress.

- Coordinate with other caregivers who may be feeding the cats, and prepare the cats for trapping by feeding on a schedule and in a designated feeding area.
- Determine how many traps and neuter appointments you will need to schedule after assessing the colony.
- Determine a safe, temperature-controlled location where you will be able to hold the cats after surgery while they recover.
- Gather and prepare all of the appropriate equipment and understand how it all works ahead of time —and practice! It is important to test all traps, to ensure that the trip plate works.
- Withhold food 24 hours before trapping, and you are ready to start trapping.

Trapping

- On the day-of, prepare the traps by lining the bottom with newspaper, tagging with a location description, and baiting.
- Set the traps and watch them from afar.
- Once a cat is trapped, cover the trap - this will help keep the cat calm.
- Ahead of time, learn how to deal with particularly hard-to-trap cats.
- After securing the traps in your vehicle, head to the veterinarian or clinic for surgeries that day or the following day.

Post-Surgery

- After surgery (learn more about the surgery in our <veterinary> section), keep the cats in the trap at all times.
- Transport the cats safely back to your secure, indoor location where cats will be in a temperature-controlled environment, dry, and away from danger.
- Monitor the cats for any illness.
- For your safety and the cats keep them in their covered cages at all times.
- Feed the cats eight hours or so after surgery and return the cats, following the guidelines in the Post-Surgery section.
- Return the cats to the exact location where they were trapped.
- Clean the traps.

People and Cats

A key part of carrying out Trap-Neuter-Return is to establish a friendly dialogue with neighborhood residents and address any possible concerns.

Familiarize yourself with the Trap-Neuter-Return process and plan your trapping day in advance. In order to ensure the safety and well being of the cats and reduce your own stress, make sure to plan all of your trapping endeavors in advance.

Details:

Before You Trap

1. **Read the step-by-step instructions below.** Understanding the process thoroughly before you trap is essential. Being prepared helps you anticipate potential problems and plan solutions ahead of time. Keep in mind that your trapping will be most effective if you employ targeted trapping.

2. **Find and coordinate with the other caregivers who are feeding about your plans to trap.** If you are the primary caregiver, this is a good opportunity to educate the community and let them know you are caring for the cats. If there are other people feeding the cats, talk to them about Trap-Neuter-Return and try to coordinate efforts, particularly when it comes to feeding, withholding food before trapping, and assessing the colony. Alley Cat Allies' literature, including doorhangers, can help explain what you are doing and why.

3. **Feed on a schedule.** Establish a routine time and place for feeding the cats every day for at least two weeks prior to trapping. Also, get the cats used to eating in a 30-minute period. Food should not be left out all of the time. The cats will quickly adapt to the feeding time and will come at that time each day. **This is essential to making sure that they all come to eat when you plan to trap.** Your trapping day will be most successful if the cats are used to seeing traps. You may want to begin feeding cats out of unset traps to gain their confidence. Remember to work with others who may be caring for the cats in order to coordinate feeding efforts, especially when withholding food and assessing the colony.

4. **Ensure that the feeding station is appropriately placed.** Position the feeding station in an area that is free of human traffic and is inconspicuous. You will have greater success in manipulating their schedule, getting them to show up, and consequently trapping.

5. **Assess the cats.** While feeding, start a log of each cat and kitten you see. This will help you monitor the number of cats and their health, determine their approximate age, and help you determine the numbers of appointments and traps you will need. It will also help you identify if some cats are stray —friendly to humans—and may be candidates for adoption into homes or if you will need to be prepared for trapping and fostering kittens (learn more in our Socialized Cat Guide.) It is important that you get to know the colony, the number of cats, and their description to ensure that all of the cats have been trapped. This is also important for ongoing colony care so you will know if any cats are missing or if any new cats join the colony that need to be neutered. Use the ACA tracking sheet to document each cat in the colony and learn more about keeping good records in our How to Provide Care for Outdoor Cats Guide.

   While you are assessing the colony, you will also have to consider their specific circumstances and safety. Alley Cat Allies does not recommend relocation; it should be done only under extreme circumstances when the cats' lives are in eminent danger. The best way to protect the cats is to ensure they are spayed and neutered immediately; then consider other plans that may be necessary, such as relocation. Be fully prepared before you decide to trap and move cats by reading our Guidelines for Safe Relocation of Feral Cats. A common reason caregivers feel they need to relocate a colony is poisoning threats.

6. **Schedule the Neuter appointments.** Line up clinic or veterinary appointments before you trap. You don't want to successfully trap cats and then have nowhere to take them. Make appointments for the number of traps you have, though you may not catch a cat in every trap. Find out if the clinic or veterinarian is familiar with trapping and make sure they are prepared if the reservation isn't fulfilled completely. Ask them what number of cats they can spay and neuter in a single day. Plan your trapping session so that the cats are transported to the veterinarian or clinic as soon as possible. Make appointments for the same or following day to keep cats' time in the traps at a minimum.

   It is important to find a veterinarian or low-cost clinic familiar with or willing to learn how to work with feral cats. Your local Feral Friends can help.

7. **Determine the location where you will be holding the trapped cats**, both before transporting to the clinic and afterwards during their surgery recovery. The indoor location should be dry, temperature-controlled, quiet, and away from dangers such as toxic fumes, other animals, or people. It is important to remember that cats are very vulnerable when in traps!

8. **Be prepared for specific scenarios that may occur during your trapping.** If you trap a severely injured or sick cat, be prepared to get her to a veterinary clinic immediately. Even before you start trapping have a contingency plan about where you will take the injured or sick cat, and be prepared for any associated financial costs. If you trap a nursing female—you can trap her without her kittens and get her back to them as soon as possible or you can trap her with her kittens and return the whole troop together. Prepare a full-service emergency veterinarian who can handle feral cats in case there is a complication that a spay/neuter clinic cannot address.

9. **Although it is not necessary, you may want to consider securing help** for the day-of, either through recruiting volunteers or asking a friend. Trapping by yourself, especially for your first time, can be overwhelming and exhausting. Having a companion is also a good safety precaution if you are trapping at night or in an unfamiliar area.

10. **Gather all of the appropriate equipment**. When trapping a colony, it is best to have at least one trap per cat. Alley Cat Allies suggests having more traps than cats, because you never know which locations will be most attractive to the cats or if a trap will malfunction.

11. **Practice setting traps ahead of time.** If you have never set a trap, doing it near the trap site on the day-of is not the best place to learn. Be as comfortable as possible with your equipment, for your own peace of mind and the cats' safety.

12. **Label the traps.** Never leave your traps unattended. It is still a good idea to create a sign stating "Spay and Neuter Program in Progress (Do Not Remove)" or "Humane Trapping in Progress" and attach a copy to each trap. Waterproof the sign by enclosing it in a plastic covering or bag.

13. **Make a written plan for the day-of.** Make sure your written plan includes every tool you need and step you must complete throughout the Trap-Neuter-Return process. Remember that many tasks must be completed before trapping can start. You must procure traps and arrange for veterinary services, transportation, and a safe, indoor recovery space.

14. **Pay attention to the weather.** Never trap in extreme temperatures, hot or cold. They are dangerous conditions for cats to be without food and exposed to the elements.

15. **Withhold food.** You must withhold all food from the cats you intend to trap 24 hours before trapping, to ensure the cats are hungry enough to enter the traps. This includes treats! Also, surgery will be

safer for the cats if they have not eaten for at least 12 hours. Remember, you are doing what is best for the cats. Always continue to provide the cats with clean, fresh drinking water.

Trapping

1. **Prepare the traps.** Prepare the traps away from the trap site to prevent unfamiliar noises and commotion that could frighten the cats away. Always test the trap to be sure it's working correctly. You can see a demonstration of setting a Tru-Catch trap and setting a Tomahawk trap on our website.

a. Line the bottom of the trap and tag the trap. Place newspaper, folded lengthwise, inside the bottom of the trap to protect the cats' paws. If it is windy, secure the newspaper to the trap with tape - this is done so the wind will not move the newspaper and frighten the cats. Should you open the rear door, be sure to relock it before trapping. If your trap does not have a rear door, you can secure the front door open with a twist tie while you work and then remove it for trapping. You may need to have several different areas to set traps when trapping an entire colony; in this case, tag the traps with a description of the location so that you can return the cats exactly where you trapped them.

b. Bait the traps. Place approximately one tablespoon of bait (tuna, sardines, or other strong smelling food - usually the ones in oil work best) at the very back of the trap, so that the cat will step on the trigger plate while attempting to reach the food. You may choose to put the food in a lid or container for this, but make sure that it does not have sharp edges that could harm the cat once trapped. Drizzle some juice from the bait in a zigzag pattern along the trap floor toward the entrance. You should also place a tiny bit of food (½ teaspoon) just inside the entrance of the trap to encourage the cat to walk in. **Do not use too much food at the entrance** of the trap for two reasons: 1) the cat may be satisfied before making it to the trip plate, and 2) cats should have a relatively empty stomach for at least 12 hours before surgery.

c. Set the traps. Place a trap on the ground and make certain it is stable and will not rock or tip. Do not place the trap on a hillside or incline. Set the traps within your eye line so you can keep track of them without having to eneter the area every time you want to check it. If you are using multiple traps, stagger them and have them facing different directions. Try to place the traps where they will attract a cat and be camouflaged, for example, near a bush. Move quietly and slowly so your movements will not frighten cats away. Set the traps and leave the area quietly. The cats are unlikely to enter the traps if you are standing nearby. You should not go back and check on the traps until about 30 minutes has passed from when you set them.

2. **Keep track of the traps at all times.** Traps should never be left unattended. Check the traps frequently from a distance. Choose a location to park your car and wait where you are far enough away to give the cats a sense of safety, but close enough so that you can see them.

Leaving a cat uncovered in a trap for too long will increase the cat's stress and could lead to injury since they thrash against the cage. (You may want to place a sheet over just the back part of the trap – not the front – before you place it for trapping so you can easily cover the entire trap after the cat is caught. This could also encourage the cat to go inside the trap since it appears to be a covered safe place.) Also, traps may be stolen, damaged, or sprung, or someone who does not understand your intentions may release a trapped cat so it is important to monitor the traps at all times and have an

exact count of how many traps you start and end with.

In larger colonies there may be multiple trapping locations. It is important not to leave any traps unsupervised, so consider bringing multiple trappers to help. If you are trapping alone don't put out more traps than you can keep an eye on – two or three at most.

Be prepared for the fact that you may trap cats that are already eartipped. If you do, it is sometimes best to hold that cat in the trap covered until the cats you are aiming for have been trapped.

Trapping a feral cat may take some time, be patient. It may take the cat a few minutes to go into the trap so make sure the trap is sprung, and the cat securely trapped, before you approach the trap.

3. **After the cat has been trapped,** cover the entire trap with a large towel or sheet before moving it. Covering the traps will help to keep the cats calm. Move trapped cats away to a quiet, safe area to avoid scaring any remaining, un-trapped cats.

   It is normal for cats to thrash around inside the trap. You may be tempted to release a thrashing cat because you fear that they will hurt themselves, but cats calm down once the trap is covered. Remember, you are doing this for their benefit. If they are released, they will continue to breed, and you may not be able to trap them again. Also, most injuries from traps are very minor, such as a bruised or bloody nose or a scratched paw pad.

   You should never open the trap or try to touch a conscious or semi-conscious feral cat. Behave appropriately around trapped cats by being calm, quiet, and not touching them, even if they appear friendly under normal circumstances.

   When an entire colony is being trapped from the same area, it does not make sense to take each cat from the location directly after the trap is sprung. This could disturb the area and scare the other cats away. Instead, when you are setting the traps out, you can partially cover them to help calm the cats once they are trapped. Since they will at least have a part of the trap that is covered, they can feel safe and you can keep the trap where it is. This helps reduce stress to the trapped cat and reduce the odds of other cats being frightened away.

   During a quiet moment when no other cats are investigating the set traps, or if the trapped cats are making noise and deterring other cats from approaching the traps, remove the full traps and put them in the holding vehicle. Rebait any traps that have had the bait eaten but have not sprung.

4. **You may be faced with particularly hard-to-trap cats.** Cats can become trap-shy—frightened to go near or enter a trap, or trap-savvy—mastered the art of removing food without triggering the trap. Don't be discouraged. There are several unique but straightforward techniques to humanely trap hard-to-trap-cats.

5. **Take the cats to a veterinarian or a spay/neuter clinic.** You should have already made appointments for sterilization and vaccination before beginning to trap. Confirm that only dissolvable sutures will be used, eliminating the need for a follow-up visit to remove stitches.

   If your appointments are not the same day as the trapping, keep the cats indoors in their covered traps and make sure they are dry, in a temperature-controlled environment, and away from dangers such as toxic fumes, other animals, or people. Your trapping should coincide with the clinic's ability

to neuter right away – or the very next morning, so the cats don't remain in their traps for long. (IMPORTANT: It is possible for a cat to die from hypothermia or heat stroke when confined in a trap outside. A simple guideline—if it is too hot or cold outside for you, then it is too hot or cold for the cats.)

6. **Never move trapped cats in the trunk of a car or the open bed of a pickup truck**—this is unsafe and it terrifies the cats. If traps must be stacked inside the vehicle, be sure to secure the traps with bungee cords or other restraints and place puppy pads or newspaper between the stacked traps. If an unsecured trap tips sideways or upside down, it can open and release the cat. If it seems precarious, it won't work. Don't take the risk.

After the surgery, the cats need a temperature-controlled, safe place to recover and should be monitored closely. Once they are ready to return to their outdoor homes, you can continue with your regular colony care.

Post-Surgery

1. **After surgery, allow the cat to recover overnight in the same covered trap.** Keep the cats indoors in their covered traps and make sure they are dry, in a temperature-controlled environment, and away from loud noises or dangers such as toxic fumes, other animals, or people. When the cats are recovering from anesthesia they are unable to regulate their body temperature. It is important that the recovery location is temperature-controlled to keep the cats from getting too hot or too cold. A basement or bathroom will usually do the trick.

2. **Put your safety first.** Keep the traps covered to reduce the cats' stress. Never open the trap doors or allow the cats out of the trap. Do not stick your fingers through the bars or attempt to handle the cats.

3. **Monitor the cats.** Check the cats often for their progress; keep an eye out for bleeding, infection, illness, and lack of appetite. If a cat is vomiting, bleeding, having difficulty breathing, or not waking up, get veterinary assistance immediately. Ask the clinic before the surgery how to reach them if there are surgical complications. If a cat is vomiting while still unconscious, her head should be turned to avoid choking. Sometimes this can be achieved by gently tipping the trap to no more than a 30 degree angle to change the cat's position. Be careful when tipping the trap so that you don't harm they cat by jostling her too much.

4. **Feed and provide the cats with water after they regain consciousness.** Wait eight hours after surgery before feeding adult cats. Kittens can be fed shortly after waking from anesthesia. When feeding the cats, lift the back door of the trap very slowly and allow only a small gap – one-half to one inch at most - to open. Slide a plastic lid with a little bit of food on it through the gap without putting your hand inside the trap. You may want to purchase or borrow a device called an "isolator" or "trap divider" for this purpose. An isolator can be very helpful, especially if you have a trap that does not have a back door. Always relock the trap door. (If you don't have an isolator device to keep the cat in the back of the trap, and you feel you cannot even slide a plastic lid in without the cat trying to escape, then don't feed them.)

5. **Hold cats until they recover.** Cats usually need to be held for 24 hours after surgery, depending on recovery speed. Male cats and often females can be returned to the trapping site 12 to 24 hours following surgery, as long as they are fully awake and do not require further medical attention. In

some cases, females may need 48 hours of recovery, depending on their specific circumstances. You should return nursing mothers as soon as possible, once they completely regain consciousness so they can get back to their kittens. Make sure all cats are fully conscious, clear-eyed, and alert before release. If a cat needs further care (longer than 48 hours), you will need to transfer her to a holding pen. You may also need to transfer cats to a clean trap in case the newspaper is soiled during recovery.

In order to transfer a cat from a trap to another holding device like another trap, pen, or carrier you will need an isolator. Begin by putting the front of the covered trap and the front of the new device facing each other. Make sure the new device is covered. Next, insert the isolator in the middle of the trap where the cat is, forcing the cat to the back of the trap. Once this is done, open the front of the trap and the front of the new device. Make sure that the two fronts are touching and will not separate. Then lift the isolator and remove the cover. The cat should go toward the new covered device. As soon as the cat enters the new device, make sure the door is locked.

6. **Return the cats.** Release the cat in the same place you trapped him or her. Open the front door of the trap and pull back the cover. Or, if the trap has a rear door, pull the cover away from the back door, pull that door up and off, then completely remove the cover and walk away. Do not be concerned if the cat hesitates a few moments before leaving. She is simply reorienting herself to her surroundings. It is not uncommon for a cat to "disappear" for a few days after she is returned. She will appear eventually. Resume the feeding schedule and continue to provide food and water—she may eat when you are not around.

7. **Thoroughly clean the traps with a nontoxic disinfectant when the returning is complete.** Whether the traps are borrowed or your own, they should be cleaned before they are stored. Then they will be ready for the next trapping adventure. Even traps that appear clean must be disinfected—the scent of the cat previously trapped may deter other cats from entering.

8. **Trap the remaining members of the colony if necessary**, after a short break of a week or two, and complete the colony's Trap-Neuter-Return effort. Be prepared for the fact that you may re-trap cats that are already eartipped. If you do, it is sometimes best to hold that cat in the covered trap until the cats you are aiming for have been trapped.

9. **Relocation of the cats should only be done as a last resort.** Alley Cat Allies does not recommend relocation; it should be done only under extreme circumstances when the cats' lives are in eminent danger. In that case, be fully prepared by reading our Guidelines for Safe Relocation of Feral Cats.

People and Cats

A key part to a successful Trap-Neuter-Return effor is establishing a friendly dialogue with neighborhood residents and addressing any possible concerns. If neighbors do not know who "speaks for the cats," they have no one but animal control to contact. Being open about caregiving can protect the cats. Find a way to approach residents so that the topic can be discussed rationally and unemotionally. Avoid arguing with people who do not support your work, and remember to put your safety first.

Read more about how to help the cats be good neighbors in our Colony Care guide.