

Too many cats: Overpopulation an ongoing problem in Livingston County

By LAURIE MERCER
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Laurie Mercer/Special to the Livingston County NewsCat overload. Three feral cats lived in the bushes for weeks likely after being abandoned. The same three orange tabbies, recovered and were adopted through the Humane Society of Livingston County.

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It was late one evening last April when the woman, living on a remote property bordering the Genesee River near Ashantee, heard a car door slam.

A few days later, Monica S. – a pseudonym used because the woman fears more people unloading pets near her property – found four new cats running around.

“By about the fifth of May, each of the four

unknowns gave birth to five kittens each,” said

Monica, who had one indoor cat of her own, Monkey, and eight spayed outdoors cats already living comfortably in her horse barn.

“That’s a total of 20 kittens, 8 females, Monkey and 11 outside cats,” she noted.

Monica’s barn cats, all spayed, shelter in a well-built, organized horse barn, sleeping in a large dog crate, lined with a heated dog bed, and old towels to stuff any cracks. As Monica stares off into space, she also remembers three more strays that she forgot in her original tally. That kind of amnesia about how many cats you feed is familiar to rescuers where cats are defined by: domestic, feral, barn cats, strays, and even community cats — that is, cats being fed by people in the community.

True ferals are like cat vapors looking out at you while hidden in the bushes, while lost and abandoned domestic cats often still crave a human rescue from their fate. When a group of loosely related cats share an outdoor territory, it is called a colony.

Cats attract other cats

What Monica was facing was a colony of former pets gone wild.

“There are always a few feral felines passing through the farm like the old tomcat we called ‘Broken Ear,’” she said.

Unlike dogs, cats - even without human involvement - are highly resourceful, if not long-lived.

While people are often willing to fix their dogs, folks do not always keep their cats from breeding. With startling fertility, cats can produce three litters a year, resulting in a tsunami of kittens. People such as Monica, who is a retired executive, good natured, lives on a fixed income, and has some mobility issues which makes large-scale trapping impossible, said she has repeatedly reached out to every cat rescue organization she can find. But rescuers, too, are overwhelmed; their cages are full.

People often dump unwanted pets at farms thinking their pets will have a nice life there. Parents can tell their kids their former pets went to live in the country. Ask any Livingston County farmer about the situation, and you will get an eye roll. Farmers are not in business to foster pets.

Strays, already mistreated by abandonment, are trigger-sensitive to any movement towards them, making capture difficult. The difference between strays and ferals is one of degree of human acceptance.

That’s where the initials TNR - Trap, Neuter, Release - come in. TNR provides a mantra for those in the cat rescue movement. Without large-scale, pervasive neutering, the cat explosion will continue. Some local veterinarians will work with low-income people to help. The cost of neutering both cats and dogs can even occasionally be free to county residents through county services. Clinics are held in season at various highway garages. For strays and ferals, Habitat for Cats, Lollypop Farm, and the Rochester Community Animal Clinic all offer low-cost neutering in Rochester.

Impossible to catch, free-range ferals have little hope.

Monica said she has called everywhere, looking for help. After being turned away or discouraged, she finally found some help with Barn Cat Outreach in Springwater.

“This is an emergency. I think of Barn Cat Outreach as almost an underground operation,” she said. “They are the finest group I have ever met who work with animals. What I have told people I know is this is not a place to get your cat fixed. This is different.”

Barn Cat Outreach

Founded in the summer of 2009 by Mary Nisbit, a vet tech and farm girl who teamed up with Dr. Kim Wilson to address the rural, feral cat explosion head-on, Barn Cat Outreach is unique. Working out of a van morphed into a mobile surgical center, they have performed more than 1,500 spay and neuter procedures on ferals since March 2010. Each cat’s ear is clipped to prevent unnecessary recapture. Clinics take place throughout Livingston County, and cease

from early November to March because of the cold weather.

Offering tips on trapping ferals, Mary recommends beginning about a week ahead of time to train the wary animals to come into a cage to eat — during the same time each day is ideal. Use a cage that can become a trap, such as a large Havaheart, when the door is sprung. Once their feeding behavior is established, she says to withhold food for 24 hours, then offer some “wet, stinky cat food.” Once contained in a trap, always cover the cage with a cloth to prevent ballistic behaviors behind bars.

“We (Mary and her husband) had an old camping trailer so we gutted it,” says Mary. “I knew we had to do something to deal with the problem. There is no money for a building, so we go where people have invited us to help.”

Once a month, Mary, who has four cats and four cat boarders, puts out an email to the dozen or so men and women veterinarians who volunteer for surgical procedures which include “fixing,” blood testing, worming, and flea prevention. The fee is \$25 per animal.

“Ferals are in a league of their own,” Mary said. “We’ve had people from 10 different counties show up because they needed help.”

Funding for Barn Cat Outreach, a non-profit operation, includes a summertime rummage sale in Mary’s grandmother’s front yard on Route 15 in Springwater.

A Veterinarian Responds

Wayne Warner, partner in the Avon Animal Hospital for 28 years and a veterinarian in rural upstate areas for 48 years, said the situation of unwanted pets has not changed.

“We live in a disposable culture,” he said, “where people will throw pets away. They will drive to the country to throw them out. Public education aimed at children about animal responsibility - pets and wild animals - is long overdue in schools.”

As for feral colonies, he said, “providing a food supply is the biggest problem.”

Warner grew up on a farm. His dad fed waste milk and sometimes dried dog food to about a dozen barn cats.

“The situation stayed the same until he was gone. After that they wandered away or some disease wiped them out,” he said.

Warner lives with two cats including 19-year-old Elvira, a black female from his father’s barn who now has full run of the veterinary office. He thinks economics results in the abandonment of pets. His office currently charges \$198 to spay a female and \$110 to neuter a male.

“The TNR idea bothers me because they give them one rabies shot which will only last about a year, and they turn them loose,” he said. He adds there are other diseases more commonly found in feral cats because of the vermin they eat to live.

Hearthside Cats

There is burnout in animal rescue. Just ask Carrienne Coyne, a young mother of two who won’t tell you how many cats she has. Hearthside Cats, after 25 years in business, is one of the county’s longest-running rescue and adoption programs. First Carrienne agreed to create a website, and with the death of the founder, she became president of the group by default.

Hearthside has an unofficial shelter site; they are currently full. The group of about a dozen active volunteers seek donations to cover the cost of veterinary care, food and litter - about \$200 to \$300 per cat.

“We believe that every cat deserves a chance to live. We do not euthanize cats, ever,” Coyne said.

The adoption fee is \$75. A Hearthside cat is always welcomed back.

Adoptions through the Humane Society

The Humane Society of Livingston County is funded by donations and staffed by volunteers

who work out of their homes.

Since last summer, the HSLC has rented a small storefront on Genesee Street to showcase cats ready for adoption to indoor homes. Because of this outreach, many adult cats - even those of 7 years of age - and lots of kittens have found loving lodging.

HSLC screens potential adopters. A senior woman in a wheelchair, pushed by her son into the Kitty-Adopt-A-Thon was quickly paired with a laid-back adult animal, while a teen chose a lively young, white and gray patterned male named Lester as an early birthday present from her father.

For \$60 the HSLC cats have received blood testing, worm and flea prevention treatments, and neutering and spaying.

The Kitty-Adopt-A-Thon store, with cats batting each other about in the window on weekends, certainly helps to market an animal that has both a strong following and an equally strong chorus of dissenters.

That's just the way it is with cats.

As for Monica's dilemma, word-of-mouth helped her place a few of the social strays which lightened her mood until one of the new cats produced another litter of wild kittens.

How many does that make?

"Don't ask," she said.

Where to find help

There are many adoption agencies for cats, but few facilities can afford to take them in. The Humane Society warns against offering free kittens on Craigslist as the babies can be used as bait to train fighting dogs and as pet food for snakes.

All the following organizations will help when they can.

Humane Society of Livingston County accepts surrendered felines of all ages whenever they have room among their home-based foster parents. Fosters get free food, litter, all veterinary work needed, and even rides to cat-related appointments. Phone, (585) 234-2828; online, www.hslcnyc.org.

Hearthside Cats. The county's oldest rescue and adoption program is a no-kill facility. Limited space for drop off, but lots of nice adoption opportunities. Phone, (585) 243-0873; online, www.hearthsidecats.org.

Lollypop Farm Humane Society of Greater Rochester. This is an open admissions shelter which means they will accept any pet being surrendered for any reason. The suggested surrender fee of \$40, but is not mandatory. Phone, (585) 223-1330; online, www.Lollypop.org.

Pet Adoption Network, 4261 Culver Rd., Rochester. Open Saturdays and Sundays noon to 4 p.m. Intake of cats and kittens is limited as space allows. Phone, (585) 338-9175; online, www.petadoptionnetwork.org.

Pet Pride of New York Inc. A no-kill, cats only facility founded in 1977 with a shelter open in 2000 in Victor. Emphasis is on adoption. Intake of cats and kittens is limited as space allows. Phone, (585) 742-1630; online, www.petprideofnyinc.org.

Do it yourself. A cute photo on Facebook and a request to forward the message to your friends can work wonders in "rehomeing." That's what cat rescue people call the finding new habitats for felines.