

# **How to Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)**

## **A Step-by-Step Guide**

### **Plan and Prepare**

Doing TNR requires planning and preparation. Remember, you're doing what is best for the cats. By carrying out TNR, you are significantly improving cats' lives!

Planning ahead not only makes the process smoother, it also ensures the best possible outcome for the cats. Taking time to prepare can prevent stressful moments, such as trapping a feral cat and realizing you're not sure what to do next.

If you feed or care for multiple outdoor cats, make it a goal to TNR all of them so they can be spayed or neutered, preventing future kittens from being born. Groups of cats that share the same territory and food source are known as colonies.

Tip: It's usually easiest to catch all the cats in a colony during your first trapping session.

### **Establish a Feeding Schedule**

To prepare for trapping, get the cats on a regular feeding routine. As consistently as possible, put out food at the same time and place each day, then remove any leftovers after about 30 minutes—or as soon as you can. Cats are creatures of habit and will learn to show up at the designated feeding time. This way you can ensure the cats will show up wanting food when it is time to trap.

Tip: In hot weather, cats are less active during the day. Trapping is often more successful (and safer) if you train ferals to come for meals early in the morning or after sunset, when it's cooler.

### **Find a Holding Space**

After trapping, you'll need a safe, secure, low-stress place to hold the cats both before and after their spay/neuter surgeries. Cats should remain in their traps at all times during the TNR process—except during surgery when they're sedated.

### **Choose a holding space that is:**

- **Quiet:** Feral cats are easily stressed, so it's crucial to choose an area that is as quiet as possible and located away from busy household areas and other animals.
- **Warm:** The area should be around 70°F, especially during the first 12-24 hours after surgery, when cats are unable to regulate their body temperature.
- **Dry:** The space must be protected from rain, dampness, and other environmental elements.
- **Secure:** There should be no access for strangers, pets, or other animals.

Make sure all entrances and exits to the holding space (doors, windows, ceiling tiles, etc.) are closed at all times in the unlikely event that a cat escapes from their trap.

## **Arrange for Spay/Neuter, Traps, and Transportation**

### *Traps and Equipment*

Whenever possible, mass trapping—the TNR of an entire colony at once—is recommended. Mass trapping is the most efficient and effective way to carry out TNR. However, your ability to mass trap may be limited by factors such as the cost and availability of spay/neuter slots, access to traps, your time limitations, or the size of your holding space.

If you do not have a humane live trap or trap divider, you can either purchase them online, or request to rent them when you schedule your spay/neuter appointments. You will need one trap per cat, plus a few extras if you're mass trapping.

Here are some recommended traps and trap dividers:

- [TruCatch](#)
- [Divider](#)

Practice setting the traps ahead of time to make sure they are functioning properly and that you know how to use them.

### *Making a Spay/Neuter Appointment*

Once you've determined how many cats you plan to trap, schedule that number of surgeries with our clinic.

### *Transportation*

Arrange transportation as well. The cats will need to be safely transported from the trapping location to the holding space, then to and from the spay/neuter clinic, and finally back to their original territory for release. If you're trapping in your own yard and holding the cats at home, transportation may only be needed for the clinic trip.

Use a vehicle that comfortably fits all traps inside. Avoid stacking traps on top of each and **NEVER** put cats in the trunk or in the open bed of a vehicle.

Remember: Throughout the entire trapping process—trapping, holding, transportation, and recovery—it's important to keep the environment around the cats as calm and quiet as possible. For example, avoid playing loud music while driving them to and from the clinic.

Always double-check that traps are fully closed and secured before transporting them.

## **Start Trapping**

Only proceed with trapping if the weather conditions are safe. Avoid trapping during extreme temperatures—for example, below 30 degrees or above 90 degrees—as it can be dangerous for the cats.

### *The days leading up to surgery*

Aim to trap the day before the scheduled surgery. Withhold all food the day prior to trapping so the cats are hungry and more likely to enter the trap—but always provide water. For example, if surgery is Monday, withhold food all day Saturday, then set the traps on Sunday at the cats' usual feeding times.

### *Setting the trap*

Set the traps on flat, stable ground in the area where the cats normally eat. Cats are unlikely to enter a trap that feels wobbly or unstable. Avoid placing traps on hills or uneven surfaces where they could tip or roll when a cat enters. Also, never place metal traps directly on particularly hot or cold pavement, as this can cause discomfort or even injury to the cats' paws.

Place about one tablespoon of bait (wet cat food or tuna) on a small piece of cardboard at the very back of the trap—this ensures the cat must step on the trip plate to reach it. You can also place a smaller piece of cardboard in the middle or front of the trap with about half a tablespoon of food to create a “trail” leading toward the bait in the back. Don't place the bait or food trail in bowls or on plates, as they can slide under the trip plate and prevent it from triggering. Instead, use small pieces of cardboard or flat paper plates with the edges trimmed off. Additionally, avoid using too much food as the trail; you want the cat to be hungry enough to continue all the way to the back. To further entice the cat, drizzle a bit of juice (like tuna or sardine juice) near the entrance of the trap.

Cover the trap with a towel after you set it, and consider placing a small weight on top to prevent the towel from flapping in the wind or blowing away. However, every cat is different—some may be more willing to enter an uncovered trap, so you might want to set a trap without a towel on top.

Before leaving the trap, run a quick test to make sure the trip plate is working properly.

### *Monitoring the Traps*

After setting the traps, move away from the area and out of the cats' line of sight. Always keep a close watch on the traps—for both the safety of the cats and the security of your equipment. Observe from a distance that's far enough not to scare the cats but close enough to keep all traps in view.

**Never leave a trap unattended!** There's a risk that someone with bad intentions could harm or steal a cat in a trap. Unfortunately, it's also not uncommon for metal scrappers to take live traps.

### *Wild animals*

Wild animals can sometimes be caught by mistake, so it's important to stay nearby. That way, you can quickly release the animal to minimize stress or scare off raccoons before they enter a trap in the first place. Always release any wild animal in the exact same location they were trapped.

Opossums are not aggressive. To release one from the trap, simply open the trap door, prop it open with a flower pot or other object, and move far enough away that the opossum can't sense your presence or smell you. Give the opossum time to exit on their own—it may take a few minutes, as they don't see well and may be disoriented.

#### *Once you've caught a cat*

As soon as a cat is trapped, calmly approach the trap. Do not open the trap or attempt to touch the cat—even if it looks like they're hurting themselves. Cats thrash around immediately after being trapped. Do not be alarmed by this—they are scared and it is completely normal. Covering the trap with a towel or sheet will calm them down almost immediately.

This is why it's so important to be actively watching the traps—you'll want to cover the trap as soon as a cat is caught, making sure all sides are fully covered to help reduce stress.

Secure the closed trap doors with carabiners, twist ties, or other securing items. Then, promptly move the cat to a safe, quiet place. If you're trapping away from home, place the trap in your temperature-controlled vehicle. If you're trapping in your own yard, transfer the cat to your designated holding area.

#### **The Night Before and Morning of Surgery**

For cats over 4 months of age, withhold all food and water after midnight (12 AM) the night before surgery.

For kittens 4 months old or younger, please feed them a tablespoon of wet food with water mixed in the morning of their surgery.

#### **During Surgery**

At Paws for a Cause Vet Care, the feral cat package includes spay/neuter surgery, eartipping, rabies and FVRCP vaccinations, and a dose of Bravecto to treat fleas, ticks, roundworms and hookworms.

#### **Post-Surgery**

When you pick up a cat from the clinic, they will be returned to you in their labeled trap. You will also receive their medical records, including rabies vaccination certificates and microchip ID numbers. Be sure to keep these documents for your records.

A few hours after surgery, you may offer the cat half of their usual amount of food and water. Feeding half a can of wet food with a tablespoon of water mixed in is suggested for their first meal post-surgery. Ensure that the cat is awake and alert before providing food/water to prevent

the risk of them falling asleep with their head in the food/water bowl, or being too drowsy to swallow properly. Normal-sized meals can be resumed the next morning.

### **Recovery Time and Monitoring the Cat**

Allow the cat to recover for a few days in the quiet, climate-controlled space you've prepared. Male cats typically need 24-48 hours of recovery and monitoring, while female cats should be held for 48-72 hours due to the more invasive nature of the surgery. The longer recovery times should only be followed if you have the necessary equipment to properly care for the cat in a trap, including a trap divider for safe cleaning and feeding without risking escape.

Monitor the cat closely during recovery. Check on them regularly, especially during the first few hours after surgery, when complications are most likely to appear. Aim to check in every hour or two that first night. Watch for any signs of trouble, such as excessive bleeding, labored breathing, failure to wake up, or vomiting. If you notice any of these symptoms, contact us immediately.

Other abnormal symptoms that will need attention from veterinary staff during recovery include any discharge coming from the surgery site, unusual odors, and biting/chewing at the incision. Vomiting or lethargy beyond 24 hours is not normal. Please contact us should you notice any of these symptoms.

### **Caring for a Cat in the Trap**

During the recovery period, the cat should remain in the same trap he/she was caught in. Do not attempt to transfer a feral cat to a carrier, or cage. Feral cats are very quick and can easily escape during the process. Remember, to help the cat feel safe and calm, keep their trap covered with a large towel at all times.

Line the bottom of the trap with newspapers to keep the cat clean and dry. The cat will use the newspaper as a litter source.

Twice daily, clean the trap by replacing soiled newspaper and provide the cat fresh food and water. Because space inside the trap is limited, it's best to offer wet food mixed with water, served in a single bowl.

Use a trap divider to safely secure the cat on one side of the trap while you clean and tend to food and water on the other side. Keep the side with the cat covered with a towel to help them stay calm. To encourage the cat to move to the other side, cover that side with the towel—feral cats tend to move from light to dark areas.

A trap divider is important for safely performing these tasks without risking escape.

Tip: Clean one side of the trap first, then the other, before placing fresh food and water inside.

### **Returning Cats to Their Territory**

Always return the cat to the exact location where they were originally trapped. Never release them in an area that is unfamiliar to them. Cats depend on their territory to survive—they know where to find food, shelter, and how to avoid threats. Releasing them elsewhere can lead to disorientation, injury, and even death.

Early morning or late at night is ideal for release, when the environment is quieter and there's less traffic. Position the trap so the cat is released facing away from roads or busy areas to help prevent them from running into danger.

Only open the trap when the area is clear and no vehicles are approaching. If possible, have a second person with you to watch for oncoming traffic.

### **After Release**

Once the cats have been returned and released, provide fresh food and water. If you are their regular caregiver, you can resume their normal feeding schedule. Don't worry if the cats stay away for a few days. They will return once they feel safe again.

Clean the traps after use. Remove and discard the newspaper, then wash the traps thoroughly with soap and water.

### **Long-Term Care and Monitoring**

After the trapping and spay/neuter process is complete, long-term care begins. For TNR to be truly effective in reducing population and providing humane care, a designated caretaker (or caretakers) should feed the cats regularly, ensure there is adequate shelter, and monitor for any new or unaltered cats.

Be sure to trap any remaining cats who may have eluded the initial round of trapping, and continue to TNR any newcomers who join the colony in the future. Staying consistent is key to maintaining a stable, healthy colony.

### **HOORAY—and THANK YOU!**

You've successfully TNR'd a cat, significantly improving their quality of life and preventing countless kittens from being born. Your efforts make a real difference—for the cat and the community.