

# Helping Feral Cats This Winter

By Becky Robinson

Are you feeding feral cats – or do you know someone who is? Or maybe you've seen the cats around your neighborhood, but you aren't quite sure how to help them.

Feral cats are not socialized to humans and can't be adopted. Feral cats live in family groups called colonies. They exist in every landscape, from the largest cities to the most rural farmland.

Most feral cats are skilled at finding their own food and shelter. But with the cold weather, there are simple ways you can help the cats in your community – not only to keep them warm, but to help to deter them from places they aren't wanted or are unsafe.

## Here is how you can help:

### 1. Build an outdoor shelter.

Plans for easy and inexpensive shelters are available online at [www.alleycat.org/WinterWeather](http://www.alleycat.org/WinterWeather). The shelter should be elevated off the ground and placed in a quiet area with minimal traffic. There should be enough space for three to five cats to huddle. The door should be no more than six to eight inches wide to keep out predators. It should be insulated with straw, not blankets or other materials that absorb moisture. A flap on the door will keep out snow, rain and wind.

### 2. Keep food and drinking water from freezing.

Build a simple feeding station that protects the cats from the elements while they eat. Keep to a regular feeding schedule so the cats will come to expect you and will eat the food before it has a chance to freeze.

Wet food in insulated containers is best for winter as it takes less energy for cats to digest than dry food – and cats can use all that extra energy to keep warm. For water, use bowls that are deep rather than wide, and place them in a sunny spot. If possible, refill the bowls with warm water. A pinch of sugar also keeps the water from freezing as quickly and provides added energy for the cats.

### 3. Stop the breeding cycle with Trap-Neuter-Return.

Educate yourself, your family and your neighbors about the habits of outdoor cats during the winter time. For example, know to check under the car or give the hood a tap before starting the engine, as cats will sometimes crawl into car engines or hide under them for warmth.

Prevent another “kitten season” next year by getting the outdoor cats in your

neighborhood spayed or neutered as part of a Trap-Neuter-Return program. Cats have a 63-day gestation period and usually mate in winter. Trap-Neuter-Return ends the cycle of breeding and helps the cats lead better lives. A local volunteer group that practices Trap-Neuter-Return may be able to help.

Visit Alley Cat Allies' web site, [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org) for more information about connecting to local resources and starting a Trap-Neuter-Return program in your community. (Virden Pet Network is developing a Trap-Neuter-Return program to serve this area.)