

Cat Currents



The Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society

A nationally recognized, nonprofit volunteer organization committed to ensuring the health and welfare of feral and domestic cats and kittens by promoting proactive, compassionate, no-kill programs.

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Web: www.mrfrs.org
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and
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Danville, NH, Sanctuary

Visits by appointment only.
Please call MRFRS headquarters.

TRAP, NEUTER, AND ... RETIRE

by Kathy Downey

The success of Trap, Neuter, and Return (TNR) is evident in MRFRS's original Newburyport feral cat colonies, where the median age of our first ferals is 14 years old. This longevity is amazing, considering that the lifespan of most homeless cats, those without the good fortune to be part of a managed colony overseen by compassionate and dedicated caregivers, might be only two years – assuming the cats survive the fragility of kittenhood.

Our success has led us to a new situation: colonies of mostly geriatric cats who've never known the inside of a human home (or a human heart, beyond their caregivers) or who were long ago abandoned and are still living the feral life. Like any senior citizen, these cats are beginning to feel the effects of aging. Some might not see or hear as well as they once did, and their bones might ache more with each New England winter.

This past December volunteers launched an intensive effort to trap and retire the five remaining cats (who were long ago spayed or neutered) from one of our boatyard colonies. Very special MRFRS supporters – some who have been the cats' lifelong caregivers – offered to adopt these furry retirees.

The changing landscape of the boatyard, specifically the city's plans to develop much of the land into residential and commercial real estate, became the impetus behind this spirited initiative. But the emotional component between caregiver and cat, built upon years of watching, observing, getting to know, and finally trusting one another (on the cats' terms, of course), became the heart of this unusual undertaking.

The trapping team set and baited the humane traps from morning till nightfall, coordinating with one another overlapping shifts in order to provide constant monitoring. To ensure success, volunteer caregivers

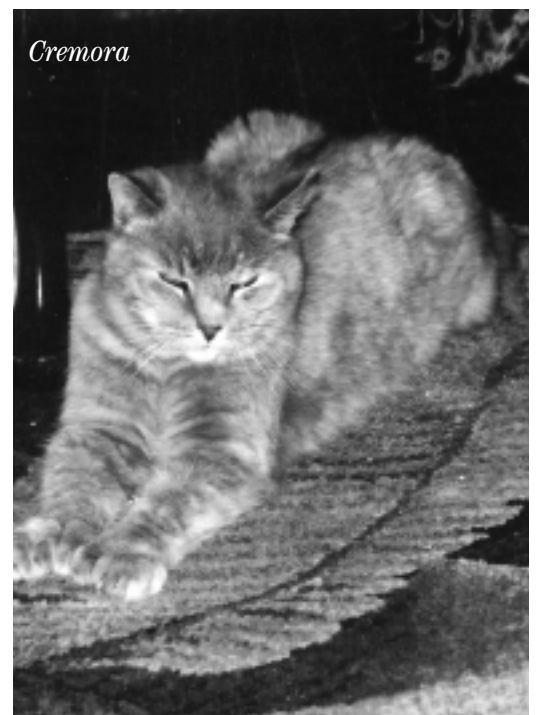
were alerted in advance to withhold the cats' daily breakfast and dinner, so the cats would be hungry enough to enter the traps.

Cremora would be the first boatyard feral to be trapped and retired. In fact, she seemed to be waiting for this event and gave her complete cooperation. A chatty girl, the creamy-coated, green-eyed cat mewed meaningfully while she watched the trapper set and bait the trap. Within moments Cremora gingerly stepped over the trip-plate, and this 14-year-old feral sweetie simultaneously took the first step toward her new life.

The four remaining cats wouldn't be as cooperative. Wintry weather had also set in, including a snowfall. A few days had passed since Cremora was trapped, and although paw prints could be seen all around the baited traps, the cats themselves remained elusive.

Rachel got things going again. In pursuit of her taste for tuna, the longhaired silver beauty became trapped cat No. 2. But her life partner Jericho would prove more defiant and headstrong, and he wouldn't be as easily lured.

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Editor/Writer:

Kathy Downey

Layout: Vern Associates, Inc.

Photography: Dave Williams
& Patte Grimes

Ad Sales: Stacy LeBaron

Printing Courtesy of:



Salisbury, MA- 978-465-8747

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

"Small is beautiful"

Dear Friends:

With help from our wonderful volunteers, we have started community-based feral cat rescue programs in our hometown of Salisbury and on Plum Island. So in addition to our adoption programs that help hundreds of cats and kittens find homes and our spay/neuter clinics that sterilize ferals from all over New England, we have turned our focus back to our neighborhoods, showing communities how to help themselves prevent huge feral cat colony growth. Our community volunteers have already been busy!

This past winter, we rescued the Beach Boys from Salisbury Beach. Josh, Peter, and Buddy are three loving and beautiful black and white shorthaired cats who spent too many lonely and homeless winters on the beach. We also rescued Cole. This jet-black shorthaired fellow had lived on the beach for years, exposed to the harshest weather. Cole tested positive for FIV and FeLV. A very special gentleman saw Cole for the special cat that he is and adopted him. He now showers Cole with all the love that this cat deserves, and that Cole went without for so long. Elsa is an old girl who one of our volunteers rescued after she found the pathetic creature half-frozen beneath the porch of her beach cottage. Elsa is a very sweet cat who likes to talk. She is patiently waiting at our adoption center for that special person who will take her home and love her.

So many more homeless cats on Salisbury Beach still need our help. We continue our hard work to rescue all of them, even as those who are supposed to love their cats shamefully abandoned them. Just last week, a man stopped his truck on a beach road and dumped two cats before driving away.

A Good Samaritan witnessed the abandonment. Unfortunately, she was not able to get the man's license plate number; pet abandonment is a criminal offense. The



Stacy and Ramses

woman stopped her car, picked up the bewildered cats, and brought them to our adoption center. Her act of kindness and caring prevented another feral cat colony from beginning.

Our goal is to establish ongoing community feral cat rescue efforts in each Massachusetts and Southern NH town. Small is beautiful in the cat rescue world. Not only is each needy cat beautiful, but also each small act of kindness that in turn helps a homeless cat. Your support will help us inspire more communities to self-empower themselves to become humane neighborhoods.

Thank you so much for helping us to help those cats in need of rescue.

Sincerely,

Stacy LeBaron
President

P.S. For anyone interested in learning more about community efforts to help needy cats, I recommend joining the masscats Yahoo group online. You can sign up by sending an email to:

masscats-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Mass Cats is a network of caring people helping cats, covering Massachusetts and bordering states.

FERAL CATS ATTEND MIT?

by Kathy Downey

You would not expect to brush against feral cats under the venerated dome of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But during a weeklong exhibition last November, you just might have.

The feline-themed display was the culmination of a study on the MRFRS feral-cat feeding program, conducted by a research team that included a Harvard graduate student and five graduate students from MIT. Photographs, a video presentation, and research findings reflected the unique contribution to community by a group of dedicated MRFRS volunteers who, every day, feed homeless cats.

An online search of community-focused volunteer groups based in Massachusetts led the researchers to the MRFRS. Their happenstance discovery intrigued them, particularly the dynamic and diverse approaches and work that MRFRS volunteers perform in rescuing feral cats. Researcher Daniel Adams (the lone Harvard Man) says, "We were searching for community groups who we felt were doing interesting things in the community context." A soft spot for animals shared by team members and a visit by all to the MRFRS headquarters convinced the research team to choose the MRFRS as their research subject.

Encouraged by the support and enthusiasm of their professor, MIT visiting artist Allan McCollum, the team collaborated on ideas and activities. Team members included Adams, MIT researchers Oliver Lutz, Lilly Donohue, Katice Helinski, Naveem Mowlah, and Nomita Sawhney.

Field researchers Adams and Lutz accompanied MRFRS caregiver/feral cat feeder Patte Grimes on her weekend rounds through Newbury, Newburyport, and Salisbury to learn about this special (if not eccentric) community of cats and people. Adams and Lutz were specifically interested in finding out about the relationship between "feeders," the relationship between feeders and the cats, the relationship of both to the community, and how serving breakfast and dinner to colonies of homeless cats can be both humbling and rewarding.



Bart, almost 13 years old, is a real gentleman. Doesn't jump up on furniture unless invited. Loves to be petted and talked to.

As they followed behind Grimes in their own vehicle, they drove to places that Adams describes as "abandoned and forgotten landscapes," observing that the atmosphere of these isolated domains reflects the independent spirits of the feral cats who live there – cats like Missie, Moose, Zorro, Big Boy, and Coastie (who a Coast Guard officer rescued several years ago after the cat's paws became frozen to the river's edge one bitterly cold winter).

Adams says that he and Lutz were awed by the manner in which this "unique world of feral cat feeding" had drawn Grimes, along with her fellow feeders, into the cats' worlds, leaving an imprint on both human and feline animal. They noted that, through her role, Grimes had become a part of these unexpectedly sublime landscapes and further became a part of a collection of individuals who had also dedicated themselves to caring for cats who the rest of society has forgotten.

The researchers learned that all the cats had been sterilized and inoculated against rabies before being returned to their colonies, where Patte and her fellow feeders have provided them with shelters and specially built feeding stations. They learned of the cats' contributions to the community as efficient rodent controllers. And they absorbed the facts that support feral-cat management as a proven method to stabilize homeless cat populations. But they had a difficult time, initially, understanding the unwavering commitment that these feeders exhibit toward cats who many people would turn away from.

"We were simultaneously amazed and baffled by this group's work with the cats," says Adams, "and left wondering what motivates them." Talking with Grimes, Adams and Lutz agree, helped them to understand that Grimes and her fellow feeders share an intricately woven bond with these often-elusive cats who they love so much. And this bond, rather than some vague moral obligation, inspires them to go out each day – even in the most inhospitable weather or if a holiday – to feed and offer a kind, soft word to their feline friends.

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TRAP, NEUTER, AND ... RETIRE

(continued from page 1)

Miss Mocha Surprise made her startling debut one cold twilight evening and became the next feral to be trapped. But the volunteer trapper had been playing a game of wits with Wombat (and Wombat was winning!) as she and the large, striking gray cat tested one another's will. The trapper sat inside her car for over an hour and watched Wombat peer out from his hiding place between the stacked boat docks. He jumped from his perch onto the trap where he remained for several moments. Wombat then alighted and walked all around the trap, continuing his inspection and scenting the deli-chicken bait – but not convinced enough to go after it.

Defeated for the evening, the trapper decided to pull the bait, trip the trap release, and resume this effort the next morning. As she placed her flashlight on the feeding station beside the trap, the trapper felt something brush lightly against her leg.

In the darkness, the trapper couldn't really say if she saw or imagined a dark shape rush out of the feral cat shelter. When she picked up the flashlight, however, and shone it inside the trap, she was startled to see a small brown tabby cat with a notched ear – the notch identifying the cat as a previously trapped, neutered and returned (TNR'ed) cat, like the other ferals. Miss Mocha Surprise had apparently been asleep inside the feral cat shelter, an insulated doghouse known as "Mickey's Galley" (in honor of Mickey, the MRFRS brave feral cat mascot who passed away several years before). Mocha became frightened when she heard the trapper outside of Mickey's Galley and bolted out ... straight into the trap.

Miss Mocha was a bit of a surprise because her caregivers hadn't counted her as an official member of the colony. She had been seen, on occasion, passing through the boatyard but always kept her distance. Caregivers were never able to get close enough to see if she was ear-notched, and they presumed she might be a stray passing through. But she hadn't been seen in many months. Adding to the confusion, Miss Mocha Surprise resembled another boatyard feral who

had died in the past year. So when the trapper looked down and found the little senior tabby inside the trap, both were equally startled.

Several feet away, Wombat sat and watched the event with an unmistakable – and victorious – smugness. Late the next morning, however, Wombat could no longer resist the fresh deli-chicken that awaited him, and the kingly cat cautiously entered the trap. And the next day, New Year's Eve, hunger finally conquered Jericho. The black and white tuxedo boy (Rachel's companion) stepped over the trip plate for his sardine appetizer, becoming the last retired boatyard feral.

After trapping, volunteers whisked each of the five ferals to MRFRS veterinarians who thoroughly examined the cats and updated them on their inoculations. Other volunteers provided the cats with interim shelter in their homes, and Miss Mocha spent a week at MRFRS headquarters in the care of staff and volunteers. Today all five of these former ferals are safely situated in their permanent homes, receiving the kind of loving care and attention that had been missing from their lives.

Rachel and Jericho found a home together, which had been a condition of their retirement being that the two cats have been inseparable for years. After an acclimation period inside a "kitty playpen," the cats are now free to intermingle with their new family's other animal companions. The more social of the two, Rachel is acclimating more quickly to domesticated life. She even allows her new human guardian to pet her on the head. Jericho is still the independent male and enjoys exploring his new home on nighttime reconnaissance missions.

Miss Mocha Surprise and her guardian are getting to know and steadily charm one another. Although Mocha remains a feral girl at heart, each week she becomes more trusting and more comfortable in her new environment. Recently, she ventured out of her kitty playpen to inspect her room, the home office of her guardian.

Wombat is the most stoic of the boatyard cats. Regal and imperial, he is not ready to drop his feral armor. He's most

(continued on next page)



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(continued from previous page)

comfortable when ensconced in his quilted kitty-cube, inside his playpen, from where he can watch his new guardian (and occasionally swat her when she serves him meals and cleans his litter box). Recently, Wombat's low growls have been replaced with the occasional purr, and his body posture is slowly becoming more relaxed. He's also feeling much better since he had two broken teeth extracted.

The little diva of the retired ferals is Cremora. To see her in her adoptive home, you would never guess that she spent nearly 14 years living in a boatyard. She craves human attention, plays like a kitten, and gets along well with the other household cats, joining them each day in front of a large glass door where together they watch the squirrels and birds outside. She's even at ease around the family dog, a lovely Border collie rescue.

Although none of the boatyard ferals asked to enter retirement (except Cremora), neither did any one of them ever ask to be born homeless or abandoned. Because the cats would have been eventually displaced from their environment, given the pending development plans, and because of their age, the decision to retire them was relatively easy.

But this MRFRS feral cat retirement initiative would not have been possible without the coordinated team effort and commitment of all involved. Each contribution, even if seemingly small in itself, helped these special cats to find comfort and compassion for the remainder of their lives.

The special people involved in this successful effort included those who loaned traps, those who monitored and trapped, those who provided transport, those who coordinated veterinary appointments, our MRFRS veterinarians, those who provided interim care, and lastly, those with already open hearts who opened their homes to give these cats a loving permanence.

Anyone who has been lucky enough to share a bond with a feral cat, however, knows that the true measure of success is no more homeless cats. Responsible guardianship that includes spaying and neutering, with a deep bond between all guardians and their companion animals, can end the cycle of homelessness – for the thousands of animals who find themselves trembling and alone, without love.



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Ethan is a 3 year old DSH black & white male. He is quite shy, but loves other cats and can co-exist with kids and dogs.

FERAL CATS ATTEND MIT? *(continued from page 3)*

“One of the most interesting things I observed as we accompanied Patte to all the different and strange sites was how she would always whisper while we were at any of these places,” Adams remarks. He came to interpret Grimes’s whispering as a response to the quietness and emptiness of these feral cat landscapes, as if Grimes did not want to disturb the environment that she had grown to be a part of.

In performing the selfless act of feeding feral cats, Adams and Lutz concluded, Grimes and her fellow feeders have formed their own unified community. Not only are they one another’s support network for the cause to which they are so passionately devoted, many have also become good friends. And they have beautifully melded into the communities in which they live, including the clandestine communities of feral cats.

To commemorate this scientific study on the MRFRS feral-cat feeding program, the research team created special gift bags containing a collection of symbolic objects, each ref

erencing the character of a feral cat, to be given to each feral cat feeder. “It was our hope that with these objects the community of feeders could be further solidified ... and could further unite the feeders with their places [in the community],” Adams explains.

Grimes distributed the gift bags at the holiday feral party, and these unusual “feral artifacts” – including a decorative pin, a mousepad, a stencil, and an adhesive window sticker, all with a feral cat motif – were joyfully received. Feeders were especially delighted with the notched-ear on each of the cat-cutouts, signifying a feral cat who has been Trapped, Neutered, and Returned (TNR’ed).

Reflecting on their temporary stint as feral cat feeders, Adams and Lutz say, “was a chance to see how even such a specific and eccentric activity as feeding feral cats forms a beautiful ‘place’ in a community.”

(Adams says that several team members are still driving around with feral-cat window stickers on their vehicles!)

MRFRS CALENDAR

April 30 — 6PM MRFRS Annual FurBall/Auction. Fundraiser for the kitties @ Newburyport City Hall.

May 29 & 30 — 10AM to 5PM Visit the **MRFRS Booth** at the annual Spring Festival. Downtown Newburyport.

June 5 — 9AM to 2PM MRFRS Yard Sale @ Salisbury headqtrs.

July 13 and November 3 — 7PM Feral Forum. Lecture-oriented presentation that answers: What is a feral cat? How do I socialize a feral cat? How can I become a feral foster parent? @ Institution for Savings Lending Office. State St, Newburyport.

July 14 and November 9 — 7PM Feral Workshop. Hands-on workshop for current feral foster parents and for anyone interested in working with or adopting a former feral cat @ Institution for Savings Lending Office. State St, Newburyport.

September 18 — 10:30AM to 4 PM Strut for Strays @ Bartlet Mall. High St. Newburyport.

September 28 — 6PM MRFRS Annual Meeting (Public invited!) @ Newburyport Public Library. State St. Newburyport.



Mama is a 6-year-old DSH tiger. She is very sweet and needs a quiet, patient home.



Elsa is a lovely 13-year-old female. She would probably like being an only kitty.



Terri— DSH grey tiger w/white SF, 1 yr. She is quite sweet, but does not like other cats.



Zoe is a 9-year-old DLH tiger/coon female. She is looking for a quiet home with no small children.



12-year-old Pugsley is a very sweet, quiet and loving guy. He gets along with the other cats and with older children.



Teeny Weeny is a shy 3-year-old female. She is FIV+ and would do very well as a buddy cat to another kitty with FIV.



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