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Cats Are Moving In... *Tips for Managing Feral Cat Colonies*

By Michelle Tomko

Note: This article was originally published in Issue 3, 2017. The colony in the story has since been reduced to 26 cats.

For some, one of the downsides of living in a condominium or homeowner association has always been close proximity to your neighbors. This can especially become a problem when your neighbors are loud and inconsiderate. But what if the rowdy family “next door” is a feral cat colony? What are your options when feline squatters settle in your community?

To look at the impact these tiny tigers can have on a property, we caught up with Donna Hildreth, board member and community cat program coordinator at the North Brunswick Humane Association (NBHA) in North Brunswick, New Jersey. The NBHA is an all-volunteer 501(C)(3) serving the greater Brunswick area with the purpose of educating the community in the humane treatment of animals through education and outreach. They also manage a fund for trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR), lend traps and teach volunteers how to TNVR with the help of a cooperating clinic.

Recently, Hildreth and her organization were asked to help a homeowners association that was teeming with cats. Using her experience as a test case, she walked us through the punch list on how to coexist when the cats come in.

Hildreth began by defining the type of animal that could end up in a feral cat colony. “Some of them are animals that have been abandoned and left be-



hind or animals that roam in and out that aren't fixed and some of them have just been there for generations breeding," she said. "They are there through no fault of their own."

Hildreth said there is also a misconception that when people see the cats and don't feed them, the cats will just go away. "They blame people who are feeding them for causing the problem. But the fact is, the cats are there. It's their home. This is a problem that we created and we owe it to the cats to treat them humanely," she said.

Hildreth explained that there are

several imperfect methods for dealing with a growing cat problem. You can do nothing, which will lead to more cats. Animal control can be brought in to collect the cats, but they never get them all and so cats keep breeding. According to statistics, most of the cats will be brought to the shelter and euthanized once the required holding period expires because they are not adoptable.

Ironically, removing the entire colony in one swoop can actually result in more cats and other wildlife by way of the phenomenon of "the vacuum

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effect.” Simply put, when all cats are removed from their “range,” cats from neighboring territories move in. Other wildlife can increase as well. More raccoons, possums, skunks, and obviously without the help of a cat population, rodents can take up house.

Residents can impose a feeding ban. But in most cases this produces poor results due to the fact that the resourceful cats have other food sources and people who care about the cats will feed them. “Feeding bans are counterproductive because as cats starve, they become more visible going through garbage and roaming. It’s much better to feed them in a responsible way,” said Hildreth.

The most widely accepted protocol is what is known around the country as TNR. Which stands for trap, neuter, release or return. Recently, rescue societies have added a letter to this acronym including V for vaccinate against rabies, which is very important for public health.

At first blush, one would think it hard to find a downside to treating animals humanely. But, in fact, there are pros and cons. Bird lovers in the Jersey shore area in particular do not support TNVR because the cats pose a threat to local bird populations like the piping plover. Of course noise, contaminated excrement, and the threat of rabies are concerns as well. Hildreth’s rebuttal is “the real threat to birds are people and habitat destruction. People worry about diseases, primarily toxoplasmosis and rabies. You have a better chance of getting toxoplasmosis from improperly cooked meat than from a cat. Cats fixed through TNVR programs are vaccinated for rabies.”

If you don’t know, toxoplasmosis is a parasitic disease that is spread by eating food that is not handled properly that contains cysts, exposure to infected cat feces, and from a mother to a child during pregnancy if the mother becomes infected.

So how did the plan instituted by

Hildreth for TNVR work? She seems to think cooperation is the key. “I worked with a homeowners association where the township agreed to it, and the homeowners association agreed to it. When these cats started coming around there were about sixty. After doing some TNVR, it’s now down to thirty-one,” she said.

Then the vacuum effect is inevitable? “It could happen. I tell people as the colony diminishes to cut back on their food. Because if the food is plentiful they are not going to protect that area. That’s why managing how you feed is so important,” said Hildreth.

Why doesn’t the colony grow when they are receiving proper care? “The numbers go down through attrition. The

“Why doesn’t the colony grow when they are receiving proper care?”

cats get older or sick and we have the kittens removed, because they are adoptable. It’s really good for the community to do the TNVR. First all the cats get fixed and it stops the breeding. And as part of TNVR they all get vaccinated. So that helps their health and the health of the community,” she said.

Were the residents actively involved in Hildreth’s plan? “People in this one project that I worked with built shelters for the cats so there was protection from the elements. People in the community helped keep the area clean and refreshed the straw a few times a year,” she said.

“They have designated feeders and the feeding areas are put in place out of the way of most people’s sight,” Hildreth said. “We control the amount of food so that wildlife isn’t attracted. When you do that, the areas are clean.” This has a very favorable effect on the community. According to Hildreth, “the minute the cats are fixed, a lot of the nuisance complaints, like the smell, the yowling, the

fighting, that all goes away. All those nuisance behaviors are associated with mating.”

How does the NBHA find out about various colonies? “In this case we were approached. It was a complicated situation where people had been doing TNR for a while. And then the township had some complaints. The township wanted the cats removed. The people who have been taking care of them were upset about that,” Hildreth said.

“What we offered to do was to make sure all the cats got fixed, and vaccinated. We put in a feeding station with signage saying ‘don’t feed these cats.’ Certain people were approved to feed them. They were only fed during daylight hours,” she said. This is an important point in Hildreth’s experience, because otherwise you might end up feeding raccoons and skunks.

You can also keep the cats out of sight with a regimented feeding schedule and good placement of feeding stations. “You really only want to put out as much food as the cats can eat in an hour. You want them to get used to a schedule, because you only see cats around feeding time,” said Hildreth.

So, it’s important where you place their habitats? “We built a lot of shelters for them where there was a lot of growth. Cat stay very close to their food source,” Hildreth explained.

Can a homeowners association prohibit people from feeding stray animals? “By and large people respect the signs. She jokes “it’s not like people are dying to have more responsibility.”

Hildreth also extended her attention beyond the well-being of the cats. Community outreach was a big part of the successful program. “We also offered to mediate any disputes. When complaints came into the township we asked them to refer them to us, so we could go and talk to people. I would bring them literature and talk to them about the vacuum effect,” she said.

Hildreth also handed out Nature’s Miracle cat repellent and other tools. But the best medicine for a skepti-

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cal resident seems to just be listening. "Sometimes you just have to listen to people and take their concerns seriously. It lessens their fear," she said.

What should a community do when they find they have a full colony? "The only nonlethal and humane way to help to control the situation is to do trap, neuter, vaccinate, and return. They should organize. Get the help

of an organization. Set up designated feeding areas. Set up some shelters. And have people who are committed taking care of this colony. The sooner you do it the better. And take pride in it," she added.

Hildreth also suggested having lots of signage so residents know what is going on. An important sign to have is one that says "If you want to help, call this number." That way all involved are on the same page.

These tips can really turn a bad situation around Hildreth explained. "It went from people saying why are you bringing these cats back? I hate cats. To now everyone saying 'god bless you.' You're doing a great thing."

For communities that want to set up a program for feral cats, it seems that most anyone can do it. Hildreth doesn't have any special veterinary training — she quipped, "I'm just a lady with a trap." ■

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