

FEEDING STATIONS

How and where you feed a colony of feral cats can depend on circumstances beyond your control. If they live behind a fence which you can't get behind, then you're clearly limited in what you can do. If you have access to the cats' territory, but only at inconsistent times, that factor will drive how you feed them. Basically, you try to do the best you can and come as close to the ideal as possible.

Location

Ideally, the feeding station will be located at a spot where the caretaker has regular access, but is not visible or even accessible to the public. This protects the cats and makes it easy for them to come and go. Again, you have to adapt to the circumstances. For example, if you must feed through a fence, then buy an arm extender (available for about \$8 at hardware stores - it's the tool used in stores for reaching items on higher shelves). Use the extender to push the food and water bowls out of arm's reach of your side of the fence (but not so far that you can't retrieve them). If you feed in an alley, but it's accessible to others, then try to hide the spot where you feed with a board or piece of wood.

The Station

Of course there are many possible variations on a station to put the food and water in. You need enough room for one or two cats and the food and water, plus it should be covered to protect from rain. One simple idea is a wooden box with one side completely open. It's important that one side be open because only a small opening or doorway could allow one cat to stay or sleep in there and keep the other cats out. If you (or anyone you know) does carpentry, build the box with a pitched roof. Because the station will be outdoors, it would be best to seal the seams of the box with silicone and give the wood a couple of coats of deck paint. Otherwise, if you're using plywood, it will quickly rot.

Another idea is to buy a Rubbermaid storage bin and, using a box-cutter, cut out most of one of the long sides, leaving a few inches off the ground to prevent flooding. It's easy to clean because of the removable top and quick to put together. Small automatic feeders and waterers will fit inside.

If you're not able to place a station on your site, there is one trick you can use if it might rain.

Put dry food into a Tupperware container and then rest the lid upside down on top. This will keep the rain from getting to the food, but if a hungry cat comes along before or after the rain, she can just push the lid off and eat.

Depending on how often you're able to put out food, you might consider using automatic dry food dispensers and waterers. If you do, the station should be big enough to hold them. We recommend the Le Bistro brand. Different sizes at the best prices we've found are available through KV Vet Supply (1-800-423-8211 or www.kvvet.com). A ten pound feeder costs \$14.95, and a 2.75 gallon waterer also goes for \$14.95.

Trapping

Maintaining a regular feeding spot or station prior to trapping gives you the advantage of

knowing where to find the cats. If you then feed at a consistent time of day, you'll also know when they'll be there. Knowing where and when the cats are coming, and essentially allowing them to come to you, makes trapping a lot easier than trying to go find them.

Winter Weather

Wet food, because it contains a large percentage of water, freezes in cold weather and so cannot be relied upon unless the cats come right away to eat it. Dry food then becomes the staple. One exception is if you are using, for the cats' sleeping quarters, a feral cat winter shelter similar to the one described on our Info page. These shelters trap body heat and keep the interior warm enough to prevent or reverse freezing. So you can place a small bowl of wet food inside the shelter in a corner, and often it will get eaten. But never put water inside the shelter - it could get easily spilled and it is just as important, to prevent illness, that a cat be dry in winter as warm.

Ants

One way to keep ants out of the cats' food is to create a little moat. Take a small tray of some sort that can hold a ½ inch of water, put water in it, and then put the bowl of food on the tray.

The water surrounding the bowl will prevent ants from reaching the food, but the cats can still lean over and eat.

Clean up!

Many feeders of outdoor cats put down cans, plates and bowls with the obvious intention of helping the cats. But then they just leave a mess for some theoretical person, or no one as the case may be, to come and clean up. Naturally, this engenders hostility among neighbors towards the feeder and, vicariously, the cats. For the cats' sake, as well as out of respect for the community, feeding areas should be kept as clean as possible.

~ courtesy of neighborhoodcats.org