

'Trap-neuter-return' program helps control feral cat population

By Malavika Jagannathan • mjaganna@greenbaypressgazette.com • March 11, 2010

HOWARD — The 10 cats under Jeff Frisque's care have food, water and a warm place to stay, but they're not house pets. Lounging in a stack of hay bales in one corner of a shed at Professional Landscape Management, where Frisque works, these feral cats are still wild, but they've been vaccinated and sterilized as part of a program aimed at reducing the stray cat population in Howard.

Howard is one of three suburban Brown County communities embracing the "trap-neuter-return" program, a method of controlling the wild cat population by sterilizing them and returning them to their original location under someone's care. More recently, Suamico approved going forward with the program, as well, and Bellevue will also be on board, said animal control officer Monica Hoff who works for the three communities.

Last year Howard adopted the program at the request of Hoff, who says it is a cost-effective and humane way of dealing with the feral cat population. To date, about 100 cats in Howard were spayed and neutered with the help of a local organization called Cats Anonymous and \$3,400 that helped cover the costs.

"Even if you're not a cat lover, the cost effectiveness is there — \$50 instead of \$145," Hoff said. Typically, when feral cats are trapped, they're sent to the shelter and later euthanized at a cost of about \$145.

Now, when folks call Hoff, she's able to get the cats spayed and neutered, then returned to a caretaker, who is only responsible for feeding and watering the cats. Often, these caretakers are people who are already taking care of the cats like Frisque.



Professional Landscape Management employee Jeff Frisque, top, looks for feral cats Wednesday in Howard. Frisque tends to the cats in a shed where they live. Both Howard and Suamico have adopted the "trap-neuter-return" program as a way to deal with the feral cats in the community. (Corey Wilson/Press-Gazette)

"A lot of people are already feeding the cats and the reason they call me is because they get overwhelmed with kittens," Hoff said "They go from three cats to 15. Everyone doesn't want kittens every spring."

According to Cats Anonymous, there are an estimated 94,000 stray or feral cats in a 17-county region of Northeastern Wisconsin. The estimated feral cat population is about 6 percent of the human population of an area. In Brown County, that would mean there are about 14,725 cats based on the 2009 population of 245,426.

There's some disagreement among experts, though, whether having groups of wild cats harms the bird population or is humane for the cat. In some communities, releasing an animal is considered a nuisance or may violate other ordinances. For example, the city of Green Bay won't allow animals to be released within city limits.

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Howard and Suamico aren't the only places in Brown County where folks can have feral cats on their properties spayed or neutered, vaccinated and returned.

Mary Haas, who lives in Ledgeview, found two feral cats out in the barn on her property a few years ago, but quickly, two turned into 12 when they had kittens.

Two years ago, she started the process of having the cats spayed and neutered through Cats Anonymous, and now she's got a colony of cats that lives in a barn that she feeds and waters.

"A feral cat, once it's spayed or neutered, will live a healthier life," Haas said. "When those cats were not out there, I had problems with mice and snakes. They're providing a service for me, so it's the least I can do for them."

Individuals can contact Cats Anonymous, which loans humane traps to people who want to catch strays and schedules a spaying/neutering day at one of the area's participating animal hospitals such as the one scheduled for Saturday. The organization does ask for a donation of up to \$50, which helps cover the costs of the surgery and vaccinations.

Vicki Becker, who helped form Cats Anonymous, said cat lovers and people who are indifferent to cats could agree on the program's benefits.

"If you don't like them, you're cutting down on the population and if you do like them, you're seeing them taken care of instead of euthanized," Becker said.

"It's good for municipalities to see how this would save them money because they don't

have to pay the shelter to keep them."

The Fox Valley Humane Association recently has partnered with the association to initiate the program in Greenville, where they hope to trap, neuter and return about 85 feral cats in three colonies by the start of spring.

"I think the attitude towards animals is changing," Hoff said. "Most people want to find a solution to deal with animals that are nonlethal and that is humane. TNR is an alternative. It's not ideal, but it's more effective and more economical."