

Befriending feral felines

Malarie Allen | mallen@sandmountainreporter.com | Posted: Monday, April 21, 2014 4:08 pm

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GFF board member Patricia Porsch, left, holds cat Clyde. Beside her is GFF President Pamela Keck holding foster cat Silas and her husband Karl Keck holding foster kitten DB. Silas and DB need a permanent home.

They may not be domesticated, but feral cats are God's creatures, too, according to Pamela Keck, president of God's Feral Felines.

God's Feral Felines is a new organization in Marshall County that is working to humanely reduce the population of feral cats on Sand Mountain. A feral cat is a member of the domesticated cat species that has never had human socialization.

While stray cats are those that were once domesticated and have either been abandoned or lost, a feral cat is one that grows up in the wild and tends to fear humans.

The project began last year with Keck brought a bag of cat food to the Spring Creek Animal Clinic in Guntersville. She learned about the feral cat population on Sand Mountain when the receptionist asked if the food could be used to feed a feral cat colony in the Walmart parking lot in Guntersville.

Keck began implementing a trap-neuter-return system to help control the feral cat population in the popular parking lot. Through the system, food is placed in a humane trap. When the cat enters the cage to get the food, a door closes behind it. The cage is then covered with a cloth to calm the cat down, and the cat is taken to a nearby veterinarian's office to be vaccinated and spayed or neutered. Its ear is also clipped for

later identification. After the anesthesia from the procedure has worn off, usually about 24 hours, the cat is released back in the area it was originally trapped.

Occasionally, a stray cat will get mixed in with a feral cat colony. If a stray cat or young feral kitten is trapped, GFF usually tries to find a foster or permanent home for them.

However, Keck stresses the goal of GFF is not to find homes for house cats that are no longer wanted, but instead to humanely decrease the feral cat population.

She also warns adult feral cats can never be socialized and do not make good house pets.

The best method

This method is proven to be the most-effective way to decrease the feral cat population, according to Keck. As opposed to trap-and-kill or trap-and-relocate methods, which simply create a void in a particular cat colony for more cats to fill, the TNR method ends the cats' breeding cycles.

"Feral cats have been around forever," she said. "If the cats are there, there's a source for shelter and food. If we take them out, new cats will just move in. So you're going to have a colony of cats. The question is do you want a colony of breeding cats or nonbreeding cats?"

"They're going to be there, so let's find a way to make it work for everybody."

As proof, Keck cites an 11-year TNR study at the University of Florida that showed the number of cats declined by 66 percent with no new kittens being born after the first four years of operation. This not only eventually cuts down on the population but also on diseases and costs of euthanizing the cats. Additionally, it ends mating behaviors, like yowling, spraying, roaming and the majority of cat fighting, according to Keck.

In another statistic, a professor at Cornell University estimates one unspayed female cat that produces two litters per year, with only two kittens surviving from each litter, can increase the cat population to almost 60,000 cats in five years, Keck said.

As Keck and her board of volunteers continue the work of GFF, they are learning more and more how large the feral cat population is across Sand Mountain.

Keck began trapping in October. By December, she had trapped 21 cats and was working with two local veterinarians. To date, she has trapped around 64 cats and now works with five veterinarians, including some in Boaz, Albert ville and Guntersville.

How you can help

The organization needs the public's help in identifying colonies of feral cats. If someone knows of a colony, which consists of at least a dozen or more feral cats rather than one or two, they are asked to contact Keck at 256-960-0538 or pkeck11 @ [gmail.com](mailto:pkeck11@gmail.com) or send a message to the group's Facebook page at [facebook.com/Godsferalfelines](https://www.facebook.com/Godsferalfelines).

"If you're feeding a colony, we don't want to take over," she said. "We want to trap, neuter and get out."

GFF volunteers usually check with local authorities when trapping in public places. They also notify all neighborhood households before trapping in a neighborhood to encourage residents to keep their domesticated cats away from the traps.

The organization is also in great need of funds, as the process currently costs around \$600-\$700 a week to trap, neuter and release the cats. To help raise money, GFF has donation boxes set up at Spring Creek Animal Clinic in Guntersville, B&A Animal Hospital in Boaz, Albertville Animal Hospital and Ross Originals in Guntersville. Organizers are looking for other businesses willing to house donation boxes.

A large garage sale will also take place at 54 LeCroy Road in Guntersville on Friday and Saturday with all proceeds benefitting the organization. Additionally, donations may be mailed to P.O. Box 1033, Guntersville, AL 35976.

Everyone involved in the organization, from the four board members to the volunteers, work for free. Therefore all donations "are put right back into the cats," Keck said.

Also just as important, Keck asks owners of domesticated house cats to spay or neuter their own pets.

"The reason we're in the situation is because humans are not spaying or neutering their cats to begin with," she said.