

## Group works to reduce feral cat population

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God's Feral Felines is making a dent in the feral cat population of Sand Mountain. The nonprofit organization celebrated its first anniversary last month. It has worked throughout the year to humanely reduce the local population of feral cats, which are members of the domesticated cat species that have never been socialized with humans.

In contrast to stray cats, which were once domesticated and have been abandoned or lost, feral cats grow up in the wild and tend to fear humans. They live in colonies throughout Sand Mountain, eating and sleeping by whatever means is available. Some people take to feeding the feral colonies by leaving food out for them periodically. However, colonies that go unchecked just continue to grow and can easily and quickly reach an overwhelming size.

Rather than try to kill the cats in the colonies or trap and relocate them, both of which have proven to be ultimately ineffective, GFF practices a trap-neuter-release method.

The feral cats are drawn by food into a humane cage. When the cat enters the cage, 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 future 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.

"We want people to be aware that there's another option for these cats," GFF Founder Pamela Keck said.

The TNR method helps slow or stop reproduction in the cat colony until, ultimately, the cats begin to die by natural means and the colony's numbers are reduced.

During the past year, GFF has trapped more than 158 cats in 16 colonies. Of those colonies, 10 have been completely spayed and neutered. The remaining six are expected to be complete in the next few months, according to Keck.

Occasionally the cats must be relocated, but Keck said this is a last resort.

"It's just so stressful and traumatic for the cats," she said. "They may be outside, but it is their outside home. When we move them to a new place, they have to relearn everything."

Some cats have to be euthanized because of severe sickness. However, out of the 158 cats trapped, only eight were euthanized this year.

Sometimes, 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 it. GFF has found adoptive homes for 12 cats to date.

However, the organization's goal is not to find homes for house cats, but instead to focus on decreasing the feral cat population. Keck also warns that adult feral cats can never be socialized and do not make good house pets.

GFF has partnered with and received much support from several area veterinarian offices in Boaz, Albertville and Guntersville, as well as Albertville and Guntersville animal control officers, all of which are important to its success.

“The more we work together, the more we can save,” Keck said. “We give big kudos to the veterinarians. There’s no way we could do what we’re doing without them.” However, the ultimate key to success is divine guidance, according to Keck. She said she and fellow volunteer Patricia Prosch pray every time they trap.

“We’re adamant that God leads this organization,” Keck said. “What God originates, He orchestrates

“If God orchestrates it, then we know it’s going to be successful.”

Porsch added, “God has never let us down.”

In the future, Keck would like to raise awareness of the feral cat problem and see more city governments and individuals get on board with the TNR process.

“We would love to meet with the cities and work out a citywide advocacy TNR program,” Keck said.

Should resources become available one day, Keck would also like to reach beyond the feral feline population to help save domesticated cats that have been abandoned or lost. There is currently no shelter in Marshall County equipped to house lost or abandoned cats for a long period of time.

“We would love to have a shelter for cats one day,” Keck said.

Eventually, she would also like to work out a program to place elderly domesticated cats that have been lost or abandoned with elderly residents or those with disabilities who need a little extra company at home.

“When you’re alone, (pets) can really add to your life,” she said. “They would be a lot happier.”

### **Help God’s Feral Felines**

God’s Feral Felines offer many ways patrons can support the program and its efforts to reduce the feral cat population across Sand Mountain.

- Donate money to support the program. All donations are used to pay for veterinarian bills, food and other necessary items. GFF does not pay any overhead, administrative or staff compensation fees, since it is run strictly by volunteers.

Since October 2013, GFF spent \$9,560.07 on veterinarian bills alone.

“Donations are the biggest thing,” Founder Pamela Keck said. “All the money is going to the cats.”

Donations can be mailed to P.O. Box 1033, Guntersville, AL 35976 or made online at [godsferalfelines.org](http://godsferalfelines.org).

- Volunteer to foster or adopt a lost or abandoned domesticated cat or kitten. The cats can make good house pets or “barn cats.”
- Volunteer to help feed a feral cat colony near you.
- Volunteer to help trap.
- Volunteer to keep up with the organization’s records through Excel spreadsheets.
- Invite GFF to speak at your church, community or civic group.
- Like the GFF Facebook page at [facebook.com/Godsferalfelines](https://facebook.com/Godsferalfelines), visit [godsferalfelines.org](http://godsferalfelines.org) and help spread the word about the organization’s efforts.
- Spay or neuter your own cats.

*For more information, call 256-960-0538 or email [godsferalfelines@gmail.com](mailto:godsferalfelines@gmail.com).*