

Sunday Column – Cats in our Midst
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The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimates that 74-96 million cats are owned in the United States. Approximately one-third of homes contain a cat and cat owners are more likely than dog owners to have more than one cat.

Alley Cat Allies is a national advocacy group dedicated to the protection and humane care of cats, including feral cats. In fact, they know just about all there is to know about unowned, or what we now more commonly refer to as community cats.

Alley Cat Allies estimates that there are as many community cats as there are owned cats. Surveys indicate that 80 – 90% of owned cats are spayed and neutered but only about 3% of community cats have been altered.

Not all outdoor cats are accurately described as feral. Many were once pets who lived cozy lives in a nice warm home with kibble available to them 24/7. But one day the humans moved away and the cats went outside for good.

Others are bona-fide born-in-the-wild feral cats who are highly unlikely to ever become a lap kitty. These cats tend to organize into colonies with established territories, food supplies and pecking orders. And they breed at an exponential rate if left unchecked.

One of the super powers cats have is their ability to acclimate to an outdoor lifestyle sans a caretaker. If their claws have not been tampered with they are natural born hunters. This is their survival mechanism but unfortunately, for bird enthusiasts among others, it ranks them firmly as public enemy number one.

At the same time those of us who love cats can't bear to watch them and their progeny languish in the heat and cold, lacking shelter, fresh water, and nourishing food. No one in this equation is wrong. But I personally advocate for a humane solution which, as anyone who has read my column knows is trap-neuter-release (TNR). If done correctly, it is a sure-fire solution, though it requires a patient public.

I heard a few months ago that Opelika officials looked into the cat situation by placing a camera at various downtown locations. The result was that few if any cats were caught on camera and the understandable conclusion was that Opelika does not have a feral, or community cat, "problem."

What do Opelika and Auburn residents think about the community cat problem in your cities? Do you know of feral cat colonies near your home, your workplace, or elsewhere? Is a caretaker associated with the colony providing food? Is anyone trapping them for spay/neuter?

I'd love to hear from you because counting cats is far from an exact science. We know what we know from what people observe and report.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.