

REGION

## Corralling feral cats is no easy task

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By David Rattigan, Globe Correspondent | January 6, 2008

When she formed an organization aimed at managing the feral cat population in her hometown about four years ago, Sharon DuBois put out a few announcements, hung a flier at the library, and was shocked when 22 cat lovers turned up at her initial meeting.

"They said, 'We've been feeding and helping cats and didn't know what else to do,'" said DuBois, president of the Billerica Cat Care Coalition.

DuBois had a plan for a trap-neuter-return program, and since the coalition's founding she and her volunteers have been responding to calls about feral cats in Billerica, Lowell, Bedford, Burlington, Wilmington, Tewksbury, and Lexington, saving animal control officers hours of time on nuisance cat calls.

The volunteers catch the feral animals in humane traps, vaccinate them against disease, and have them spayed or neutered. They help put sociable cats up for adoption, and return some to their environment to live out the rest of their lives.

"Trap-neuter-return is a great program," said DuBois. "It's a very humane way for people in the community to deal with an overwhelming issue, and at the same time provide cost savings for the community."

A handful of local rescue organizations have helped control the population of feral cats, which remains a problem in many parts of Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

"They do a wonderful job of keeping it under control in the specific ranges that they cover," said Michael Keiley, manager of the Massachusetts Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Nevins Farm operation in Methuen.

For regions without such programs, the issue of free-roaming cats is "a major, major problem."

Two organizations in the area have a connection with the Salisbury-based Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society, which was formed in the early 1990s to control the population of cats on the Newburyport waterfront and has become a model, lending its expertise to other groups.

DuBois was a volunteer for the rescue society before founding her own organization closer to home. Cathy Ahern was the society's vice president before she and other members splintered off in spring 2006 to form Animal Rescue of Merrimack Valley, which focuses its efforts on the section of the Merrimack River from Haverhill to Lawrence and communities on both sides of the river in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

DuBois said that the needs of feral cats in communities outside that area are covered by groups such as Kitty Angels Inc. in Tyngsborough and the Clinton-based Second Chance Fund for Animals. A similar group is being organized in Acton.

"When I first started [with the rescue society] 10 years ago, I had a notebook with pages and pages of [feral cat] colonies identified in the Haverhill area," said Ahern, a Haverhill resident. "Now, most [colonies are] a single mom with kittens."

Generally, she said, colonies start near food sources such as dumpsters. They can grow quickly, she said, citing the colony behind a Plaistow, N.H., trucking company where her volunteers trapped 30 cats - including three to four litters of kittens and eight pregnant cats. While with the society, she once went to a farm in Danville, N.H., that had 120 cats, she said.

Some cats are welcome because they hunt rodents and keep the rat and mice populations in check. But in the early 1990s Newburyport was overrun with as many as 300 cats. Most were unable to hunt enough food for themselves, and were aggressively scavenging in restaurant dumpsters. (One owner estimated that he had 35 living in his.) Many of the animals were sick and most were starving.

"The businesses liked cats, but not that number of cats," said society president Stacy LeBaron. "They wanted healthy, working cats."

To solve the problem, the society created feeding stations and instituted a trap-neuter-return program. Some of the sick cats trapped in the earliest days had to be euthanized, but the others were adopted or returned to the wild.

The feeding stations provided them with food, and medical procedures kept the population in check.

These days in Newburyport, LeBaron said, "we have 35 volunteers who feed five cats twice a day, seven days a week."

Since its founding, the nonprofit has shared its knowledge and expanded its mission. While focusing on feral cat control issues in neighboring towns, it has also opened adoption centers, administers a spay-neuter hot line for dogs and cats (888-495-SPAY), and has a foster home and temporary boarding program for cats as well as a small sanctuary in Danville, N.H. for 41 feral cats. The organization rents humane traps to groups dealing with feral cat issues for as little as \$5 a week, offers a low-cost spay-neuter program and low-cost microchip program for pet owners, and once a month runs feral cat spay-neuter clinics at Nevins Farm.

Animal Rescue of Merrimack Valley is also offering low-cost spay-neuter clinics on Mondays at the Salem, N.H., Animal Rescue League to eligible animal owners in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

"I firmly believe [the problem] starts with an unspayed cat getting out or being abandoned," said Ahern, adding the procedure would cost \$250 at a veterinarian's office. "The goal is to stop it at the source."

*For more information about the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society, Animal Rescue of Merrimack Valley, and Billerica Cat Care Coalition, go to [mrfrs.org](http://mrfrs.org), [armv.org](http://armv.org), and [billericacatcarecoalition.com](http://billericacatcarecoalition.com). ■*