

What is a feral cat: management protocols in an undefined population

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There is no single accepted set of identifying characteristics for a feral cat. Within the United Kingdom, many charities work with feral cats, each with different guidelines and standards, causing problems when attempting to coordinate effective feral cat control. The aims of this study were to investigate the definition of a feral cat used amongst those working with them, and to establish what happens to cats once labelled as feral. An online database of cat charities was used to identify a sampling frame of 40 charities located in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. Of these, 13 were willing to participate and underwent face to face structured interviews. A follow-up focus group was run at the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science. The only characteristic that all study participants agreed on when defining a feral cat was that it would be 'unapproachable in its free roaming environment.' The most common term used to describe a feral cat by respondents was 'wild', with lack of socialisation towards humans also identified as a key feature. Of the respondents, 62% felt that a feral cat could be tamed, regardless of age. All charities neutered cats before release or re-homing. Although 92% identified neutered cats, only 54% did this through ear tipping, as recommended by WSPA, and 38% of shelters returned neutered cats without any form of permanent identification. In the UK, several different definitions of a feral cat are currently in use. Based on the opinions of those working with feral cats, this study proposes that a feral cat is both unapproachable and capable of thriving in its free-roaming environment. Taming of all ages of feral cat has been identified as common practice; this is a controversial process as confinement is extremely stressful for ferals. Provision of a common definition of feral cats is a necessary first step to more coordinated management and improved welfare of these animals.