

# Cutting down on kittens: Blair volunteers try to keep a lid on feral cats by trapping and fixing

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POSTED: THU RSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2015 12:30 AM | *UPDATED* : 11:40 AM, THU SEP 24, 2015.



Taryn Breuer gave a weary smile and shrugged as she waited for a feral cat to finish inspecting a wire box trap and finally take the bait. Patience, the retired Blair teacher said, is the key when you trap, neuter and return these skittish creatures to the wild. “It takes as long as it takes,” Breuer said. “We’ve trapped nine cats in an hour, and then there are locations when it’s one cat an hour.”

Breuer and her husband, Mark, are among the volunteers who operate the Friends of the Jeanette Hunt Animal Shelter in Blair.

Since 2012, the Breuers and others have captured, sterilized and released 1,056 felines. After getting some instruction from an Omaha woman, the volunteers trapped 138 cats in 2012, 171 in 2013, 404 in 2014 and 343 so far in 2015. “The reason we got started in trap, neuter and return or release is that it became apparent there was a huge overpopulation of cats in Washington County,” Breuer said. “What we were looking for was a humane way to control the cat population in rural areas and towns all over the county.”

Such programs, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, help communities by stabilizing the population of a feral colony and, over time, reducing it. Nuisance behaviors such as spraying, excessive noisemaking and fighting are largely eliminated. No more kittens are born, yet the benefit of natural rodent control is continued.

“It’s much healthier for the cats, because cats that have been fixed live longer and better lives,” Breuer said. “We also vaccinate the cats and notch their ears, so if we trap them again, we can release them right away.”

National organizations such as Alley Cat Allies say studies have found that removing cats from an area and killing them only leads to a vacuum effect where cats from neighboring areas move into the empty space. Tracy Smith of Herman, Nebraska, agrees with the philosophy. She called the Blair shelter because she was worried about several feral cats that have been hanging out near her home.

Smith, who moved to town three years ago from North Carolina, is what animal control officers call “a colony caregiver.” She leaves dry cat food outside for the feral cats, but a recent batch of kittens sent Smith looking for population-control answers. “I was amazed at the cat population when I got here. I wanted them to get fixed,” she said. “I don’t want to see them put down. Coming from North Carolina, I did see a lot of euthanized animals and I said, ‘Uh-uh. That’s not the answer.’”

During a typical week, the Breuers trap on Tuesday and cart the cats to a clinic on Wednesday. The cats are returned to familiar territory on Thursday. The job is somewhat easier since the Blair Shelter bought a used animal control van with 232,000 miles on it from the Nebraska Humane Society. The shelter filled the van with capture and transfer cages. The group uses two types of capture cages: a tomahawk trap, in which the cat enters a cage and steps on a metal plate that causes the door to slam shut; and the box trap, which catches the animals using a box, a stick and a string.

A plate of sardines and tuna — “the smellier, the better,” Mark Breuer says — is placed under the box. When the cat walks under the box and begins to eat, a volunteer watching a good distance away pulls the string and the box slams down over the cat.

“The box traps tend to work better than the other trap because cats are more likely to go under something than to go inside,” Taryn Breuer said. A transfer cage is placed next to the traps and the cats — looking for an escape — run in.

When Mark Breuer sprang a box trap Tuesday on a feral cat near 19th and Lincoln Streets in Blair, resident Crystal Adams rushed over and confirmed the animal was feral. Shelter volunteers have been working in the area since Adams called about 18 months ago to report “about 20 cats” roaming around.



“We keep having strays showing up on the block, and they keep reproducing,” Adams said. “There was no one who was able to assist us. And then I ran into (Taryn). The first time they came, I don’t know how many cats they caught, but there were four pregnant females in the batch.”

The cats are sterilized and vaccinated through the Humane Society in Omaha or at veterinary clinics in Washington County. The shelter pays a discounted rate of \$32 per cat.

Humane Society spokeswoman Pam Wiese said she was “truly amazed” by the work being done by the Blair shelter. Especially, she said, considering its modest resources.

“Any time someone is working to decrease the cat overpopulation, we are happy to help,” she said.

“What they’ve accomplished up there is just awesome.”

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