

Veterinary Students Making a Difference

Cyclones show their “feral” side

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We're not just all corn, hogs, and Cyclone football at Iowa State University. We're all about cats, too.

Students at Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine are taking the opportunity to help homeless animals and get some hands-on experience at the same time. They are volunteering their time and effort to help spay or neuter, and vaccinate feral* cats and kittens through the Iowa State University (ISU) Feral Cat Alliance, providing experience otherwise not gained at the veterinary school.

The ISU Feral Cat Alliance, a veterinary student organization that was formed in the fall of 2001, is dedicated to reducing the free roaming cat population in central Iowa. We do this using a humane and effective alternative to death and eradication known as “Trap, Neuter, and Return,” or TNR. TNR is a concept that is being implemented by the national feral cat organization Alley Cat Allies and is endorsed by the Humane Society of the United States.

The ISU Feral Cat Alliance holds monthly clinics at the ISU College of Veterinary Medicine. During these clinics, about 25 student volunteers from all classes (freshmen through seniors) work to vaccinate, spay or neuter, and ear crop each cat. We receive 20 to 25 kittens and adult cats per clinic, and each clinic takes about five to six hours to complete. Licensed veterinarians, including one of our club advisors, who is a board-certified veterinary surgeon, oversee all clinics.

Most of the cats who we work with here in the Midwest are “barn cats” – that is, feral or semi-feral cats who live in rural areas in groups known as colonies. Like feral cat colonies in urban areas, barn cat colonies will congregate anywhere there is food. Managed colonies are fed and watched over by one or more human



Students and veterinarians who participated in the first clinic. Dr. Merkley (3rd from left in back row) and Dr. Loenser (last one on right in back row) facility advisors. Suzanna Brown (4th from the left in front row)

caretakers. Among humane organizations, the left ear crop is a sign that the cat has been sterilized and is a member of a managed colony. This marking is easily identified from a distance.

Animals who are purely feral (i.e., non-touchable) are caught the day before the clinic using humane live traps that can be rented out from the Alliance. These animals are both induced and recovered from anesthesia inside the trap, thus minimizing handling and stress, and ensuring the safety of our volunteers. The day after the clinic, all animals are returned to their colony.

The clinics are very popular among students, most of whom are very enthusiastic about the program. However, a considerable amount of work went into making the Alliance such a success. As the organization was forming in 2001, our major concern was funding. We applied for and were fortunate enough to receive a \$1,900 student organization grant from a large corporation, which helped pay for a great deal of our start-up costs. We also wrote to several veterinary pharmaceutical, pet food, and other companies, who have donated money and items such as vaccines and live traps. We are also very grateful to the ISU Veterinary Teaching Hospital for partial funding of the project and for allowing us to hold our clinics in the surgical teaching laboratory.

The Alliance believes that TNR, in most situations, is a more humane and effective method of feral cat population control than trap and eradicate. Our hope is to significantly reduce the number of feral cats who are brought to animal shelters in central Iowa. With the help of our student volunteers and with



Veterinary student volunteers from all classes work to prepare patients for surgeries.

support from the college and the community, we are sure that we will reach that goal. From concept to reality, the ISU Feral Cat Alliance has been an interesting journey and we are optimistic for the future.

For more information, contact the ISU Feral Cat Alliance at:

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*Feral cats are “un-owned,” free roaming cats who avoid contact with humans.