

TNR & COLONY CARE

How to Build an Insulated Winter Shelter for Outdoor Cats

A small, raised, straw-filled shelter keeps a colony dry and warm through Cattaraugus County winters. Here is how to build and maintain one.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 15, 2026 • 1 min read • 3 cited sources

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Why size matters

Cats heat a shelter with their own bodies, so smaller is warmer. Alley Cat Allies suggests roughly 2 feet by 3 feet and at least 18 inches high, which fits a few cats without leaving cold empty space.

The two-tote shelter

1. Take a large plastic storage tote and a smaller one that fits inside it with a few inches to spare on every side.
2. Cut a doorway about 6 inches wide through both totes, lined up, a few inches above the floor so snow and rain do not run in.
3. Pack straw into the gap between the two totes and into the bottom of the outer tote, then set the inner tote in place.
4. Loosely fill the inner tote with straw for bedding and put both lids on.
5. Set the shelter on a wooden pallet or boards to keep it off frozen ground, with the doorway facing away from the wind or against a wall.

Straw, never hay or blankets

Use straw for insulation and bedding. Straw resists moisture, so cats can burrow into it and stay dry.

Do not use hay, blankets, towels or newspaper. They soak up moisture, then stay cold and can freeze, making the shelter colder than having nothing at all.

Winter upkeep

- Replace straw when it gets damp, dirty or flattened.
- Clear snow away from doorways after every storm.
- Do not use salt or chemical de-icers near the colony: they hurt paw pads and are toxic if licked off.
- Put food and water near, not inside, the shelter, and check water for ice daily.

Checklist

- ☐ Two totes (one inside the other)
- ☐ Straw for insulation and bedding
- ☐ Pallet or boards to raise it
- ☐ Doorway a few inches above the floor
- ☐ Weekly straw check

Sources

1. Alley Cat Allies — Providing Shelter
<https://www.alleycat.org/community-cat-care/providing-shelter/>
2. Alley Cat Allies — Winter Weather Tips for Outdoor Cats
<https://www.alleycat.org/resources/cold-weather-tips-for-cats/>
3. ASPCApro — Top Ten Tips: Caring for Community Cats in Winter
<https://www.aspcapro.org/resource/top-ten-tips-caring-community-cats-winter>