

TNR & COLONY CARE

Stray, Feral, or Someone's Pet?

How to Tell the Difference

What you see from a distance tells you whether a cat needs a home, a return to its owner, or TNR and its colony.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 15, 2026 • 1 min read • 2 cited sources

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The difference

A stray cat was socialized to people at some point and has lost or left its home. A feral cat has had little or no human contact, or so little for so long that it no longer accepts people. Ferals bond with other cats, not with humans. Over time a stray can become feral.

Signs you can watch for outdoors

- Approach: strays may come near people, porches and cars. Ferals avoid people and hide.
- Company: strays usually live alone. Ferals often belong to a colony.
- Body: strays tend to walk like a house cat, tail up, and may look at you and blink. Ferals stay low, may wrap their tail around themselves, and rarely make eye contact.
- Voice: strays may meow or answer your voice. Ferals rarely meow, beg or purr.
- Ear-tip: a cat with a straight-cut ear tip has already been through TNR. Leave it be.

Do not judge a cat in a trap

Fear changes behavior. A frightened stray in a trap or a shelter can hiss and lash out like a feral cat. Watch a cat outdoors over several days before deciding.

What to do next

- Likely someone's pet or a stray: check for a collar, ask neighbors, post on local lost-pet pages, and have a vet or shelter scan for a microchip.
- Feral, not ear-tipped: plan TNR. Apply to us for a surgery voucher and trap loan.
- Feral and ear-tipped: already sterilized. Keep feeding and sheltering it.

Sources

1. Alley Cat Allies — What's the Difference Between Stray, Feral, and Pet Cats?
<https://www.alleycat.org/community-cat-care/whats-the-difference-between-stray-feral-and-pet-cats/>
2. Alley Cat Allies — Feral and Stray Cats: An Important Difference
<https://www.alleycat.org/resources/feral-and-stray-cats-an-important-difference/>