TNR & COLONY CARE

How to Make an Outdoor Cat Shelter for Winter

How to build an insulated winter shelter for outdoor cats from storage totes or a foam cooler: the right size, straw (never hay), placement, safe heat and upkeep.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 24, 2026 • 5 min read • 9 cited sources

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Why size matters

A small, raised, straw-filled shelter keeps a colony dry and warm through the winter. Cats heat a shelter with their own bodies, so smaller is warmer: in a big shelter the heat spreads out and is lost. Alley Cat Allies suggests roughly 2 feet by 3 feet and at least 18 inches high, which fits three to five cats without leaving cold empty space. Go smaller for fewer cats, and build several shelters for a big colony.

The doorway should be about 6 inches wide (sources range from 5½ to 8), roughly the width of a cat's whiskers, and a few inches above the floor so rain and snow don't run in.

Shelter is one part of winter care. Water, food, cars and de-icers are covered in **how to keep outdoor cats warm in winter**.

AT A GLANCE

- The most common build is two plastic storage totes, a smaller one inside a larger one, with straw packed into the gap between them.
- Use straw for insulation and bedding. Straw resists moisture; hay, blankets, towels and newspaper soak it up and can freeze.
- 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.

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. Damp hay can also grow mold.

Telling them apart: straw is golden and light; hay is greener and heavier, and usually costs two to three times as much. Pack straw loosely, filling the shelter a quarter to halfway. Farm and feed stores, garden centers, pet stores and stables sell it, and fall decorations are a good free source after the season.

Where to put it

- Off the ground, on a pallet or bricks, so the floor doesn't draw heat away and snow can't block the door.
- Doorway away from the wind, ideally facing a wall, fence or porch; a sunny spot helps.
- Weighed down with bricks or pavers on the lid, so it can't tip or blow over. Don't crush the roof.
- Out of sight of passers-by: dark paint, or leaves and brush around it, away from traffic.
- With the property owner's permission.
- A door flap of vinyl or a rubber mat is optional. Never make it airtight, and add it only after the cats are using the shelter.
- A second door gives an escape route where predators such as coyotes are common, but it lets in drafts, so most shelters do without.

Heat: what is safe

A well-built shelter needs no electricity: straw and the cats' own body heat do the work. If you add heat, use only pads made for pets, such as low-watt heated pet beds. Microwavable heat discs stay warm for hours indoors but less outside, so keep two and swap them.

For water, a heated pet bowl with a shielded cord and automatic shut-off keeps it liquid. Never put water inside the shelter: a spill soaks the bedding.

This quick sheet is the start of the guide. Still to read: The two-tote shelter, One tote with a foam liner, The foam cooler shelter and 4 more sections, plus the Outdoor Cat Shelter Plans for Winter. Read it all free when you join our pet health emails at cattcountycatnippers.org/articles/how-to-build-a-winter-shelter-for-feral-cats

Sources

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