TNR & COLONY CARE

Stray or Feral Cat? How to Tell, and What to Do

A stray was someone's pet; a feral cat was never socialized to people. The signs that tell them apart, outdoors and in a trap, and what each cat needs: a way home, a new home, or TNR and its colony.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 28, 2026 • 4 min read • 4 cited sources

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The short answer

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.

A stray may come toward you, meow and look you in the eye. A feral cat keeps its distance, stays low and stays quiet. A stray may be someone's lost pet, or ready for a new home. An adult feral cat belongs outdoors with its colony, after TNR.

Both are community cats: Alley Cat Allies uses the term for any unowned cat that lives outdoors.

Stray or feral: the signs

HOW TO TELL A STRAY FROM A FERAL CAT

Sign	Stray	Feral
Around people	May approach people, houses, porches or cars	Won't approach; hides from people
Other cats	Likely lives alone	May belong to a colony
Body language	May walk like a house cat, tail up	May crawl, crouch, stay low and protect its body with its tail

Sign	Stray	Feral
Eye contact	Will probably look at you or blink	Unlikely to make eye contact
Voice	May meow or "answer" your voice	Won't meow, beg or purr
When you see it	Mostly in the daytime	More often at night; sometimes by day
Coat	Probably dirty or disheveled; no ear-tip	Probably clean and well kept; an ear-tip if it has been through TNR

From Alley Cat Allies. No single sign decides it: watch the cat over several days.

Unneutered males and nursing mothers

Some signs come from hormones, not temperament. Alley Cat Allies notes that a male with a big head, a thick neck, a muscular body or fight scars is more likely to be feral, because those are traits of unneutered males, and only about 2% of feral cats in the US are neutered. Hormones can also give an unneutered male a spiky coat or "stud tail": hair loss, grease or bumps at the base of the tail. A female who is pregnant or nursing is more likely to be feral too.

This quick sheet is the start of the guide. Still to read: Don't judge a cat in a trap, What to do next, Why the difference matters and 1 more section, plus the The Cat Caretaker Bundle. Read it all free when you join our pet health emails at cattcountycatnippers.org/articles/stray-feral-or-outdoor-pet-identification-guide

Sources

1. Alley Cat Allies — Feral and Stray Cats: An Important Difference
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2. Alley Cat Allies — What's the Difference Between Stray, Feral, and Pet Cats?
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3. Alley Cat Allies — The Cat Socialization Continuum
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4. Alley Cat Allies — A Step-by-Step Guide to Trap-Neuter-Return
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