

Volunteer shelter and cat rescue

Peggy Brown

In 1992 my family found a litter of abandoned kittens that nobody else would take care of, so we gave them refuge and subsequently found them homes. We are now fulltime volunteers for The NSW Animal Welfare League (AWL), Manly Warringah/Pittwater Branch and conduct a Volunteer Animal Shelter at our home. We prefer to work under the umbrella of the NSW AWL as we respect their constitution, animal rehoming policy and educational focus as well as their valued professional advice and insurance policy coverage.

Our branch is supported by the Terrey Hills Veterinary Hospital which provides discounted veterinary attention, much appreciated professional advice, holds some of our kitten overflow at no charge when needed and ongoing assistance that has contributed to our survival and success.

We have a reasonable relationship with our three local councils, Manly, Warringah and Pittwater and their three Mayors are our shared patrons. I represent our branch at Companion Animal Advisory Committees at each council. They have chosen to recognise our efforts by medals or Certificates of Appreciation from each council.

My annual pilgrimage to the National Urban Animal Management Conferences has kept our branch up-to-date on the latest trends and has been vital to enhance our animal welfare role in our local community.

Our shelter has capacity for 60 cats and kittens, housed in a number of outdoor and indoor enclosures and cages. There are also a couple of dog runs and rabbit and guinea pig display sections. In the last twelve months we have rehomed 325 cats and kittens and 29 dogs and puppies. Regretfully we have had to euthanase 30 feral or terminally ill cats.

We have a wonderful band of animal lovers who volunteer to help from 9.00am-2.00pm and 4.00pm-6.00pm, seven days a week. Our branch raises funds by selling bric-a-brac, cakes and handcrafts at street stalls and community days, conducts raffles and dinner parties and are very appreciative of donations of food and other items. I am also an authorised microchip implanter under the NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 and have a contract to microchip animals for the Pittwater Pound. We do a small amount of boarding when the kitten season is over between Easter to November.

On the average month we use 1.5 tonnes of kitty litter, 280kg of pet meat, 300 cans of pet food, 8kg of cat dry food, 6kg of grated cheese, 20 baked chickens (deboned, cut into small pieces, labelled and refrigerated) and 'Nile Perch' for fussy eaters. Other essential items we buy are Divetelact, dog biscuits, Hibiclens hand wash and floor wash — all by the drum!

It is our task to acclimatise all the rehoming animals to being handled by their new family. We also make sure basic training for puppies and litter training for cats and kittens is well advanced.

We believe all animals deserve respect and care, but the easy going and affectionate pets are certainly much easier to rehome. Unfortunately, our community either reveres cats or treats them as predators —there is not a middle ground.

We have many phone calls each day. A typical example is "I've got this cat in my backyard. I've been feeding it for six years, *but it's not my cat!* It's a bit scared and it can't walk. Oh yeah, and it had these kittens nine weeks ago and I can't get near them. Can you help me?" This may entail helping the person trap and catch the cats as trapping is more difficult than it sounds.

TRAPPING PROTOCOL

1. Each state has different laws and these should be consulted prior to trapping any cat.
2. Get as much details from the telephone caller as possible — how long have the cats been there; how many cats have they seen; are there any kittens; do they appear wild; does anyone feed the cats?
3. Talk to surrounding neighbours to ascertain the background of the situation — eg previous tenants in a rental property moved out six month ago and left the cat.
4. Do a letterbox drop of the local area briefly detailing the situation that cats are causing nuisance to a local resident and that trapping will commence shortly. Speak to as many people as possible as well. Advise cat owners to keep their cat confined for the next week so they won't be trapped accidentally.
5. Feed the wild/nuisance cats on paper one hour after dark for a few nights.
6. Place the trap near the food in a sheltered position covered by cardboard boxes or towels. Place paper inside the trap so the cat is walking on a known familiar surface. Cats are attracted to small dark corners and calm down quicker in a darkened situation.
7. If kittens are under four weeks of age, ask the people to feed them for a week until they are older and stronger and better able to cope with the stress of transport at around five weeks of age.
8. Once caught, cover the trap with a towel and take them straight to the veterinarian for evaluation, microchip scanning, worming, etc. Our vets even come out in the middle of the night if there is a particularly wild or stressed cat that has been caught and is hurting itself on the wire trying to escape.
9. If the cat has a collar and address tag, the owner is notified as soon as possible to come to collect their cat. If it is microchipped we advise the NSW Pet Line of the microchip number.
10. Transporting the trapped cat necessitates covering the trap with an old sheet, a seat covered with a tarp and lots of newspaper and quiet conversation.
11. Removing the cat from the trap should be done slowly so as not to rush a scared animal. A big towel, a steady hand, a darkened *secure* room and avoid eye contact, all help to enhance a safe transition. Placing the trap at the door of a larger isolation cage and opening the door slowly and allowing the cat to run in and shutting the door very quickly, is safest! If the cat is quiet it can be picked up by the scruff of the neck, support the rump, point the sharp bits in the opposite direction from you or others and place it rapidly in a holding cage.
12. If the cat has no identification and is too wild, it can be euthanased by the veterinarian, in the trap by pressing the cat to one side. This is only done to a cat that is damaging itself by the trauma of being confined and then only as a last resort.

ASSESSMENT PROTOCOL

1. Kittens between birth and one week are very hard to rear without a lactating queen. Divetelact feeds every three hours sometimes gets them through. Placing the kittens with a quiet, tame lactating queen with similarly aged kittens sometimes works. Watch the situation closely to ensure she is coping physically and behaviourally. We supplement the queen's food supply and the veterinarian gives the queen a vitamin injection each week.
2. One to three week old kittens have a slightly better chance. Four to six weeks old kittens usually fare well.
3. Kittens that have had no human handling before seven and eight weeks of age (when their eyes change colour) have a 50% chance of adapting to people. It is possible after eight weeks of age, but with so many kittens to care for, they unfortunately have to be euthanased.
4. Interpreting cat body language is mostly straightforward. Cowering body posture, ears flattened back against the head, eyes widely dilated, hissing/spitting and tail tucked underneath often leave no doubts. But remember that loving pets can also look like this if they are lost and stressed *give the cat time to settle!* They can sometimes be enticed by food or a nice dark room for a few hours. *Avoid eye contact* as much as possible during the settling in period.

5. Wild cats often look more bedraggled. Knotted tangle of fur may indicate lack of grooming, a harsh hair coat may indicate a substantial worm burden and a very thin cat under all that fur may indicate recent starvation. Unfortunately, time and space are the limiting factors and the quieter, tamer cats have to take priority.
6. To aid in the assessment with touchy animals, we gently stroke the cat with a long, fine stick through the wire or a partially opened door, to gradually acclimatise it to contact with new people. Gradually gaining its confidence, we then stroke it with a towel then our hands briefly and retreat before it gets upset. Cleaning the cage around these animals is particularly challenging!
7. Wild cats are placed in cages on their own until they are settling down so they are not stressed by the presence of other cats, they can receive more individual attention and they are not harassing other settled, happy cats!
8. If there is hope for a wild cat, desexing tomcats accompanied by a female hormone injection often works wonders! A pregnant female often settles quickly once kindness is shown and food is plentiful. A wild queen with a young litter will also often tolerate care being shown to her and her kittens as long as the movement is slow, steady and predictable and eye contact is avoided.

CARE AND MANAGEMENT PROTOCOLS

1. Each newly arrived animals is given a quick once over for signs of sneezing, watery eyes, wounds, ticks, fleas or ringworm.
2. They are then wormed, treated with Advantage Flea treatment, and quarantined for a few days as much as possible.
3. All animals are given beds, a cuddly blanket, toys, food, water and fresh kitty litter. Cats are handled/groomed as much as possible during this process.
4. Volunteers wash their hands in Hibiclens and change aprons between animals/cages and quarantine areas.
5. Litter trays are changed completely each morning and scooped each evening. They are washed in hot water, detergent and bleach and dried in the sun.
6. All floors are washed daily in hot water, detergent and Halasept. Food and water containers and utensils similarly are rinsed well to remove chemical residues.
7. Adults are fed twice daily with canned and dry food.
8. Grass is made available every second day and chicken necks are given twice weekly.
9. The shelter is divided into four main areas by gardens, which allows efficient quarantine measures to be applied if necessary.
10. Cats have to be 100% healthy before being vaccinated or undergoing an anaesthetic for desexing.
11. Our policy is not to rehome animals with families with children under five years of age.
12. Each animal is treated as though it will be our own, personal pet. This ensures we do our very best with each and every animal that comes into our brief circle of care.

REHOMING PROTOCOL

Rehomed animals are house-trained/litter-trained, wormed, health-checked, desexed, microchipped, vaccinated and treated for fleas with Advantage (cats) and Frontline (dogs). Dogs are also heartworm tested placed on heartworm prevention (Heartgard) and receive basic obedience training.

Several advice sheets accompany every rehomed cat — feeding, kitty litter, scratching post, settling-in advice — *‘How to Build an Outside Run’* and even *‘Animal Emergency Preparedness’* advice.

We recommend new owners keep the new cat inside constantly for at least one month. Preferably start with the cat in one room only, and then gradually allow greater access to the house.

While the cat is inside for the first month, train the cat to walk on a harness. We advise cats be kept inside permanently or have access to an outside run. This protects native wildlife, prolongs the cat's life by minimising catfights, car accidents, nuisance caused to neighbours and chance of getting lost!

Kittens are usually sold around 10–12 weeks of age to ensure they are strong and healthy. Potential owners have to provide, borrow or buy secure transport cages for the trip home.

We ask people to groom their new cats many times a day to help the cat acclimatise to their new family.

In conclusion, why do we dedicate our lives, 24 hours a day, seven days a week? The reason being it is challenging, there are lots of highs and lows, it's a terrific opportunity to learn about animals 'in sickness and in health', learning to read behaviour patterns and most of all, it's great to know your making a difference by giving animals a second chance at finding a loving home.

Thank you to Robert Stabler for his encouragement and persistence in helping me to write this paper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Peggy completed an Animal Nurse Course and several Animal Management Courses at TAFE and become a horse trainer, instructor and judge and eventually the tutor for the Horse Management Course at Brookvale TAFE for 11 years. She retired from that position and has been a member of the NSW Animal Welfare League since 1990, Branch President 1992-97 and Animal Welfare Officer and Secretary since 1993. Peggy attained her CGC CD and CDX titles with her dog and completed a Dog Instructor's Course with Northern Suburbs Dog Training Club. She runs the Volunteer Cattery. Peggy is a NSW Authorised Identifier for Microchipping. Presently holds a seat on the 3 local Councils — Manly, Warringah and Pittwater Animal Advisory Committees and is the Convenor for the Council's Animal Emergency Committee. She has been honoured by the 3 Councils with Certificates or Medals of Appreciation for Outstanding Service to Animals. Peggy's dream for the future is to get academic recognition for prior learning for her animal behaviour work and to get sponsorship to visit The Blue Cross Animal Shelter in the UK and the Humane Society of the United States to volunteer and further her knowledge of animal welfare work.

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