

# South County Cats - Barn Cat Guide

## Part 1: Introduction

South County Cats works to save lives by relocating displaced feral cats and unadoptable cats to suitable barn homes. This relocation is not always 100% successful so it is a last resort for cats that have no other options. Careful matchmaking is critical to give these cats the best chance possible. Here are some useful articles that discuss feral cat relocation.



- Spay & Stay/Alley Cat Allies' - *Safe Relocation of Feral Cats* (<http://www.spayandstay.org/relocate.pdf>)
- Alley Cat Allies' - *Safe Relocation of Feral Cats* (<http://www.alleycat.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=334> )

There is no guarantee that all cats will be “mousers” but most cats are instinctive hunters and hunt for sport and not for food. Therefore we only place cats in homes where they will be fed, and not expected to survive on rodents alone. A safe structure is required for protection from predators and weather.

**All of our cats are health checked, spayed or neutered, vaccinated (FVRCP and rabies) and assessed for temperament.**

We generally place **four cats per barn** for their safety and protection. Sometimes barn owners question whether they really need to take on four cats, thinking perhaps a couple of cats will do. We tell them that these cats are nearly invisible. The only difference between two and four cats is that the food dish needs to be filled a bit more often. The upside is that four cats will do a better job of rodent management, because your barn will contain a critical mass of cats to get the job done.

## Part 2: Matchmaking

**The first step in getting barn cats is to complete the *Barn Cat Adopter Questionnaire*** (<http://members.petfinder.com/~WA285/bcquestionnaire.html>). The cats we place come from a variety of origins. Some have been trapped by local animal control jurisdictions, some have been surrendered to local shelters by their owners but are considered unadoptable as “house cats” due to lack of socialization (often times from hoarding situations where there were too many cats to socialize and care for). Occasionally we are asked to place tame cats who have been surrendered multiple times due to poor litterbox habits. Their only hope is a safe outdoor home. The cats we place are all accustomed to living outdoors at least part time. We screen cats and barn homes very carefully to ensure the best match possible.

A friendly or semi-social outdoor cat that has outdoor experience can survive quite well if placed in a group of at least four cats that includes ferals that are skilled at evading predators. The ferals generally want nothing to do with people but will readily accept tame cats as companions. In such groups, the friendly cat acts like an ambassador between the feral cats and their human guardians. Our “four cat minimum” also maximizes the physical comfort of the entire colony, since they tend to huddle together to keep warm during the winter.

We have also found that a tame or semi-social cat is a great mentor for feral kittens who are too old to be socialized. A barn owner who adopted a tame housesoiler and three feral kittens states, *"I love Elliot! He is the Patriarch of the barn. You can always see him overseeing the 3 black kittens, sitting authoritatively watching them play. The three black kittens live in the barn with him and are not afraid of me anymore but they won't let me touch them."*

### Part 3: Barn Home Requirements



**Food, Water and Shelter** - Like all animals, barn cats have habitat requirements that include food, water and shelter. Without these basic habitat elements, barn cats may not stay in their new home for very long, especially if better habitat is available nearby. For this reason, we cannot relocate cats to a place where they won't have ongoing access to food or water. We also can't relocate cats to a site that lacks a roof and protection from weather.

**Dogs** – We are not opposed to placing cats at barn homes with dogs but there must be a plan to prevent the dogs from chasing the cats off.

**Acclimation** – When the cats are brought to your barn they must be acclimated to their new home for at least two weeks before they can be released. If the barn or outbuilding is 100% secure, they can be immediately released into the building. Most barns are not secure so a tack room may be used.

If a secure room or building is not available, we can provide a 4' x 4' relocation cage for the cats to stay in during the acclimation period. The cage will need to be protected from the elements in an open shed or barn. A quarter of a bale of straw or hay should be placed in and around the cage, which can then be covered with an old blanket. This arrangement helps reduce drafts and creates a cozy space where the cats can relax and get used to the sights, sounds and smells of their new environment.

**Sources of Relocation Equipment** - If you would like to purchase your own relocation cage, we recommend the 36"x 48"x 48" Midwest Pet Exercise Pen with a wire top. This pen is lightweight, folds easily for transport or storage, can be set up and disassembled quickly, and is easy to clean with a scrub brush, soap, hot water and bleach.

Information about this pen is available at: <http://www.midwestpetproducts.com>

Plans to build your own enclosure can be found at: [http://www.cdpets.com/enclosure\\_kits.php](http://www.cdpets.com/enclosure_kits.php)

### Part 4: Preparing for your Cats

Once we have found a suitable group of cats for you, you will need to purchase a few supplies to prepare for their arrival. Below is a list of the items you should have on hand before your cats are brought to you.

- **Cat food** - dry and canned
- **Food and water dishes** – Large, flat bottom stainless steel or ceramic bowls are suggested.

- **One or two LARGE litter boxes** - These can be conventional litter boxes, Rubbermaid containers, plastic lined cardboard boxes or boot size shoe boxes (but you will need several as these are disposable).
- **Cat litter** – Newspaper or wood pellets are suggested, but traditional clay litter will also work. Clumping litter is not recommended as it can be very messy and get into the food and water bowls.

**Preparing the barn** - Remember, the cats will be secured in the barn, tack room or cage for two weeks so if you want to make some improvements to their living space, you can do that while they are acclimating. This might include preparing the rafters or acquiring “cat houses” such as boxes or large carriers - places for the cats to hide and sleep.



We have seen some amazing structures designed for barn cats. These can be made with items in your barn or garage. The photo at left shows a “cat house” made from a cupboard lined with Styrofoam. It was placed on a wood platform with a ramp leading up to it. The cats love it.

Check <http://spayandstay.org/wintershelter.htm> for ideas on building cat shelters.

## Part 5: Acclimation

**Moving Day** - Trapping and transport of feral cats to a spay-neuter clinic, surgery, recovering from surgery in a cage, and being transported to a new location are extremely stressful experiences for cats used to a free-roaming lifestyle. If a group of relocated cats is simply released into an open barn, they are likely to be so frightened and disoriented that they will run away immediately, even if provided with a comfortable place to live and plenty of food and water. This is why we insist that relocated outdoor cats be acclimated in a confined area for 14 days to help them adjust to their new home. Fourteen days of confinement gives relocated cats time to calm down and become familiar with the sights, sounds and smells of their new surroundings. This helps ensure that when they are released they will stay at their new home.

A volunteer will bring the cats to your home and help set them up in the barn or outbuilding. The volunteer will help you determine where to release or set up the cats. Please be prepared with the items on the list in Part 4 of this Guide.

The ideal place to confine the cats is inside the barn or other building that will become their permanent home. A barn with an enclosed room and/or outer doors that can be kept securely closed is ideal, because the cats can move around freely inside and peek outside through windows or cracks in the walls during the acclimation period. If you do not have a 100% secure building we will provide a relocation cage. No matter what type of enclosure is used, it is best to confine the cats in an area where they can get at least a glimpse of the outside world. This helps orient them to the environment surrounding the building in which they will live most of the time.

**Barn or Outbuilding** - If your barn or outbuilding is 100% secure (please check ahead of time as cats will find a hole if there is one), the cats can be released directly into the building. Cats prefer to congregate in the upper parts of barns and outbuildings whenever possible, because these areas are warmer and provide more protection. A hayloft is ideal, but you can also create a cat lounging area by placing a sheet of plywood over a set of rafters. Barn cats are generally adept at climbing walls to get to such spaces, but if you don't have a stairway, it is helpful to build a ramp or shelves between the ground and the loft so the cats can easily reach

it. You can make a small “cave” in the loft made out of a stacked set of hay or straw bales, with loose hay or straw stuffed inside for the cats to sleep on. Hay and straw are wonderful insulation materials, and can be changed regularly to provide fresh bedding. Cat carriers, cardboard boxes and Rubbermaid containers placed on their sides can be used for “cat houses” in the loft or rafters.



**Relocation Cage** - If a relocation cage is used, it should be placed near where the cats will ultimately be housed and fed, if possible. The cats will be brought in cat carriers that serve as security for them while they are in the relo cage. Most of the time the cats will hide in their carriers when humans are present. A sheet or blanket placed over the relo cage will help to comfort the cats.

Once inside the relo cage, the carrier doors must be held open with a bungee cord or twine or a rock placed in front so the cats don't get “locked out of the house.” Care must be taken to prevent the cats from dashing out when the relo cage door is opened for feeding and litter box cleaning.

**Daily Care** - You will need to provide fresh water and clean the litter box daily. Dry food can be free fed and filled as needed. Feeding your new barn cats canned food daily (as a treat), talking to them and leaving a radio on will help your kitties feel welcome in their new home during the acclimation period. If your cats are in a relocation cage it is easier to swap out a clean litter box for a dirty litter box and then clean out the dirty litter box for use the next day.

Whether loose in a secure barn or confined to an acclimation cage, the cats will spend the first 24 hours trying to find a way out. After that they will settle down and await their release. Don't be tempted to release them too early as they may take off and never return. By the same token, don't confine them more than three weeks as they may be so scared of confinement that they will take off for fear of being confined again. Fourteen days for acclimation is ideal.

## **Part 6: Releasing your Cats**

**After approximately fourteen days**, it will be time to release your cats from the acclimation cage or room.

**If your cats were acclimated loose** in a barn or outbuilding, simply open the door and walk away. Be sure the door stays open so the cats can get back in.

**If a relocation cage was used** and you have a loft for the cats, you may want to close up the carriers (with the cats inside) and release them on the loft by setting the carriers on the loft, opening the doors and walking away. (The carriers may be retrieved after a couple of days if they are to be returned to us.)

If you do not have a loft, open the door of the relocation cage and walk away. Make sure the door will not close by itself. If you have a fairly secure barn where the cats will live, try to keep the cats in the barn for a few more days by keeping the barn doors closed as much as possible.

If you are using a relo cage, after the cats have exited, remove the relo cage and carriers but leave the litter box, food, etc. in the same place.

If you have a loft for the cats but did not release the cats on the loft, you may want to put the towels from the carriers (if not soiled) on the loft in the “houses” you have prepared for them.

## Part 7: Post Release Care

**Feeding** - If you want to feed the cats in a different location, put a second food dish in the new location but do not remove the original food dish until they are eating in the new location. Do not leave cat food out at night where it may attract raccoons and other critters. Here is a link to raccoon-proofing a cat feeding station: <http://www.thewildones.net/raccoons.htm>

Alley Cat Allies recommends feeding in the following ways to discourage competitors and predators:

- **Feed during daylight hours**, preferably early to mid-morning, when it is relatively quiet and the air is still cool (during the summer months), i.e., when you are more likely to see your cats yet not attract nocturnal wildlife.
- **Gauge the amount of food** provided so that it is enough to feed the cats, with minimal food left over to attract wildlife in the evening. Consider taking in the food bowl at night.
- **Recruit a substitute feeder** to feed on your days away, rather than leaving an automatic feeder to cover for you. Outdoors, automatic feeders are emptied overnight, and automatic waterers are dumped by scavenging wildlife. You have only managed to attract critters, while leaving your cats hungry and thirsty.

*"I still see the fluffy grey female come to eat but she lives in the woods, not in the barn."*

Don't be surprised if you don't "see" the cats for a few days. They will be out exploring. If the food in the barn is not getting eaten, try putting food near the barn exit(s). We have found that feral cats spend more time outside the barn, away from humans, while tame or semi-social cats will likely be more visible in the barn. If you want to make sure it's cats eating and not other critters, try putting flour or baking soda on the floor next to the food dish. The footprints will reveal who is eating the cat food!

**Litter box** - You should be able to wean them from using the litter box but if the weather is bad and they are staying in the barn, you may want to keep a litter box in the barn. If the litter box is not being used it can be removed.

## Keep Us Posted

Please email us at [southcountycats@comcast.net](mailto:southcountycats@comcast.net) from time to time with your questions, suggestions, observations, etc. We'd like to know if:

- you are seeing dead rodents (yay!)
- food is being eaten
- you hear the cats in the rafters
- there is no sign of the cats at all ☹️

Your input helps us improve the success of our barn cat relocation program.

Thank you for helping us save lives!