

Caring for a Stray

Some of us cannot turn a blind eye to a stray cat. Here are some other options.

By Pat Miller

Fourteen years ago on a winter evening, my husband Paul and I were seated at a window table at the Good Earth restaurant in Santa Rosa, California. As we dined and sipped on our glasses of Gewürztraminer wine, we noticed a handsome gray cat boldly introducing himself to pedestrians on the sidewalk in front of the movie theatre next door. He even greeted people with dogs on leashes without even turning a blue-gray hair. Given that the restaurant and theatre were located on a busy downtown street and the risk of injury to the cat was high, we agreed that if he were still there when we left, we would take him home.

I was a little disappointed when we exited The Good Earth and the cat was gone. Oh well... perhaps he made his way safely home. But when we entered the parking garage to get our car, there he was on the opposite side

Truth be told, I'm thoroughly convinced that we find them. Lost cats often wander from person to person, home to home, even neighborhood to neighborhood, until they find someone who takes them in, or at least puts a bowl of food out for them. A homeless cat learns pretty quickly that there's no benefit in hanging around outside the home of someone who doesn't even acknowledge her presence. She moves on to the next house, and the next, until she catches the eye of someone who cares... someone like us.

True to form, Gewürztraminer put his best efforts into connecting with scores of people while Paul and I ate dinner and watched. Ultimately, who found whom?

Actually, who finds who is irrelevant. What matters is that you are someone who connects with cats, and as such you are likely to find yourself chin deep in founding felines if you succumb to every rescue opportunity you encounter. What do you do when Felix and Fluffy show up on your door stoop and stake a claim to a piece of your heart?

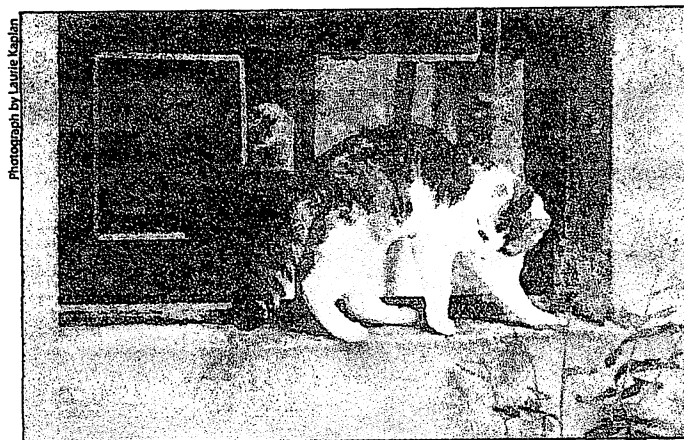
You have several options to choose from when a stray cat knocks at your door and tugs at your heartstrings. The first thing to do is look for its owner by leaving a "Found" report at the local animal shelter, putting up "Found Cat" posters around town, placing an ad in the Lost and Found column of your newspaper and watching the "Lost" ads. But if for your efforts you fail to turn up his owner, you have several options. Let's examine each of these options in detail.

The Path of Least Resistance

You can ignore him and hope he'll go away. Well, maybe not. If you were the kind of person who could do this, you wouldn't be asking the question in the first place! The fact that you've already noticed him means you're not going to let him starve in your back yard. Face it: if he's been there long enough for you to realize he's a stray, you're going to be offering him food and water. At the very least.

A Token Offering

You could feed him in the back yard and hope that he will eventually wander off. Nice try! After feeding him for several weeks, how are you going to feel when he does disappear? You're going to be down at the animal shelter looking for him, frantically putting posters on



Cats without homes abound in every state of the country. Some pass them by without a second thought; others cannot.

of the structure, meowing at the heels of several young people who were studiously ignoring him. I knelt down and called the time-honored "Kitty kitty kitty" call of cat rescuers across the country. He spun on his furry heels, flew across the cement garage floor and leaped into my lap, where he immediately started purring and making kitty biscuits. He was home. Gewürztraminer, also known as Gewurtz, is a Russian Blue-colored domestic shorthair and is now 15 years old.

I have worked professionally in animal protection for 25 years. I still chuckle every time I hear someone say, "I don't know why it is... stray cats just seem to find me."

telephone poles, placing an ad in the paper and praying that the phone will ring and someone will tell you they found him, safe and sound. And, by the way, if the stray in question is a "she," what do you do if she blesses you with a litter of kittens in the meantime...?

Commitment Time

You can feed him in the back yard and resign yourself to having a permanent yard ornament. Now we're getting serious. If you're getting to do your feline foundling any good at all, you need to be prepared to make more than a passing commitment to his well-being and his future.

Of course, you can't just feed him in the back yard. If you're talking permanence, you're also talking collars and ID tags, microchips, vaccinations, flea control, testing for feline aids and leukemia, dental care and neutering (or spaying, if "he" is a "she").

If you just feed without providing all of the other necessary care, you really aren't doing him any favors at all: you're exposing him to unnecessary risk of injury and disease, you're creating a public nuisance, and you're guilty of contributing to the problem of pet overpopulation. We know you don't want to do that!!!

Also, cats that live strictly outdoors have a life span of three to five years. Bringing him indoors, at least at night, greatly increases his chances of living a long and happy life. Cats are particularly vulnerable to cars and predators in the dark of night.

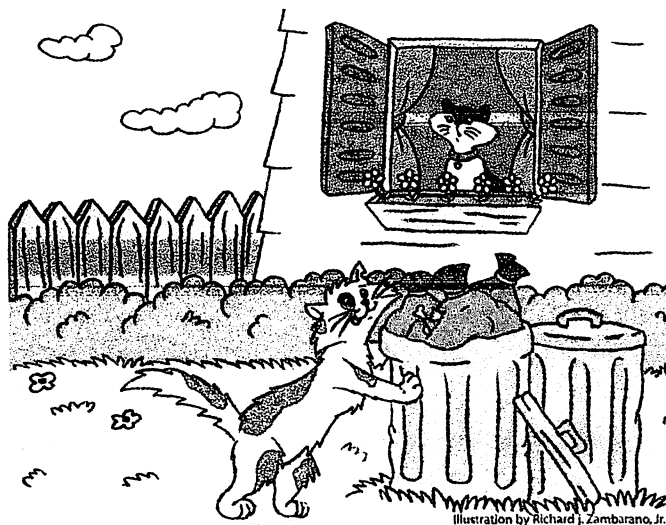
A Temporary Fix

You might bring him in the house while you look for a home for him. This is a good option, particularly if you are unable or unwilling to make a lifetime commitment to yet another feline family member.

Be careful that you keep him isolated from your other cats until you can get him vaccinated and tested, and your vet says it's safe to let them mingle. Even then, take the introduction process slowly—let the cats meet each other under a doorway, and give them plenty of time and space to warm up to each other. In fact, if you know the visitor's time in your home is short-term, and so it is less of a risk to all parties concerned if you just keep them separated.

If your stray is a female and you are able to, go ahead and have her spayed before you place her in a new home. This is the only way to be sure beyond a doubt that she won't reproduce. Then if her next home doesn't work out, wherever she goes, she won't be bringing more kittens into a world that has no place for them.

Finding a home for a stray cat can be quite a chal-



lenge. If you and your stray are very lucky, you'll have a friend or family member who just happens to be looking for a new feline.

More likely, you'll need to place an ad in the paper, put notices up at local animal hospitals and pet supply stores, and exhaust every outlet you can think of to find a home. If you're looking during late spring to late fall (kitten season), your task will be difficult. Many people prefer a kitten to a grown cat—and the

supply of kittens is plentiful at this time of year. From November to March or April, however, the supply of kittens dries up in most areas of the country, and it's easier to find homes for strays, adults and kittens alike.

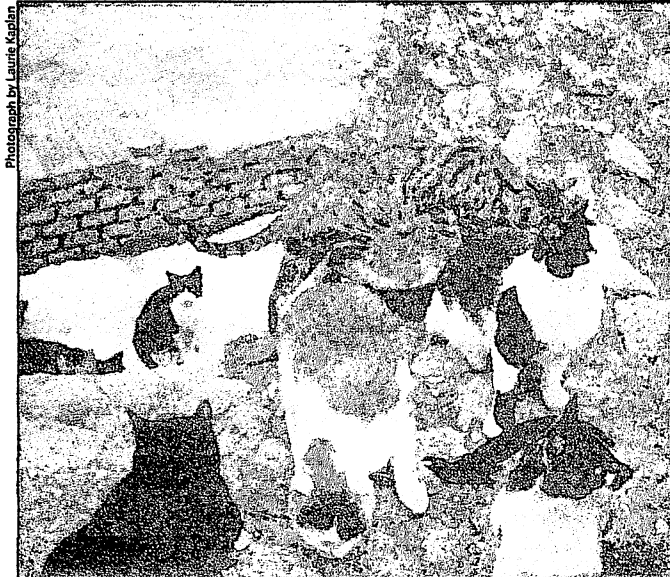
You may be tempted to place your foundling in the hands of the first person that comes along. Don't. Screen your potential homes carefully. Find out about their pet-owning history. If they have a long list of dogs and cats that have met untimely fates at an early age, you might want to keep looking. If they plan to keep Fluffy "outdoors-only," you might want to keep looking. If you are opposed to declawing and they intend to remove her claws, you might keep looking.

Ask for references, including the name of their veterinarian and their landlord if they are renters. Check to see that they are responsible about regular health care with their other animal companions, and that the new cat will be welcome in the home by the landlord and all family members. Some animal control agencies will even tell you if they have had serious animal problems with your potential adopter.

When you do find a hot prospect, write a contract that spells out your agreed upon expectations for care. If the adoptive family is going to let the cat out, you want them to live far enough away that she won't try to find her way back to you. In this situation, they should agree to keep her indoors for at least a month to allow her to connect with her new home and family before letting her outside. You may want to include a clause that says Fluffy will be returned to you if they cannot keep her for any reason, or that you have the right to approve her placement into a new home. Such contracts are difficult to uphold in court, but they often compel an honorable adopter to comply.

Use Local Resources

You could take him to a shelter or a rescue facility. This is a reasonable choice, especially if your back door cat is ill or injured and you don't have the resources to care for him. Depending on the shelter's policies, there is the possibility that he may be euthanized at a shelter.



Photograph by Laurie Kaplan

Shelters are sometimes so full that they have to turn away cats in need. These feline foundlings have to fend for themselves.

a shelter. The level of care that shelters provide varies widely from one to the next. Some can dedicate extensive resources to fixing "broken" dogs and cats; others cannot. Some have very high adoption success rates, while others are quite low. You may already have a good sense of where your local shelters fall on that continuum. If not, check them out carefully before making a decision, to avoid making one that you will later regret and not be able to undo.

Your foundling may be healthy and friendly cat, and your local shelter may have a reputation for achieving a high percentage of successful adoption placements, in which case this could be a very happy option indeed. You can ask what their policy is for retrieval—some shelters will allow you to come and retrieve Felix if they are unable to place him.

You may look for a "No-Kill" shelter. The good ones will turn away an animal when the shelter is full—which is often, when they don't think they will be able to place

the animal, and when the animal will require extensive and expensive medical care to make him more adoptable by repairing injuries or behavior problems. Some of the No-Kill shelters also turn away animals with communicable diseases, rather than risk transmission of the disease to the existing shelter population.

Other shelters fall victim to the "Hoarder Syndrome" (also known as Collector Syndrome), taking in more animals than they have the space or financial resources for. These shelters are actually victimizing the very animals that they claim to care for and about. There are also shelters that simply warehouse animals, keeping the ones they consider "un-placeable" in cages for the rest of their lives.

Most "No-Kill" shelters do euthanize under certain circumstances. Find out what their criteria for euthanization are. Be warned that some define themselves as "No-Kill" by claiming to euthanize only "unadoptable" animals. There are questions to be asked regarding how the decision is made: what does "unadoptable" mean? Before putting Felix into the hands of any shelter, take a tour of the shelter to observe the conditions. Understand their definitions and be comfortable with their policies and with the level of care they provide

Happily Ever After

And last but not least, you can bring her in, make her a full-fledged family member, and keep her forever. This is a happy choice for Fluffy. You bring her in—at least at night if not all the time—and you give her all the good things she should expect from a responsible, loving caretaker. Just what every cat deserves. If you can afford it, if the rest of your human family approves, and if she can cohabitate peaceably with the rest of your feline family, it's the perfect solution. Welcome to happily ever after.

Sometimes "Happily Ever After" really does happen—just ask Gewürztraminer! When it can't happen for your foundling in your own home, take the time to carefully evaluate all of your options, and select the one most likely to give Felix or Fluffy a Happily Ever After in someone else's home. 🐾

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