



The Accidental
Cat Lady

How I learned
to embrace the
feline mystique

by BETSY MCFARLAND

was a cat advocate long before I became a cat lover. Though I found the descriptions of kitty antics by feline-crazed colleagues at The HSUS amusing, I was partial to dogs and frankly didn't know what all the fuss was about. But a pivotal shift occurred two years ago, when I came face to face with a fuzzy, wide-eyed kitten perched on my backyard woodpile.

During my childhood, cats were a bit of a mystery to me. I had dogs, hamsters, guinea pigs, and a rabbit, but my parents weren't keen on cats. A few times, I tried to befriend neighbors' kitties by applying my dog-centric ways, but my attempted tummy rubs were met with angry swats or indignant glares.

When I started volunteering for my local animal shelter after college, my first assignment was to clean the cages housing an assortment of feral and otherwise fractious kitties. The staff didn't warn me, however, that these weren't your average lap cats. When I unlatched a door to remove a litter pan, I was greeted with hisses or, worse, a blur of fur flying past my shoulder. Since the busy staff didn't have enough time to train me and other newcomers in the ways of fearful, half-wild shelter inhabitants, I decided to devote my limited hours to managing another species altogether. Soon I was running the shelter's first volunteer program and learning all I could about shelter operations.

After I joined The HSUS in 1998, I learned much more about the threats to cats' well-being—everything from declawing and infectious diseases to overpopulation and animal hoarding. In time, I could speak about these issues passionately, but at heart I remained a dog devotee.

Life was good. I loved the new job where I advocated for better treatment of pets every day of the week. My husband Mike and I bought a house in rural Maryland to share with our two wonderful mutts. I didn't feel anything was missing.

But before the boxes were unpacked in my new digs, I started seeing cats along the edge of the woods. Quite a few of them. When my neighbor explained that they belonged to a colony he was caring for—and that he had already trapped and neutered them—I was relieved. I already had plenty to keep me busy and was grateful that my involvement with these animals would be limited to watching them bask on the downed trees and helping with feedings.

Three years later, in the summer of 2008, a mama cat and kitten showed up on the scene and changed my best-laid plans. To keep the colony healthy and stable, I knew I had to act quickly. According to everything I'd learned about managing feral cat populations, I would need to prevent the new arrival from breeding through an organized sterilization and vaccination effort known as trap-neuter-return. TNR helps keep colonies stable while gradually reducing the numbers of these homeless animals through attrition.

In preparation for trapping the cats, I began feeding them at the base of the woodpile. One evening I was refreshing their water and had a feeling I was being watched. I looked up and saw a little fluffball staring down at me curiously from atop the stacked firewood, with mama nowhere in sight. Surprised by his lack of fear, I picked up a stick and offered it to him. He batted it tentatively before starting to play. That's when my instincts overcame both common sense and the tenets of TNR (use a trap, not your bare hands!): I plucked him off the top log as he gave a surprised little "mew!" Fortunately, he wasn't a fighter, and I survived without a bite or scratch.

I never planned to keep him. For starters, my two cranky old dogs weren't interested in sharing their home with other critters—no matter how cute. As I drove to the pet supply store for some "temporary" provisions, I was already making a mental list of friends who needed a kitten.

My plan to house him in the basement until an adopter appeared lasted just a weekend. He quickly moved upstairs to our spare bedroom, where I slept to keep him company while he adjusted (he was a baby, after all!). For the first time in my life, I learned what it was like to wake up to a kitten pouncing on my face or attacking my feet under the covers.

My husband, Mike, was no fool. Within a few short days, it was obvious I'd fallen hard and the kitten wasn't going anywhere. We started playing the name game and Mike, a computer geek, won: The kitten would be named after Cisco Systems.

Cisco was playful and endlessly curious. I spent hours watching him, marveling at the fearless personality that inhabited his tiny body. Even my dogs seemed to recognize a will stronger than their own and, after a gradual introduction, treated him with grudging respect.



I quickly trapped Cisco's mom—who was about as tame as your average mountain lion—and took her to a feral cat spay/neuter clinic an hour's drive away. It wasn't long before she had a name—Carly—and a companion from the local managed colony. Homer, a big orange tabby who'd already claimed my back porch, took a shine to Carly and invited her into his cozy domain: a double-insulated cat condo, constructed by my dad and me and complete with a window, perch, and heating mats.

Though Homer has shown such territorial tendencies that even my dogs are afraid of him, he is a walking kitty contradiction who represents to me one of the many gray areas of cat protection. At his worst, he's a gentle but distant feral who wouldn't mind chomping your hand off if you tried to touch him. At his best, he's a bullying but irresistible domesticated cat who clearly revels in his porch life. Outside his comfort zone—in a shelter, for instance—the stress of an unfamiliar and captive environment would more than likely make him appear insanely wild and impossibly unadoptable. At least on my porch he is safe, sterilized, and providing companionship for Carly.

With a much larger brood to look after now—many skittish ferals, a few pampered lap cats, and one kitty who walks the fine line between both worlds—I had cats on my mind constantly and talked about them with anyone willing to listen. Soon I was even helping my coworkers trap ferals in other locations during our off-hours.



A Home for Refugees

Voted off the island, these cats now call the shots at an HSUS sanctuary

Thousands of miles from her own kitty kingdom, Betsy McFarland's newfound affinity for cats came in handy last year when she helped transport almost 60 feral island refugees to an HSUS sanctuary in California.

While unloading some of the cats upon their arrival at The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center in Ramona, McFarland sensed their fear and tried to help them settle comfortably into their new home. Rescued from San Nicolas Island, they had spent their whole lives in the wild until the federal government proposed trapping and euthanizing them as part of a restoration project to protect native species.

After The HSUS built them a special outdoor habitat, McFarland returned to find the once-nervous wrecks scratching on logs, lolling on branches, and playing. Though most feral cats remain feral for life, some of the most fearful ones in this bunch eventually relaxed: Rocket, a growling orange ball of fire, went from hisser to kisser,

In time, my passion for cat rescue had a predictable result: Felines now outnumber canines in my house, after I kept two kittens from a litter I fostered. And even though Cisco dishes out his affections conditionally, I worship him anyway. He opened a door to a world that I'd only known about second-hand, and he's made me a better animal advocate in turn.

Today, I only have to look at my three felines snuggled up together on Mike's lap,

or peek outside at my ferals lounging contentedly in a patch of sun, to remember that one animal can truly change your life, and vice-versa. As I write this in late spring, I see Carly sleeping on what's left of the winter woodpile, perched at the highest point like the queen of the universe, her dainty little paws dangling over the front. Now that I've been endeared to her species, I have the urge to go scoop her up in my arms and squeeze her tight. Too bad she won't let me near her.

reports Kimberly D'Amico, an HSUS animal care technician who knew the cat had turned a corner after catching him delighting in the pleasures of a ping pong ball. Skinny Ruby, so terrified she refused to eat for four days, finally agreed to a "welcome home" meal of wet food and settled into a calm and peaceful routine.

Some cats had more trouble than others making the transition from the wild to captivity, but all are now thriving. Below, D'Amico describes the transformation of one particularly gregarious fellow:

During Hamilton's early days, I would pet him while he was eating in an effort to socialize him. He'd look up as if to say, "Lady, as long as the food is here, you may pet me all you want." Once or twice, I tried to pet Hamilton without his face buried in a dish of food, and he swatted at my hand and gave me a displeased look. He was setting his boundaries, and I was happy to oblige.

I usually show up in the afternoon like a free pizza-delivery service. These days, whenever I enter Hamilton's section of the habitat, he is always quick to greet me. One day after Hamilton finished eating, he began walking circles around me while flicking his tail in my direction. I hadn't seen such an outwardly friendly gesture from him, so imagine my surprise when he stopped in front of me and sat down. Looking right at me, he blinked his beautiful yellow eyes, and as I reached out a hand to pet him, he crawled into my lap.

I began petting him softly and talking quietly, and he looked up at me and meowed. He seemed to be enjoying himself, though my heart was racing because at any moment I was expecting him to swat me. Instead, he pushed his head into my hands, asking me to scratch his ears. The purring that came out of this cat was unbelievable; I could feel his whole body reverberating in my lap.

After about 20 minutes of this, I wanted to end our session on a good note. I gently nudged Hamilton to move from my lap as I stood up. He obliged, but stood at my feet. I reached down to pet him, and he was still purring. I asked, "Do you want me to pick you up, little man?" He didn't answer, but maintained his position. As I reached down to pick him up, he went limp in my hands. I brought him to my shoulder and his purring continued. I felt his head push to my head as he meowed into my ear.

It was getting dark outside and it was time for me to go, so I carried Hamilton over to his favorite tree. As I set him down on one of the branches, I said, "Thank you, Mr. Hamilton." Then he flicked his tail, hissed at me, and climbed up higher into the tree.

But at least I know that, through the collective efforts of my neighbors and me, she is contented and safe—too wild for an indoor life, but more than happy to hunker down with Homer, just beyond the reach of the dog lover she helped convert into a certified (and, as my resigned husband might say, sometimes certifiable) cat lady. ■

► **BETSY MCFARLAND** is the senior director of The HSUS's Companion Animals section.

A Family Project to Help Ferals

My backyard ferals don't want to be petted or fussed over, but I was determined to pamper them as best I could. I decided that my dad, a retired electrical engineer and consummate handyman, needed a project. He took the task seriously, sketching plans based on my ideas and walking the aisles at Lowe's to price materials.

It turned out to be the perfect father-daughter bonding experience: We spent a warm spring afternoon constructing an insulated kitty condo. After I posted pictures on Facebook of two ferals enjoying their new home, I heard from Mindy Bacon, marketing director for Bacon Group, an architectural firm that specializes in animal shelter design. She offered to draft detailed building plans so other feral cat caretakers could create their own deluxe cat houses (see below).

For the kitties who won't approach my porch, I created simple but effective shelters based on a design from the CSM Stray Foundation in Queens, N.Y. When cold weather hits, the shelters give the cats a cozy place to hunker down—and I have peace of mind knowing they're warm and dry.

This is a good way to protect the ferals in your neighborhood, as long as you also implement a managed trap-neuter-return program that will stop the cycle of breeding. Also keep in mind that cats should be fed at a designated time and their food picked up after they've eaten; bowls should be placed on perches or structures a few feet off the ground; and the area should be kept clean. This will help prevent attracting predators who may harm the cats or put themselves in danger by becoming too habituated to the area. For more tips, visit humansociety.org/feralcats.



Simple Shelter Design

Based on plans by the
CSM Stray Foundation

MATERIALS:

- ▶ 35-gallon plastic storage tote or bin with lid (approximate dimensions: 32.5 inches long, 19.75 inches wide, 18.5 inches tall)
- ▶ yardstick
- ▶ utility knife
- ▶ sheet of 1-inch-thick rigid foam insulation board, 8 feet by 2 feet
- ▶ straw

ASSEMBLY INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Using the yardstick and utility knife, cut a 6-by-6-inch doorway in one of the long sides of the storage bin toward the corner. To prevent flooding, cut the opening so that the bottom of the doorway is a couple of inches above the ground.
2. Cut a piece of the foam insulation board to fit the floor of the bin, and line the floor with it.
3. In similar fashion, line each of the four interior walls of the bin with a piece of the plastic foam. Perfect cuts aren't necessary. Leave a uniform gap of at least 3 inches between the top of these wall pieces and the upper lip of the bin.
4. Cut out a doorway in the plastic foam lined up with the doorway in the storage bin. Trace the outline of the doorway on the plastic foam first before cutting.
5. Stuff the bottom of the bin with straw or other insulating material to hold the interior wall pieces in place.
6. Cut out a plastic foam roof to rest on top of the interior wall pieces.
7. Cover the bin with its lid.

TIPS:

- ▶ To clean the shelter, simply remove the lid and the foam roof.
- ▶ The shelter is lightweight and may need to be weighted down with a large rock or cinder block.
- ▶ Face the opening away from the direction of the wind, if possible.
- ▶ To entice cats to check out the shelter, sprinkle catnip inside.
- ▶ Periodically replace the straw to keep it fresh and dry.



▶ **WEB EXTRA:** Check out the blueprints for the custom-designed feral cat condo created by Betsy McFarland and her dad at humansociety.org/magazine.

PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT: TROY SNOW; RIGHT: MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSUS. OPPOSITE PAGE: CHRISTINE JENSEN/THE HSUS. THIS PAGE, TOP TWO AND BOTTOM RIGHT: MIKE MCFARLAND/THE HSUS; OTHERS: BETSY MCFARLAND/THE HSUS