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## Got a rodent problem? Working Cats could be the answer

By Vera Kochan



Oakland Animal Services' feral cat holding facilities temporarily keep the cats before adoption Photos Vera Kochan

For nearly 10 years, Oakland Animal Services has been running a successful Working Cat Program designed to encourage folks with rat, mice, vole, or even gopher problems to adopt feral cats.

Feral cats have had almost no contact with humans, and as such make perfect rodent hunters as a matter of survival. Life on the streets has made them very low-maintenance, and they are most often found around homeless encampments or parks. According to OAS Community Cat Coordinator Tiffany Ashbaker, "The cats are only brought to us if they have lost either their caregiver, their home, or live in an unsafe neighborhood. Rather than have them euthanized, OAS provides them with a second chance at life. The East Bay Regional Park District has offered OAS a contract that allows the safe removal of cats from its parks to use in the Working Cat Program."

The cats in the program are not social or suited to be pets. They may even take a long time before they can trust their new human owner enough to be touched. In order to be successful working cats they will not live in the house, but rather in sheltered areas such as a garage or barn. This is not to say that a once feral cat can't become a house pet someday, but that would be entirely up to the cat. The youngest cats in the program are approximately six months old; anything younger would not yet have the skills to remain outdoors safely. The typical age of adoptable cats are between 1 and 5 years old.

OAS does not charge a fee for the adoption, but they do expect new owners to keep the cats healthy and provide food, water and shelter. All cats that come into OAS will be spayed or neutered, receive current vaccinations, microchipped, treated for worms or fleas, tested for FeLV/FIV, and ear-tipped. The cats are kept in holding facilities, usually in pairs, for about a month. This allows OAS to observe them for any illnesses and gets the cats used to being fed cat food and given clean water. This will become part of their care once they are adopted, and they will learn that humans will be a part of their lives.

Ashbaker has delivered cats throughout the East Bay Area, including Lamorinda, and as far away as Santa Rosa. Word-of-mouth is their only form of advertising. Besides residences, OAS has adopted cats out to warehouses, breweries and wineries. Once they determine that the placement will be beneficial to the cats, two or more are transported to their new home. They will need to be confined in an escape-proof room or an extra-long dog crate (approximately 6 feet) for 4 to 6 weeks while they acclimate to their new surroundings. During this time, they must continue to be fed, given water, have their litter boxes cleaned regularly, and have toys to play with. After the obligatory time period has passed, the cats begin to accept their new home and can be released in order to "do their job" of hunting rodents. By continually providing food and water, the cats know that this is now home and should return to it at day's end.

This reporter also went to a scheduled delivery with Ashbaker to Orinda. Resident Tracy Ellman, who heard about the Working Cat Program from a friend and had also seen it online, had already purchased all of the recommended supplies in order to take delivery of three cats. This included Fancy Feast cat food, brand new feeding bowls, scratching posts, a collection of toys, cat carriers that would serve as each cat's apartment and a litter box.

Ashbaker brought Ellman two females and a male which were delivered in a special feral cat box made of metal with plastic doors. She also brought all of the OAS paperwork containing each cat's history and vaccination information. Not only did Ashbaker help Ellman set everything up, but she checked in with her the following day to see how things were going. She will continue to call Ellman in the following weeks until things stabilize and is always available for any questions.

One week later, this reporter asked Ellman how things were progressing. "They hide when I come, but I know that they play with the toys, because they're scattered everywhere," said Ellman. "They are easy to take care of, and it seems that the rat noises have quieted down. I'm happy with them. The cats are doing great!"

While Ashbaker prepares to make a Working Cat delivery to Moraga, she suggested a phone call to Charles Tian of Lafayette who had recently released his cats after the suggested waiting period. "I had two cats

delivered around April 15, and I've had them in the large cage for six weeks," he reported. His daughter (8) enjoys watching them eat in the cage and they seem to respond to her more than Tian. "Once I released them they went right into work mode after the gophers. My neighbor is more pleased than I am, because they're taking care of his gopher problem, too. They only come to their cat house for food and water, and they hang out in the yard. They also like to lay in the sun."?

In recent years, some wildlife organizations such as Lindsay Wildlife have raised concerns about outdoor cats negatively affecting bird populations.

Ashbaker stressed that the working cat placements are "truly the cats' last option."

"Relocating cats isn't 100%. Our program is very successful, mostly because we are in constant communication with the new caretakers and also because of the amount of support we give throughout the process," she said. "I want this program to be successful. I am very invested in the cats and the program."

For more information about the Working Cat Program visit: [Oaklandanimalservices.org/adopt/Oakland-cats-program](http://Oaklandanimalservices.org/adopt/Oakland-cats-program).



OAS Community Cat Coordinator Tiffany Ashbaker (left) and new cat owner Tracy Ellman prepare the cats' new home Photos Vera Kochan



Feral cat tries to play with reporter's camera. Photos Vera Kochan

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