

Getting a Feral Cat Accustomed to a Carrier

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger discusses ways to gradually get a feral cat desensitized to the carrier experience.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I have a 3-year-old spayed feral cat named Samantha. I also have three other feral cats. Samantha has never socialized with humans but she is very close to one of her older brothers. When I try to pick her up she snarls and shows her fangs. I haven't been able to take her to a vet. The vet tells me to give her a sedative pill but of course I can't get her to take it. Do you have any advice about how to take her to the vet? We are moving soon and short of retrapping her in a cage I'm out of ideas.

A: You can gradually desensitize Samantha to the carrier experience. Start by providing her with a large hard-sided carrier. Unlatch the top and remove the doors. Place the bottom of the carrier in one of Samantha's favorite hang-out places. It might be there for a few weeks, maybe longer. Place something soft and comfortable in the bottom of the carrier. Whenever you feed Samantha, put her food in the carrier. Also toss treats she loves into the carrier.

After Samantha is used to going in and out of the bottom part of the carrier, place the top securely back in place without installing the door, since we don't want Samantha to feel trapped. Keep feeding Samantha inside the carrier and toss her treats in there as well. Proceed to the next phase only after she calmly goes in the carrier for her meals and treats.

Reinstall the door after Samantha repeatedly goes inside the carrier without stress. Do not close it. Continue to feed and treat her as before. The door will need to stay open during this phase of the carrier desensitization. Only after Samantha is completely at ease with going into the carrier consider closing the door while she's in there munching on a snack. After closing the door, immediately open it. Gradually increase the time the door is closed each time she goes in by one second. If she seems agitated or stressed, you are going too fast and need to go back to a level she is comfortable with. It may take a while, but you will be able to work up to the door remaining closed for a few minutes.

Continue to slowly desensitize Samantha to the carrier experience. After she is accepting of being in the carrier with the door closed, pick up the carrier and then immediately put it down again. After she is calm when being picked up, carry her into another room. I think you get the picture of where I'm going with this. The goal is to slowly accustom Samantha to being in the carrier, picked up, moved and then transported stress-free in the car.