

How Can I Domesticate a Feral Cat?

CatChannel expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, gives advice for trapping and socializing a feral cat.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I have a little black-and-white cat who was born in my back woods. He comes to my door every day for his meals. I feed him very well: chicken, beef and pork that I cook for him. My problem is that it's cold in New York where I live in the country. The cat waits for me to close the door before he comes to the plate to eat. While he eats I talk to him, telling him that I love him and I want him to live in the house with me. I am having problems getting him inside. How can I get him in the house? After I catch him, I will take him to my vet for shots and everything else he needs. He will have a great home with me. Right now the cat lives in a rock pile where it's very cold. I have named him Sweet Face. Please help me get this little one in my home. I think he's about 1 year old.

A: There are a couple of ways to convince a cat to come indoors. One takes time; the other is a more immediate approach. Since you have inclement weather, I recommend the immediate approach. Trap Sweet Face as quickly as possible using a humane trap. A popular one is the Havahart trap. Some humane societies will lend you the trap or charge a nominal rental fee. Bait the trap with an irresistible and smelly food such as sardines or tuna. Cover the trap with a towel or a sheet and make sure to check the trap often for occupants. Don't be surprised if you trap other animals, including raccoons and the neighbor's cats!

I recommend that immediately after you trap Sweet Face, you take him to your veterinarian while he is still in the trap. Don't release him in your house and then try to catch him later to take him to the vet. Since he is essentially feral, it would be very challenging and maybe impossible for you recapture him and put him in a carrier. Instead make arrangements beforehand with your veterinarian so she and her staff will be expecting Sweet Face after you trap him. Sweet Face will need a check-up, vaccinations, neutering and maybe a deworming.

After Sweet Face is given a clean bill of health by your veterinarian you can release him in your home. Have one room made up just for him. The room should be darkened and contain boxes or cat furniture for him to hide in. He will also need food, water, comfortable places to sleep and multiple cat boxes.

It will probably take a long time for Sweet Face to become socialized. The younger cats are, the faster they socialize. A cat who is 1 year old will take much longer to socialize than a kitten. Many years ago I caught a 2-year-old feral cat. It took six months for him to come out from under the bed and another year until he felt safe enough to start integrating and socializing with the other members of the family.