



Data to support Position Statement:

Cat definitions in Australia

To effectively reduce the number of free-roaming cats and associated issues such as costs and potential nuisance behaviours or wildlife predation it is critically important to accurately distinguish between **domestic cats** and **feral cats**.

The distinction between **domestic cats** and **feral cats** is important because it impacts:

1. the methods available for successful management of cats to measurably reduce their numbers
2. the actual threat to native wildlife
3. the treatment and fate of individual cats.

Misclassifying domestic cats as feral cats prevents a resolution to the free-roaming cat problem in Australia.

The definitions utilised by Australia's leading national animal welfare organisation, the **Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)** and the Commonwealth Government and some state governments is recommended, **with cats categorized based on how and where they live**.

A. Domestic cats

The RSPCA's manual for Best Practice in Domestic Cat Management (RSPCA Australia 2018) defines **domestic cats** as those with some dependence (direct or indirect) on humans, and are subcategorised into **owned**, **semi-owned** and **unowned** cats.

Cats found in areas where people live, such as in and around towns and cities or around farm buildings, are all domestic cats. Cats involved in nuisance complaints or entering Australian animal shelters and council pounds are all domestic cats.

Domestic cats include:

1. **Owned cats** are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable, although sociability varies.
2. **Semi-owned cats** are directly dependent on humans and intentionally fed by people who do not consider they own the cat. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.
3. **Unowned cats** (sometimes called stray cats) are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food unintentionally from people, such as via food waste bins. They cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.

Unowned cats are very uncommon. The vast majority of cats found in the vicinity of where people live are either owned or semi-owned cats.



B. Feral cats

Feral cats have no relationship with or dependence on humans, survive by hunting or scavenging for food, and live and reproduce in the wild (e.g., forests, woodlands, grasslands, deserts). Feral cats do not live in the vicinity of where people live. For example, feral cats are not found in or around towns, cities or around farm buildings. Feral cats do not receive food from humans intentionally (direct feeding) or unintentionally (e.g. via food waste bins). Feral cats are completely unsocialised to humans and have none of their needs fulfilled by humans.

Feral cats are not found or trapped in the vicinity of where people live, and are not the subject of nuisance complaints. Feral cats are not the subject of nuisance complaints because a complaint means that the cats have had contact with community residents. Feral cats do not exist in the vicinity of where people live or frequent. Therefore, feral cats are not trapped or found in areas where humans inhabit (RSPCA Australia 2018; Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats, Commonwealth of Australia 2015, Victoria State Government 2020).

Feral cats do not enter Australian council pounds or animal shelters. RSPCA Australia does not use 'feral cat' as a cat classification category for cats on admission or as a reason for euthanasia in RSPCA shelters or council pound service facilities which recognises that feral cats do not enter shelters or council pound service facilities (RSPCA Annual statistics 2022).

Feral cats are not managed by local government councils or their animal management officers (AMOs). Feral cats are managed by different authorities such as National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Local Land Services (LLS) or the Department of Environment. Feral cats managed by these authorities are typically shot, either while free-roaming or caught in a trap cage or leg-hold trap, or they are poisoned, and are not brought into council pounds or shelters by council AMOs or the general public.

Behaviour should never be used to label a cat feral. Research shows that when highly stressed, pet cats can react with more aggressive behaviours to humans than feral cats. Domestic cats require an average of five days to five weeks in a non-stressful environment before adoptability can be assessed (with a range from a minimum of 3 days to five weeks or longer to assess adoptability) (Rochlitz 1998, Kessler 1997, Ellis 2014, DiGangi 2022, Jacobsen 2022, Slater 2013 and Kerr 2018).

- When cats are in a trap cage or recently admitted to a shelter or pound and exhibit behaviours such as hissing, growling or striking, this represents a normal fear response to an unfamiliar environment. This does not mean the cat is a feral cat, an unsocialised cat or unsuitable for adoption (Overall 2013).
- Deeming domestic cats that are in traps or entering shelters/pounds or rescue groups as being 'feral', 'unsocialised' or 'unsuitable for adoption' based on fear behaviours exhibited prior to habituation is scientifically invalid and inhumane and should be prohibited.



- Outcome decisions based on behavioural characteristics must be deferred to allow the cat sufficient time to habituate to the unfamiliar environment (e.g., shelter or pound), given the likelihood that these cats will experience high levels of fear in a trap cage or unfamiliar environment, and that different behaviours will be observed *after* habituation has occurred.
- It is not scientifically possible for a veterinarian, animal behaviourist or any other person, regardless of their experience or training, to immediately assess the behavioural characteristics, suitability for adoption or socialisation level of a cat in a trap cage or on entry to a shelter/pound or other facility, with any accuracy.
- This is because based on veterinary behavioural science, it is only possible to make accurate behaviour assessments *after* the cat has habituated to the unfamiliar environment, and this requires a time period and the provision of an appropriately calm and comfortable environment for the cat.
- Habituation time can vary between individual cats. Scientific studies show that the average time for cats to habituate to a shelter-like environment is five days to five weeks and ranges from a minimum of 3 days to five weeks or longer to habituate (Rochlitz 1998, Kessler 1997, Ellis 2014, DiGangi 2022, Jacobsen 2022, Slater 2013, Kerr 2018).
- Cats should be given the opportunity for multiple behaviour assessments over time.
- Cats that are still showing fearful behaviours such as hissing, growling or striking after being given reasonable habituation time should be moved out of the shelter/pound facility environment to a more suitable environment such as foster care and given more time to habituate. Barn/working/factory cats are other options that should be considered for these cats.

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