



## **NEWS TORONTO & GTA**

# It takes a village to help Toronto's feral cats

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TORONTO - Bronco saunters up the street, eyeing a Toronto Sun photographer-turned-feline paparazzo, who is carefully snapping away.

The tubby cat sniffs the air before bolting down the side of an East York house, which is unremarkable except for the makeshift shelter constructed on the front porch for feral felines like Bronco.

Welcome to Bronco's only home — a feral cat colony assigned to an agreeable home owner, one of many in Toronto.

Bronco, Myles, Scout, Lily, Gordon, Mayo, and Joey are ferals who stick close to home.

But the average passerby could easily mistake the group of seven for house cats. Their fur is clean. They're cautious of outsiders — like wary house cats that wandered from their owner's backyard.

And their bellies are full, thanks to animal lovers like Mary-Chris Staples, who arrives armed with cat food and fresh water.

"They figure cats can take care of themselves," she said, hauling supplies from a car emblazoned with animal advocacy slogans. "That's not the case."

Volunteers like Staples and Lynn Kavanagh make up the frontline in the effort to care for feral cats relegated to unkind and often deadly streets.

"Even though they're feral, they're still domestic animals," Kavanagh says.

Feral means the cats weren't socialized as kittens. They never got used to human touch.

"But they're still domestic, so they're still dependent, they don't know how to really survive outside," she said.

"And they will suffer. They won't necessarily get enough food, they'll suffer from the cold, they'll get disease, they'll get injuries."

That's why eight people regularly volunteer to feed Bronco and the rest of his crew.

Come rain, snow, or shine, these cats eat daily.

"Someone comes every morning to feed the cats, no matter what," Kavanagh said.

## **TRAP-NEUTER-RETURN**

No one really knows how many feral cats call Toronto home.

Depending on who you ask, it could be anywhere from 100,000 to 200,000.

"That's kind of the number that people talk about," Toronto Humane Society CEO Jacques Messier said.

THS is part of the Toronto Feral Cat Coalition, working to lower the number of homeless cats on the streets through a policy called Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR).

The idea is to trap feral cats — females first — and spay or neuter the animals before returning them to the streets.

The policy seems to work. Toronto Animal Services freed 915 feral cats from the burden of a constant reproduction cycle last year alone.

But TNR can also require volunteers to sometimes trap cats themselves.

“I didn’t know what a trap was. Now I can trap a cat,” volunteer Lynn Kavanagh said.

Ideally, every cat would have a home.

A female cat can easily have a few litters — three to seven kittens each time — in a year.

“I think sometimes there’s a sense that cats are more disposable animals or that they don’t need to be fixed for some reason, or that having kittens is cute,” Kavanagh said, with a sigh.

Colonies begin when abandoned cats reproduce, “then they’re left to fend for themselves,” she said.

As progressive as Toronto’s TNR program is, Kavanagh wouldn’t mind seeing more resources.

“There are always more supports needed,” she said, watching the cats gingerly approach their daily communal meal.

## **FERAL DOGS NOT A PROBLEM**

How many organizations does it take to herd feral cats in a city of Toronto’s size?

Quite a few, actually.

The Toronto Feral Cat Coalition consists of Toronto Animal Services, Toronto Humane Society, Toronto Feral Cat Recovery Centre, Ontario SPCA, Animal Alliance of Canada, Toronto Feral Cat Project, Annex Cat Rescue, Urban Cat Relief, and Toronto Cat Rescue.

“Everybody does what they’re good at,” animal services spokesman Mary Lou Leiher said. The city service fixes cats trapped by registered colony caretakers.

Did Toronto ever have a similar problem with street dogs?

Not quite.

“We used to have a big problem with stray dogs, and dogs that would run at large and have puppies,” she explained. “But those dogs were always owned by people. So I would say at least in the last 25 years, we have not had issues with feral dogs.”

Don’t see any feral cats in your neighbourhood?

Trust the experts — those cats are there.

“Feral cats are very elusive,” volunteer Lynn Kavanagh says. “They’re around the city. People don’t always know they even exist because, of course, they’re afraid of people.”

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Feral cat colony volunteer Mary-Chris Staples feeds Bronco, one of the several cats at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

Michael Peake/Toronto Sun



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Michael Peake/Toronto Sun



Gordon, part of a feral cat colony volunteer that volunteers feed at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

Michael Peake/Toronto Sun



Feral cat colony volunteer Mary-Chris Staples feeds Bronco, one of the several cats at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

Michael Peake/Toronto Sun



Feral cat colony volunteer Lynn Kananagh helps feeds a few cats at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

Michael Peake/Toronto Sun





Lily, part of a feral cat colony that are regularly fed enjoys a meal at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

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Feral cat colony volunteer Mary-Chris Staples feeds a few cats at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

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Two members of feral cat colony that are regularly fed enjoy the sunshine at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

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Lily and Bronco part of a feral cat colony that are regularly fed enjoy a meal at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

Michael Peake/Toronto Sun



Feral cat colony volunteer Mary-Chris Staples feeds a few cats while one named Myles watches at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

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Feral cat colony volunteer Mary-Chris Staples feeds Bronco, one of the several cats at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

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Lily, part of a feral cat colony that are regularly fed enjoys a meal while Bronco, left, arrives at this east end Toronto home on Friday March 4, 2016. Michael Peake/Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

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