

Please Spay Your Cat!

By Barbara Robbins

If you are feeding a cat, indoors or out, it is your responsibility to get that cat spayed (females) or neutered (males). No new kittens are needed, as the animal shelters are full of adoptable kittens and cats, especially at this time of year. Spaying/neutering is the kindest thing you can do for them, and prevents unwanted kittens from suffering a difficult life.

When I went outside in early July, I was greeted by an extremely thin gray tabby with white chest and paws, and the clearest green eyes one can imagine. It meowed constantly, drawing attention to its pitiable condition. Because it was so malnourished, its head looked disproportionately large, and I stepped backwards out of caution. I was wondering if the cat had rabies, a contagious and deadly virus that spreads through bites and scratches between mammals. Still, I felt sorry for the cat, bought some food, set it out and stood back as it approached. Rather than pouncing directly on the food, the cat came right over to me with loud meows. This was strange behavior for a famished animal. When I shooed it away, it turned to eat the food and I went inside. Was it hungry? Yes. Was it also accustomed to human interaction? Possibly.

Was this a stray cat, a friendly pet that had been released to the outdoors, or a feral cat, one that avoids human contact? Throughout the week, I maintained my distance as the cat made a temporary home under my porch, where it felt safe from unfamiliar surroundings and dangers. After the sixth daily feeding, the cat disappeared. I had a week to research how and where I might be able to take it so that it could be adopted by a caring owner. I learned the difference between animal clinics and animal shelters. At the clinics, cats, dogs, rabbits and other animals can be spayed or neutered to prevent pregnancy, which perpetuates the outdoor cycle. Clinics provide vaccinations that prevent rabies and other diseases. Shelters are places where a pet can be surrendered if a person is no longer able to care for it. Shelters fill up quickly in the summer.

The cat I had been feeding showed up again after a week of absence. I called it Gypsy because of the wild green eyes. Unfortunately, its right front paw had been injured. Most likely, it had tested a rat trap for some tempting food. The next day, I saw another cat with the same injury on its back paw. Rat traps may seem like a good idea, but injury to other animals is also possible. Rats and squirrels love to raid dumpsters. Perhaps we, as a neighborhood, city or state, might choose to start a program of city composting of all food waste, as a method for rat prevention.

Finally, I got a spay date for Gypsy on the last day of July, at the Protector of Animals, a low-cost spay and neuter clinic in East Hartford. The night before, I was to set the trap in the regular feeding spot, and keep the cat overnight for the next day's early morning spay. Later in the afternoon, I picked up Gypsy, but she was actually a male cat! I was able to find a spot for him at the Enfield Pet Smart store, referred by the Enfield Community Cat Project. Tiger was lovingly accepted, and is sure to find a good home with a caring owner. The three-week ordeal was over.

Getting Tiger placed required many phone calls, cat food, a cat trap and carrier, and lots of attention. As a community, we can prevent the need for other people to go through this process, by having pets spayed or neutered, and by trapping and releasing feral cats that must survive Connecticut summers and winters. Once fixed, the feral cats can live their lives outdoors, catching rats if they are good hunters. Many cats are not hunters. Tiger turned out to be extremely people friendly and only wanted to be indoors where he belonged. Yet he had suffered a paw injury from a rat trap, and three weeks of dangerous outdoor living. Please do your part: spay/neuter your cat!