

# What to call that cat?

## Outdoor cats are defined by their ownership status, lifestyle, and behavior

There's a variety of terms for domestic cats. We refer to pet cats, feral cats, wild cats, alley cats, stray cats, barn cats, working cats, and community cats. They're all the same species (*Felis catus*); the terms we use simply describe their lifestyle, ownership status or behavior around humans.

**So, what do you call *that* cat?**

**FERAL CATS:** Feral is a temperament, not a breed or a species. In animal welfare circles, the term "feral" is used to describe cats who are fearful of people, typically because they didn't have human contact during their key socialization period as kittens. While people sometimes use the term "feral" to mean any cat living outdoors, that's a misuse of the word. Because of widespread confusion around the term, many animal welfare experts now prefer the term "unsocialized" to "feral" or "wild."

### **SHY, SKITTISH, SEMI-TAME:**

Socialization exists on a spectrum. At one end, there are the people-friendly cats who will hop up on any available lap; at the opposite end are the cats who are extremely fearful of people, making them unsuitable for home environments. Many community cats (and pet cats, for that matter) fall somewhere between the extremes. They may also behave differently around people they trust and under different circumstances, and they can become more or less socialized over time.

**COMMUNITY CATS:** This is a broad term for cats who live outdoors and don't have a clear owner. Some cats have lived outside for generations, while others adapted to living outdoors after being lost or abandoned. Their behavior can range from extremely fearful of people to friendly and open to human interaction. They typically rely on people for food and may live in groups (often referred to as "colonies") around a common food source.

**STRAY CATS:** The term "stray cat" can mean different things to different people, and communities also vary in how they define the term in their animal control ordinances. Some animal welfare organizations use the term "stray" to describe people-friendly community cats, while others apply the term to pet cats who are lost or have roamed off their owner's property. Some animal care and control agencies may also lump community cats, including ferals, under a "stray cat" category.

**HOMELESS CATS:** This is another term you'll often hear applied to outdoor cats, but it doesn't capture the reality that community cats have an outdoor home, typically with one or more caretakers who feed, shelter and watch over them.

**OWNED CATS:** In an ideal world, all owned cats would live indoors, but in reality, the cats you see outside may include pet cats allowed to roam outside and lost cats whose owners are searching for them.

**SEMI-OWNED, LOOSELY OWNED:** Community cats can also challenge our concept of ownership, giving rise to terms such as "semi-owned" and "loosely owned." Concerned residents may feed the cats and provide shelter for them but not identify the cats as their personal pets. Conversely, some community cats are fed and sheltered by multiple households who may all consider the animal "their cat."

