

University group manages felines at West Ga. campus

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CARROLLTON - Somewhere around 150 to 200 stray cats prowl the University of West Georgia, feasting on the mice and birds that inhabit the campus as well as food remnants left by the school's students, and since October 2007 CampusCATS has been working to keep the population healthy and manageable.

The cats, which live in drain pipes and hidden burroughs throughout the campus, were coming out during the breaks when students weren't occupying the campus and leaving more evidence of their presence in public areas.

"The ferals were coming out more, because they didn't have access I guess to the food Dumpsters that they normally had," said Ineke Abunawass, who works in the environmental safety and health office. "We were kind of curious as to what to do for them." The university considered calling animal control to pick up the animals, but knew more cats would move in to take their place. Strays are adept at finding food sources and relatively comfortable quarters, she said.



A stray cat eats from a bowl of dry food left by CampusCATS volunteer Elizabeth Smith Wednesday.

After researching the problem online, Abunawass found a better way to manage the cats and protect the students. She started a trap, neuter and release program at the university. Through the program, she traps the animals in humane traps and takes them to the West Georgia Spay and Neuter clinic in Villa Rica. There the cats are spayed or neutered and vaccinated for rabies and distemper. Afterwards, she returns them to the area of campus where they were caught. So far the group has been able to capture and neuter 36 cats.

"In some places this is very controversial," said Elaine MacKinnon, a supporter of the program. "People want to see (the cats) eliminated. They don't want to see them brought back."

Many of the cats are wild and completely undomesticated. They will never be able to live in a home, and some people feel they are a danger to the community.

"A lot of these are feral," Abunawass said. "The possibility of socializing them is, you're not able to. You have the cats at home you pet and purr. These, if you touch them their hair stands up straight on their backs."

But the program has also trapped some kittens that were young enough to domesticate, and those are put up for adoption so they can have a better life than is offered as a feral cat. Nine young cats have been adopted, including one taken to a new home on Wednesday. "The littler ones, the ones that we feel can be socialized are adopted out," Abunawass said. "That's really a goal, that thus far we've been able to meet."

MacKinnon, a history professor, became involved after she heard a disturbing rumor on campus.

"I heard a rumor that at one time the university was using gas to, you know, to get rid of some of them, and that really upset me," MacKinnon said. She found that the rumor was completely unfounded, but it got her involved with CampusCATS. She found trap, neuter and release programs were being used successfully on other campuses and signed on to help however she could.

"This is a very humane way to deal with the feral cat program," MacKinnon said. "The most important element is to get them spayed and neutered because then they don't reproduce."

The project also has an educational component, teaching students to be responsible pet owners. Some of the cats are probably pets adopted by students and abandoned when they moved on, or animals that were abandoned on campus

because the owners thought it would be safe for them, she said. She hopes showing the students what really happens to those abandoned cats, can help stop them from taking in pets they can't care for.

After starting CampusCATS, Abunawass tried unsuccessfully to get a student organization to adopt the program. Having students involved in the trapping also brought up some difficult issues. So, she approached the Carroll County Humane Society about taking in the program under its umbrella of services.

"The best part for us, outside of that we can give people the letters for their donations, is that they handle the accounting also," Abunawass said. "I have a separate account. I just hand them the donations and they basically manage that part of it."