

# Is There a “Right Time” to Trap a Feral Mom with Kittens?

A veteran feral cat trapper for a successful TNR program expresses concern over the shelter’s policy changes to leave feral queens with unweaned kittens in place rather than trapping them all and bringing them to the shelter. Dr. Schumacher explores the reasons behind this idea and discusses why this shelter’s new policy is moving them in the right direction to improve the welfare of feral cats in their community.

## Question:

The local shelter in my area has an enviable record of high quality care over the years, including a free TNR program. Unfortunately they are about to implement some policy changes that will very negatively impact feral cats.

Our shelter leadership has convinced itself that it is better to leave nursing kittens in the wild until they are old enough to be weaned (5-6 weeks), rather than trap the mom and get her and the kittens into a safe environment (shelter nursery or foster home) where she can raise them without fear of predation.

I have been a volunteer trapper in this community for 15 years, and have always tried to trap moms and kittens as soon as they have been reported by a member of the general public. I am painfully aware how critical it is to get these fragile families into a safe environment as quickly as possible; a delay of a day or even a few hours could be a matter of life and death. The concept of letting the kittens get older prior to trapping appears to ignore the many hazards to young feral kittens and their low life expectancy, as well as the increased difficulty of socializing them if they are lucky enough to survive. There is also the strong possibility that mom will start moving them, and the trapper will never find them. Shelter leadership seems far more focused on “streamlining” their operations than saving feral kittens and getting the mom cats fixed (the best time to trap a new mom is when she is nursing, since the trapper can use the kittens as a powerful enticement for the mom to go into the trap).

This particular shelter has become data-driven, and therefore I am searching for data that addresses the issue of when is the “right time” to trap a feral mom and kittens. I know from experience that “the sooner the better” is almost always the right answer, but I would like to know whether there are any studies by organizations such as yours that support that viewpoint.

Thank you so much for your help.

## **Answer:**

Hello and thank you so much for reaching out.

Your question surrounds an issue that is often highly emotional - the TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return) of feral queens. Not so long ago, many shelters were euthanizing healthy feral and even friendly adult cats, and intervention in the life cycle of feral kittens born in the wild seemed like a stretch for many organizations. However, as shelters across the country achieve greater life-saving success, we are increasingly able to turn our attention to these vulnerable cats and their kittens.

Unfortunately, this is not a situation where there is an easy answer. Even non-feral cats that have not been well socialized to people experience unrelenting stress in the shelter environment. (Kessler and Turner, 1999). Truly feral cats are more like wild animals than our typical house cats- they are terrified of the sights, sounds, and smells of people. Having kittens to protect likely furthers the cat’s experience of fear when subjected to proximity to these frightening stimuli. For this reason, long term housing of feral and undersocialized cats in confinement is not recommended. (See [ASV Guidelines for Standards of Care](#).) So although as you note, there is a sense of urgency around getting these cats into a safe environment with their families, confinement in a shelter or foster home does not offer an ideal solution. For this reason, housing feral queens and litters in shelters is an uncommon practice in our experience.

On the other hand, we know that there are risks to feral kittens. While the kitten mortality rate is comparable to that of other similarly sized wild carnivores, the fact that feral kittens can potentially be tamed and adopted into a lower risk environment tempts us to intervene.

Ideally of course we would bypass this dilemma by spaying cats prior to them having kittens, and where resources are limited many programs choose to focus on spaying the highest possible number of cats as the best way of preventing both unwanted births and unnecessary suffering of kittens and cats. However, inevitably some births will continue to occur. Cats are efficient breeders! In this case, the best balance of preserving the welfare of the mother and the safety of the kittens depends on the kitten's age. In the case of a feral queen with unweaned kittens (i.e. less than around 4 weeks of age), the best choice is often to support the finder/local resident in looking after the queen where she is until the kittens are older (for instance by providing food and water at a respectful distance).

When to trap weaned kittens and queens is largely dependent on the shelter and community. In a shelter that is operating within their [Capacity for Care](#) in a community with a high demand for pet kittens, socializing the kittens and placing them up for adoption will often be the right choice. In that case the queen and kittens should be trapped when the kittens are barely old enough to be weaned but still young enough to be tamed. Finders and trappers should be provided with visual guidelines for what the kittens look like at that stage. The queen can be spayed and returned to field immediately, minimizing her stress by keeping her time in the shelter limited to only what is needed for surgery and recovery. In communities where the shelter is overrun with kittens, battling regular infectious disease issues, and/or has a low live release rate for kittens, bringing the kittens into the shelter might be much riskier than trapping them when they are older, altering and returning them to their community home. (In this case, trapping of the mother should also generally be delayed to coincide with trapping of the kittens if possible.)

Of course, there will always be circumstances when feral queens and their litters must be trapped, for instance because the building where they were sheltering is being torn down or another exigent threat is present in the environment. At times shelters will be faced with abandoned feral cats and kittens with no knowledge of their location of origin. Space in the shelter should generally be reserved for these urgent cases, and the cats should be housed in an environment that minimizes the need for handling and the exposure of cats to the sounds, sights and smells of people and dogs and the other comings and goings of a busy shelter. If safe, outside, confined space is available this is often ideal. Confinement should be spacious enough that a

person can enter the housing space to change litter, provide fresh food and water, and perform other needed care without handling or removing the cat. Kittens should be removed for socialization when they are old enough to be weaned, as above, and the queen can then be sterilized and tracked to a barn or working cat home.

So, to answer your question as to whether there is data that addresses the “right time” to trap a feral mom and kittens, there is not. However, to support the goal of providing TNR services while maintaining humane treatment of all animals in care, then the “right time” would generally be after the kittens have weaned so that the feral mom can be returned to her territory after she has recovered from spay surgery.

I hope this has been helpful!

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