Pet Talk

-Million Cats-

Welcome to *Pet Talk*, an occasional column about local pets and related topics.

Since the dog days of summer are here, let's focus on homeless cats!
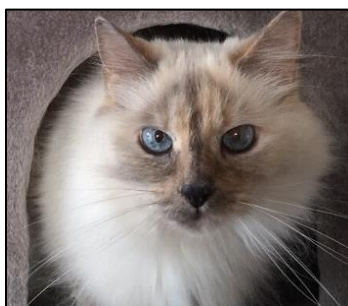
Did you know that as many as 100 million homeless cats exist in the U.S.? And why is that?

First, there's the overpopulation problem. Indeed, cats are so prolific that just one fertile female and her offspring can yield hundreds of kittens in just a comparatively few years.

And since most homeless cats in the U.S. are not spayed or neutered, animal shelters can easily become overwhelmed with unwanted kitties. As a result, nearly 3 million cats are euthanized in the U.S. every year. (Not to mention the unfortunate millions roaming at large, who are prone to sickness and injury.)

Note, however, that euthanasia is more common in big U.S. cities. By contrast, rescue organizations in the Flathead only rarely must euthanize, such as for incurable sickness.

So how many rescue groups exist in the Flathead? A quick web search reveals numerous hard-working entities such as the Flathead County Animal Shelter, Humane Society of Northwest Montana, Flathead Spay & Neuter Task Force, KittyMom's Rescue Organization, and others.

Although all local organizations strive to solve the homeless cat problem, their focus can vary.

At the Flathead County Animal Shelter, caregivers use best practices delineated by the nationwide Million Cat Challenge. This program, developed and promoted by nationally prominent veterinarians, recommends that shelters take some simple steps to reduce

crowding and promote wellness.

For example, by providing large, clean, and well-spaced cat enclosures, favorable shelter environments can yield healthier, happier cats—which makes them more adoptable.

To give you an idea of how busy the county shelter has been, it took in 29 cats in July and 243 since January. (Despite the fact that the county has no cat ordinances.)

In Columbia Falls, population control is a main focus of the Flathead Spay & Neuter Task Force. That is, in addition to sheltering homeless pets, the organization provides low-cost spaying and neutering services.

In fact, Executive Director Mimi Beadles recently provided some amazing statistics. Since 1999, the Task Force has operated on some 40,000 cats, about half of whom were females. Consequently, Beadles estimates that their work has prevented more than 200,000 unwanted births in the Flathead!

Some organizations also practice what's known as the Trap-Neuter-Release method of population control. In short, feral cats

can be humanely trapped and taken to a veterinarian to be examined, neutered, and vaccinated. After recovery, the cats are returned to their original habitat to help reduce the overpopulation problem.

Similarly, Flathead County Animal Shelter offers its Working Cat Program (previously called the Barn Cat Program). In this case, the above vet services are offered free to citizens who are willing to bring in feral cats and then return them to their original locations.

Fostering is another way to address the homeless cat problem. For example, here's a description from the KittyMom's website: "We have volunteers in every corner of Flathead County and 15 foster homes who lovingly raise our babies and foster our adult rescued cats."

In summary, many advocates have been working tirelessly to improve the lives of domestic and feral cats in the Flathead.

But everyday citizens also can help by adopting whenever possible. For instance, when longtime cat lover MJ was challenged to list her past and present feline adoptees, no problem! She

quickly reeled off 18 names—in chronological order no less.

(Reminds me of the popular TV series *All Creatures Great and Small*, in which old Mrs. Bond proudly proclaims, "I work for cats!")

If you too love cats, please consider adopting from Flathead County Animal Shelter or other organizations today. You can also help spread the word among family and friends in rapidly growing Flathead County.

By the way, did you know about the Senior Pet Voucher offered by Flathead Shelter Friends? The free voucher pays up to $250 toward veterinary care for adopted cats and dogs who are 7+ years old.

For more information, please contact Flathead County Animal Shelter, phone number (406) 758-1310, or visit the website at https://flathead.mt.gov/department-directory/animal.

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