

Barn Basics: the benefits of barn cats

As part of good stable management, bring in the kitties.

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Got mice? Besides securing the lids of grain bins and sweeping up leftover pellets, you can cut down on unwanted rodents by recruiting the services of a barn cat. A recent article in the Los Angeles Times revealed the Los Angeles Police Department controlled a burgeoning mouse problem in its warehouses by putting feral cats to work patrolling the buildings.

“You still have to practice good stable management,” says Erin Harty, a three-day event rider who also serves on the board of directors of the Feline Rescue Association in Baltimore, “but a barn cat can help make your stable a mouse-free zone.”

Over the years Erin has helped re-home many feral cats in to barns. “While it’s wonderful if a feral cat ends up becoming totally tame, the older ones have grown up having to fend for themselves. Many of them aren’t likely to ever be a true pet in the sense of picking it up and carrying it around. So when we can place them in a barn setting, where they’re cared for but they’re allowed to still be ‘free’, it’s like, ‘Wow! We hit the jackpot with this home!’”

If you have noticed feral cats lurking in the fields surrounding your stable, and you’d like to invite one or more to stay there permanently, Erin offers three quick tips.

She begins by explaining, “There is already some sort of food source nearby or the cats wouldn’t be in the area. But you can lure them to the barn if you put out food. You have to be careful, though. If the food is disappearing and you don’t spy a feral cat sneaking up and eating it, you might be feeding other animals you don’t want around a barn, like raccoons and opossums.”

Once you have a cat who’s come to dinner, you have to trap it so it can be spayed or neutered and vaccinated. After all, you need to be responsible for the cat’s welfare and you certainly don’t want to add to the feral cat population.

“Contact a cat rescue group, the local branch of the Humane Society or your animal control department. They’ll be able to loan you a humane trap and explain how to bait it,” Erin says. “They can also refer you to a low cost spay-neuter clinic or a vet who is willing to work with feral cats.”

Finally, once you have your official barn kitty, you need to provide shelter. Simply assuming it’ll find a bed in an empty stall or snuggle up in the hay loft isn’t good enough.

“They really like having an area where they feel safe and secure,” Erin explains. “An easy home is to buy a big rectangular plastic tub, like a Rubbermaid. Cut a large opening in the side. Turn it upside down and set it out of the barn’s traffic area. Then place some straw inside or other warm bedding material, like maybe an old flannel or fleece blanket. Some people also insulate the outside in really cold weather. Eventually, the cat will discover the home and use it as its den.”

Of course, you’ll still need to continue to feed the cat to keep it around. Otherwise it’ll go seeking a more reliable food source. Yet don’t worry that by feeding the cat it’ll stop hunting vermin. “That’s a natural instinct,” Erin says. “And remember, just having a cat around will help keep the mice away.”

After you’ve welcomed a feral cat into the stable, you and your horses can enjoy the benefits of a barn cat. Plus, you’ll have the satisfaction of having given a forlorn feline a good home.