

Caring for the cat carers



By Jane Binsley

AUCKLAND'S stray cats can strut a little taller now thanks to an SPCA initiative that has brought together the city's many volunteer cat carers.

Spearheaded by the Society's Executive Director Bob Kerridge, the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition aims to tackle the city's escalating stray cat population by supporting volunteer cat carers in their efforts to trap, neuter and release as many cats as possible.

"For a long time I've been aware of the dedication of these people and concerned that we've done so little to help them," says Bob. "I'm also very aware of the large number of stray cats in Auckland who need our help.

"You've got these brave individuals out there in the middle of the night. It's probably pouring with rain but they drag themselves out to feed these cats. They could feel very alone but it's nice to know they've now got this umbrella over them."

It was a cold and rainy Saturday in February when more than 50 cat carers from around the Auckland region gathered at the SPCA's Mangere headquarters for the inaugural meeting of the Cat Coalition.

"We wanted to gather them together to acknowledge what they do and let them know they're not out there on their own," says Bob. "I was delighted with the response. Some came just to listen but I think the bulk of them were there because they liked the concept.

"Bear in mind that we're dealing with staunchly independent people who are doing their own thing and often dedicating their lives to doing it."

Bob is full of admiration for the carers who offer support, comfort and help to cats that would otherwise be quite isolated.

"It warms the heart. In many cases the carers know the cats by name and the cats get to know the carers very well. They know the sound of the carer's car. It's interesting to see all these cats appearing when the car turns up and enjoying, in a limited way, the company of a human who cares."

He says the stray cat population, which may number up to ►

Easy to spot ...

If you see someone feeding stray cats and wearing a cap or vest like these, you'll know that person is a member of the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition.



Easy to help ...

Would you like to volunteer to feed a stray cat colony near you or foster kittens? Phone the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition on 09 256 7300 and you will be given the advice you need to look after the cats yourself, or put in touch with a carer in your area.

► 400,000 cats throughout New Zealand, is made up predominantly of cats that have been abandoned by their owners. “A stray cat is a sad cat.”

They rely on each other and on a few kind people to survive. “It’s such a sad thing when you think about it.”

He would like Auckland to take a similar approach to the Italians in Rome, where cat carers are acknowledged by the city for what they do. The coalition will lobby local authorities for support.

“To my mind, cat carers do an important job, not just looking after the animals, but in an environmental sense. They help the community by making sure the cats are well fed and happy.”

Aware that some carers are looking after as many as five colonies seven days a week, Bob is keen to lessen their burden by calling for new volunteers to help spread the workload.

“We need to put in place a mechanism so anyone who is interested in helping can contact the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition and then be put in touch with carers in their area.”

He is hoping to produce a brochure to encourage new volunteers.

Bob says one of the coalition’s first jobs is to provide the volunteers with an identification card that they can carry with them in case they are questioned about entering a property. Caps and luminous jackets will also be available but it’s up to each individual cat carer to decide whether or not to wear them.

“Because the colonies are in all sorts of different places there are some who want to be very clearly identified but there are others who deliberately keep a low profile,” he says.

Next, the coalition intends to write to all the vets in Auckland, asking them to give cat carers a discount price on neutering, vaccinating and checking the health of stray cats.

“We do already have some special vets who are happy to provide a good price, but the more vets we have on board the less distance the carers will have to travel with the cats, which reduces the stress on them.”

The trap, neuter and release (TNR) approach has been shown to be the

most effective means of humanely reducing stray cat populations over time.

Through the coalition, the SPCA will provide cat carers with vouchers to help pay for desexing and vaccinations.

“Under certain circumstances we’re also able to help with food, which is the other thing they spend their money on,” says Bob. “We recently had a very generous donation from Purina of good-quality cat food, which we’re making available to the cat carers.”

The coalition will be guided by an extensive protocol document and a handbook will be produced to help cat carers with their work.

“They all face different problems,” says Bob. “Some totally dedicate themselves to a colony, whereas others have some helpers. Others would like some helpers but can’t find any. Some will continue to do their own thing, continue to pay for neutering and food, but if there are times when they need some help or need some food then that’s when we’ll be there.

“They can choose to use our help as much or as little as they want to, but at least they’ve got that umbrella of a system if they want it.

“It’s something special that they do and they get a lot of satisfaction from doing it. I hope there are more people out there who are interested in becoming part of this wonderful group of people by taking care of one little colony near their home.”

He says many colonies rely on just one person, whereas it would be ideal to have two or three people sharing the care of each colony.

“One of the other jobs that some of our carers are now doing is rehoming cats and kittens. Some become very friendly and adoptable and go back into loving homes. That’s a very nice outcome so I hope there will be an increase in that, too.”

Bob believes stray cats will be the winners once the coalition is up and running: “It’s very satisfying in that I think many, many more cats are going to be helped by having this coalition.

The more helpers we get the more cats we will be able to help.”

CAROLYN RAVLICH

Westmere, Auckland



How did you get involved with cat caring?

Almost 20 years ago I started feeding a few stray cats in Auckland city where I was working. I fed the cats each night and managed to trap them for desexing. One evening my husband and I stopped at the Parnell Rose Gardens. A lot of slender tabby cats and a few kittens caught my eye. I went straight to the dairy and bought cat food – and there started my affiliation with the wonderful Parnell cats.

When I began feeding these cats there were more than 100 and now there would be only 20. Trap, neuter, release works well in controlling and reducing cat colony numbers, and managed colonies work well if managed properly. Some animal “welfare” groups prefer to trap and destroy the cats, which is sad as many street cats or stray cats are in better condition than a lot of domestic cats, though just a bit shy.

How much time does it take up?

It used to take almost an hour to feed the cats, pat them, change the water and clean up the mess the public used to leave. Trapping cats is also very time-consuming. I was in constant contact with the council and fought for the cats any time they were at risk. Each colony needs one person to manage it and deal with the property owners or council.

How much of your own money do you spend?

When I started I easily spent over \$100 a week until I

decided to advertise for volunteers and these wonderful people all supplied food and fed one night each week, giving of their time and money to help care for the colony.

In the old days I used to pay for a lot of the desexing and then others started to help out. We had donations from the public, which all helped. The SPCA later came to our rescue and gave us money toward desexing, which was a huge help.

The SPCA has been fantastic and Bob Kerridge has been a major player in trying to make a positive difference in the life of the stray cats of Auckland city.

We would love to have help from the companies that produce quality cat food or biscuits. This would be a dream come true for coalition volunteers. My dream is to win Lotto and set up a small clinic in a central spot with a couple of vets to run it solely as a desexing clinic.

What do you think of the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition?

The coalition is fantastic. It brings together all of the wonderful people out there who work tirelessly, often in the dark, sometimes abused by the public, all for one cause – to make life better for the street cats and to at least make a dent in the stray cat problem. I would love to see the council working alongside the coalition and contributing to the desexing as we are all doing this as a community project and we do make a difference.

TANIA KEARNS

Glen Eden, Waitakere City



How did you get involved with cat caring?

About seven years ago I saw a group of cats in Ellerslie and started leaving food out every morning. I saw an advert in *Animals’ Voice* calling for colony feeders, made contact and was given some great advice including how to trap the cats, have them desexed and return them to the site. I committed to feeding them every day.

Why do you do it?

It’s very rewarding, particularly when I turn up and they come running to me. My part has been to make their lives the best they can be in the circumstances via neutering and regular worming, not to mention giving them a guaranteed meal every day. I monitor their health and if a cat deteriorates I make sure it doesn’t suffer.

It’s also rewarding when I rehome cats from the streets to someone’s lap, where they become a much-loved family pet.

How much time does it take up?

I just factor it into the rest of my life. I look after one colony in Ellerslie, one in Waitakere and several in Avondale. It’s a commitment I take very seriously. I feel guilty if I miss a feed.

How much of your own money do you spend?

Many people have hobbies that they invest their money in. I consider this my expensive hobby. Early on I would spend a few hundred dollars a month on vet bills and food. Now I

have some funding from various sources which supplements what I put in so I can do that little bit more, like subsidising people on lower incomes to have their cats desexed.

What problems do you encounter?

People’s ignorance is the main one. There is so little understanding of cat colonies. By keeping the colonies low profile we avoid potential problems with people who see the cats as a nuisance or something to be gotten rid of.

Dumping is a huge issue. People seem to think it’s okay to dump their unwanted cat with an existing colony because they will get fed. Often the cats they dump are not desexed (and sometimes pregnant) so the problem just gets bigger.

What do you think of the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition?

It’s well overdue. So many of us operate individually – struggling with the enormity of the situation. It’s lonely, heartbreaking and overwhelming at times.

The coalition is still in its early days and I hope with time its profile will increase as well as its authority and powers, because we need to be heard and be taken seriously. It has already been very useful having connections with others for advice, support and sharing ideas, but even more importantly, being affiliated to a known welfare group, the SPCA, gives us credibility, instead of just being thought of as “crazy cat ladies”.

As the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition grows, its strength will obviously come from the cat carers who are its members. Here we profile four of the very committed women who have been helping stray cats over the years.

SYLVIA FAIRBURN

Forgotten Felines, Auckland's North Shore

How did you get involved with cat caring?

I happened to be in a pet shop one day in 1995 when I heard someone talking about the stray kittens in Browns Bay. So I went along to have a look and thought "Somebody's got to do something".

I trapped the kittens and rehomed them, then I trapped the adults and got them fixed. Then somebody said, "What about that colony further down the street?" then "What about behind the shops?" ... it just kept on going.

Which areas do you cover?

I only do the North Shore, from Albany and Browns Bay down to Takapuna and into Glenfield, wherever the need arises. We've got 17 colonies that we feed daily and we're always hearing about more.

How much time does it take up?

A lot. I was working but when my mother became ill something had to go. It wasn't going to be the cats so it had to be the job.

I'm always backwards and forwards to the vet. I work on it every day, certainly in kitten season. I have about 40 volunteers, about 30 of whom feed colony cats on a daily basis. Some have been with me for more than 13 years. Then I've got about 10 fosterers and a couple of people who help trap.

We have a website called www.forgottenfelines.co.nz.

How much of your own money do you spend?

A lot. The SPCA has helped us financially with desexing for years now. In the past four weeks we've cared for about 15 cats. It's \$65 a pop to have them desexed and on top of that I always have them vaccinated, deflea-ed and wormed, at \$12 each, plus if they look ragged we pay \$50 a pop to get them tested for feline Aids. Also food and litter cost a fortune, all paid for by myself and the volunteers, so it really adds up.

What do you think of the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition?

Bob Kerridge has been wonderful with Forgotten Felines and I think the coalition will be helpful to people who are on their own out there and maybe have just discovered a stray cat colony and want to help.

It's wonderful there is a support network there you can ring up for help and advice. When I started I didn't know where to turn.



ANNE BATLEY-BURTON

Parnell, Auckland

How did you get involved with cat caring?

I saw an article in the local newspaper about eight years ago, talking about the Parnell cats and how they needed more feeders.

Why do you do it?

Because I am so passionate about cats.

How much time does it take up?

Feeding takes about an hour, chopping food and getting organised takes about another hour. I also get involved in dealing with the council, building and maintaining the enclosure, providing houses and putting little beds in. A group of us look after the colony. Even Auckland Mayor John Banks and his family help out when other feeders are unavailable. John often pops in with warm milk in the mornings!

How much of your own money do you spend?

A lot. I also pay vet bills for other cats that need sponsoring after an accident or illness.

What problems do you encounter?

A lot of our cats are quite elderly so we help them through their final days. I have taken elderly cats home and that has been a very rewarding experience, although sad when the time has come to put them to sleep.

From time to time we have issues with the public, such as vandalism of our site. Guy Fawkes night is always a problem as a lot of people tend to hurl fireworks around, sometimes causing major fires. It is terrifying for the cats and on one occasion some kittens were burnt to death.

What do you think of the SPCA Auckland Cat Coalition?

It's a wonderful idea. Cat carers need to work together and help each other. It also gives us more credibility to be part of an organisation supported by the SPCA. So often the public think that people taking care of stray cats are ridiculous. People need to understand that we are doing a public service in looking after these cats and, in following the TNR policy which is a basic premise of the coalition, we are preventing a feline population explosion.

What other help would you like?

There are a lot of kind people who would love to help with feeding but cannot afford it. It would be marvellous if some of the cat food companies would donate food – even damaged cans would be a help. The SPCA is already helping with desexing vouchers and we receive unflinching support from Bob Kerridge. He is the best of all! 🐾



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