

Selection and Care of Barn Cats

Our topics for this week are::

- **Desirable characteristics of a good barn cat**
- **Health care requirements of barn cats**
- **Recommended daily care of barn cats**

Barn owners can benefit greatly from barn cats. Cats are a poison and trap-free means of controlling rodents. Rodents in barns not only eat and contaminate grain with their urine and feces, they also can be vectors of diseases that affect other animals and humans. Rodents can chew and contaminate leather goods and tack, plus electrical wiring which can cause barn fires. Wildlife predators of rodents, including snakes, skunks, opossums, coyotes, and owls can be lured into barns hunting rodent prey.

However, feral cats are a big problem for many communities. Most have descended from rural environments and the security of living in barns. In too many barns, cats are not properly selected, cared for, and controlled, which leads to overpopulation and some of the barn cats becoming feral.

Selection of Barn Cats

Sources of barn cats to add to your barn can be from someone else's barn, animal shelters, and animal rescue organizations. When selecting a barn cat, it should be in good health, alert, active, and have the desire to seek human attention for petting. Proper care cannot or will not be provided if the cat avoids humans and is not willing to be caught and handled. Short hair coats reduce the risks of hair mats and hair balls. Long hair coats decrease heat tolerance without providing much more tolerance to cold. If hairmats have occurred and been pulled or clipped off, a long haired cat can have less tolerance to cold than a short-haired cat. Barn cats should not be declawed for their safety and hunting efficiency.

Hunting instinct can be assessed by providing an empty paper sack for the cat to explore and slowly dragging a rag on a string. Disinterest in either would suggest a poor hunting instinct.

Barn cats should be spayed or neutered. Female cats generally maintain a smaller territory and are less likely to roam and be killed on roads by traffic or by wildlife or roaming dogs than male cats. Having a companion female cat can also aid in keeping both cats near a barn. Selecting littermates can avoid an period of adjustment for two cats. Unfamiliar cats who are intended to live in the same barn should be introduced slowly to each other. This is best done restricting the cats to separate crates that are moved closer to each other every day for one to two weeks.

Bedding and toys should be switched between crates to permit the cats to adjust to each other's odors. After a week, one cat can be released to assess its interest in and tolerance of the other cat. When both cats seem to seek the other's attention in a friendly manner, they can both be freed in the barn if they are also adjusted to other animals in the barn such as horses, livestock, and dogs. Adjustment to other animals can be carried out by confining the cat in a crate within sight and sound of other animals. The crate should either be closely supervised or placed in a location that protects the cat from being scared by the other barn animals.

Health Care

All barn cats should receive basic health care, including annual checkups, core vaccinations and rabies vaccinations. Rabies is more common in cats than dogs because many outdoor cats are not vaccinated. Cats who live outdoors are at high risk for parasites. Regular deworming and systemic flea and tick prevention are essential. In some areas of the United States, heartworm prevention may be indicated.

Daily Care

Barn cats should not be expected to meet all their nutritional needs from hunting rodents. A high-quality dry cat food should be provided in an area or room protected from wildlife. Otherwise, wildlife predators of rodents will raid the food after being attracted inside the barn. A work room, grain room, or tack room can be used to allow the cats to eat at preferred times. A pet flap door is not a reliable deterrent to wildlife entry. In fact, it provides an easy access for wildlife to feed and tack rooms.

When possible, barns should be shut at night if they are built to provide some prevention of wildlife entry. If this is not possible, barn cats should be restricted inside a secure barn room with litter boxes to protect the cats from environmental temperature extremes and from cat predators, such as coyotes or roaming dogs. If the overnight room is not heated in winter, a solid wall crate with bedding should be provided. Plastic bins with lids can make a good winter cat crate after a door is cut out of one end of the bin. No poisons such as rodent baits or antifreeze should be kept anywhere in barns.

Fresh water in bowls shaded from sunlight should be provided in warm weather and in heated bowls in winter if the water bowl could be exposed to freezing temperatures. To prevent disease transmission, wildlife should not have access to barn cat water bowls.

Elevated rest areas called perches should be provided in barns to give cats a place to rest and to escape potential dangers. Hay bales are common rest areas, but shelves or ledges should also be options.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. The best barn cats tend to be spayed, short-haired females that seek human attention.**
- 2. Barn animals and barn cats need a series of controlled, graduated, low stress exposures to each other to reach a tolerated coexistence.**
- 3. Barn cats should be confined in a closed barn or room in a barn at night to eat, drink, rest, and be safe from wildlife predators and roaming dogs.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.