

7 Things To Do If You Find Stray Kittens

It's kitten season! For cat lovers this means pictures of friends' newly adopted bundles of joy on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and whatever hip new social media sites I haven't even heard of. But it also means stray fur babies who need help.

What should you do if you come upon kittens outdoors?

1. Assess the situation.

First investigate whether the young 'uns are on their own. Their mother may be away temporarily to hunt for food, she may be hiding because you are there, or she may be moving the family, one by one, to cushier digs. Back a ways off, stay still, and watch. Give her some time — at least a few hours. If no mom appears, move on to #2 below.

If the mother shows up your action plan depends on whether she is a stray (a pet who has lost her home) or feral (a wild animal who wants nothing to do with you). It's easy to tell the difference: try to pet her. If she won't let you close enough for petting, try bribing her with food to get her within arms' reach. To catch a stray mom, see #5 below.

If she is feral you're looking at a TNR (trap-neuter-return) situation. Alley Cat Allies has a [helpful guide](#) to performing TNR. Keep in mind that kittens younger than eight weeks ([here are some tips](#) on determining a kitten's age) should stay with their mother if at all possible; if they are in a safe location, they are best off remaining there with her. Bring them food, water and shelter ([click here](#) for a ton of shelter options).

If the kittens are more than four months old, don't scoop them up and carry them off — they probably won't take kindly to it. Treat them like feral cats (meaning they need TNR and not adoption) unless and until they prove otherwise.

2. Do you have time to do it right?

If you have decided they need to be taken in, consider how much time you have to give them. Stray kittens need more than food, litter and toys — they also need you. Without a lot of positive human interaction the kittens [won't be adoptable](#) and will have to go back outside when they are old enough and have been spayed or neutered.

Kittens younger than four weeks require [special round-the-clock care](#). Do a gut check and make sure you are up to the task before committing to take them on.

3. Can you get the kittens spayed or neutered?

If you take them in, you will need to have your little charges spayed or neutered when they are old enough to prevent them from producing yet more kittens who need homes. They will also need vaccinations and possibly other veterinary services too. Can you afford all of that?

If you can't, do you have access to veterinarians or organizations that can help? Some vets will reduce their fees when the patient is a rescue, and there are groups that will subsidize the costs or even pay them in full. Find out whether there is [one near you](#).

4. Can you get the kittens adopted?

Unless you plan to keep all the kittens you take in you will have to find adoptive families. [Here are some tips](#) on how to do that. Are you willing and able to put in the time and legwork it will take?

If you have considered all these questions and decided that you can't or don't want to do what it takes, alert a rescue group to the kittens' location. Petfinder has a tool to [find an organization](#) near you.

If you are up for the challenge, here are your next steps.

5. Catching strays, including the shy ones.

If you're lucky the kittens will be friendly. See #1 above on how to tell whether a cat likes people. If they let you pet them you can pick them up and pop them into a cat carrier to take them home.

For kittens you can't touch you will need a humane or "no-kill" trap, which is a cage with a door that shuts when an animal is inside. Before buying one [look for a rescue organization](#) that loans them out. Read Alley Cat Allies' [instructions for trapping](#) cats.

6. Make them feel at home.

Prepare a somewhat small, quiet space for the feline family. It should have no hidey-holes that you can't reach into — you will need to touch the kittens to socialize them, administer any medications, take them to the vet, etc. Create a cozy spot in their room or enclosure where they can retreat and feel sheltered, but make sure you can get a hand in there.

Supply food bowls, water bowls, bedding and litter. The litter box must be shallow enough for stubby little legs to climb in. Fill it with a non-clumping litter — kittens can ingest litter, and you don't want it clumping up in their tummies.

Keep the tots warm, especially if they are orphaned. Wrap a towel around a heating pad (set it to the lowest temperature) or a hot water bottle. Kittens must also have space to get away from the warmth so they don't get too hot.

7. Socialize the kittens.

Teaching kittens to love people is a gradual process. Some of them take to people quickly, but prepare to be patient with more reticent types. My favorite part of socialization is the last stage, which involves lots of petting, cuddling and playing, but you have to lay the ground work to get there. The Urban Cat League has a [video and a written guide](#) to socializing kittens. Alley Cat Allies offers a [detailed how-to](#).

For more information on helping stray kittens, visit the [ASPCA](#), [Petfinder](#) and [Alley Cat Allies](#). The [Humane Society](#) has ideas about preventing overpopulation and reaching out to help stray kittens even if you don't stumble upon any yourself.

Here's to kittens and making sure they are all safe and sound!

