

Camp Companion aims to control homeless cat population

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Call it M*A*S*H, Camp Companion style.

In the operating room, four veterinarians were operating on female cats. Just down the hall, surgery preparation and post-operative care took place in a large room.

There, about 50 feral cats were in cages. Feral cats don't have owners and live on their own. Feral cats are often fed, but no one claims responsibility for them.

"A lot of them are very healthy, they're cared for very well," said Michele Quandt, executive director of Camp Companion.

Without touching the cats, volunteers injected them with anesthesia. As the cats went under, volunteers prepped them for surgery, shaving bellies of female cats and attaching them to plastic covers, stretching each leg out to a corner. The female cats were carried into the operating room on the covers. Volunteers carried tom cats in their arms and held them for their much-quicker surgery.

Cats recovered from surgery in cages that were covered by blankets in an effort to keep them calmer. The cats would stay overnight before being returned to their natural environment the next day, Quandt said.

The mission of Camp Companion is to prevent homeless or unwanted cats, Quandt said. The organization does this by organizing spay and neuter clinics, providing public education and working with other organizations to find homes for displaced animals. The group's goal is to eliminate the "free kittens" classified ads in the newspaper.

Since Camp Companion started, it's spayed or neutered 4,077 cats, including 500 last month. Organizers try to do several clinics in March, before the first litters of the season are born, Quandt said. They do one or two clinics a month from April through November. Camp Companion started in 2004. It's based in Rochester, but works with humane societies, animal control and farmers or rural residents in the 10 counties of southeastern Minnesota, stretching from Houston to Freeborn to Goodhue.

They have worked with farmers who have five cats on up to farmers who have 125.

"We will do any size colony," Quandt said.

Sarah Mehrkens, a Zumbro Falls large animal veterinarian, has donated her skills for several Camp Companion clinics.

She said it's amazing how a farm cat population changes after tenants have been spayed and neutered. The cats are more sedentary and their hormones aren't in control of their lives. The cats also tend to be healthier.

The typical lifespan of a farm cat is five to seven years, whereas a pet cat lives 15 to 20 years, Quandt said. A feral cat or farm cat will have an average of three litters a year, producing an estimated 20 kittens annually, Quandt said.

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