

## Fearful or Feral?



One of the biggest challenges for rescuers trying to help a homeless cat is determining the difference between a cat who is social and used to humans, but severely stressed out and afraid, and a truly feral cat. Unfortunately there's no easy answer or fool proof method to distinguish between the two.

Being trapped and brought into an unfamiliar environment, be it a strangers home or shelter, triggers stress and fear in almost all cats or kittens whether they've had social exposure to humans or not.

If a cat exhibits 4 or more of these behaviours in your presence, they're most likely socialized but scared:

- Approaching the front of the kennel/cage
- Kneading
- Tail pointing straight up
- Chirping sounds, friendly meows
- Rubbing on the front or sides of the kennel/cage
- Yawning
- Grooming
- Playing

Some indications that a cat is likely feral:

- Tipped ear – practiced by most TNR (Trap, Neuter, Release) programs in North America, a tipped ear is an indicator that a cat has already been trapped and spayed/neutered, and considered ineligible for rehabilitation under the criteria of the rescue/shelter
- Presence of facial scars or torn ears from fighting or exposure to cold
- Dilated pupils, heavy & fast breathing and elevated heart rate in the presence of humans
- Will stay at the back of the kennel or cage and not solicit any interaction
- Remains completely silent in the presence of humans
- Will exhibit extreme stress behaviours once confined, i.e. peeing outside the litter box, biting, stalking, tunneling into furniture/under carpet to hide

Hissing and growling are typical stress behaviours of all cats and should not be used as factors to determine if a kitty is fearful or feral.

It's recommended to wait an absolute minimum of 24hrs before making an assessment, as highly aroused cats tend to remain in a state of stress for long periods of time. Social but scared cats are more likely to thrive with consistency and routine. In addition to providing them with a dedicated quiet space, limiting the number of people interacting with them, or better yet, having one designated caregiver can go a long way.

Remember, this is not an exact science! Your most valuable tools are time and patience.

