

How to Best Care for Barn Cats



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By Kate Hughes

Though cats have a reputation for lounging around and napping, that's not all that they do.

Beyond the typical house cat owner, there are also people who rely on cats to keep spaces like barns and sheds critter-free. Barn cats, as most people refer to them, are working cats with a job to do.

Additionally, many of the people who keep barn cats don't necessarily consider them pets, especially if they're feral—that is, they have not been socialized with people.

Even if a barn cat isn't necessarily considered a pet, these animals do require a certain level of care, especially considering that their environment is not quite as controlled as someone's living room. Here's what you need to know if you're thinking about adopting a barn cat.

What Is a Barn Cat?

The term “barn cat” can apply to any cat that helps keep a barn or other outdoor area vermin-free. That said, certain cats might be a better fit for the barn cat life.

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PETMD EDITORIAL

Keri Heise is the adoption program manager of [Animal Allies Humane Society](#) in Duluth, Minnesota. Her organization finds homes for both pet cats and barn cats, and they make a clear delineation between the two.

“We tend not to adopt social cats out as barn cats, since they make good pets. Feral cats that would otherwise be euthanized are great working cats and can live long, full lives helping keep someone’s barn mouse-free,” she explains.

Heise notes that her organization recognizes two types of barn cats—feral and semi-social. “Semi-social cats have been around people and are somewhat used to them. They won’t want to interact with people though, and they tend to get aggressive if you push them,” she describes. “Feral cats have never socialized with people. They’re wild animals; you’re basically dealing with a raccoon that looks like a cat.”

Providing Basic Cat Care for Barn Cats

Even if your barn cat isn’t social, she does require basic cat care. Broadly speaking, that boils down to food, water and shelter.

Food

Barn cats can and will eat the same [cat food](#) as their indoor counterparts. The bigger concern is ensuring that other creatures don’t have access to that food. “It depends on the cat. If they’re semi-social, you might be able to keep food in your barn’s tack room and just let the cat slip in and out during the day while you’re in the barn.

If not, you probably want to put the food somewhere high—like in a loft—where raccoons and skunks can’t get to it,” Heise suggests. “Your cat should be keeping the population of small rodents—think mice and squirrels—under control, so those won’t be too much of a problem.”

By the same token, your cat’s food shouldn’t be out in the open to tempt other critters. [Cat food storage](#) containers that can be closed securely, like the [IRIS elevated feeder with airtight food storage](#), are a good option for reducing the risk of attracting unsavory animals.

An [automatic cat feeder](#) like the [Petmate pearl pet cafe feeder](#) can also help to reduce how much you need to interact with your barn cat, assuming he doesn’t want to deal with humans.

Water

For water, you want to be sure that the [cat bowl](#) doesn’t freeze the water in cold weather. Heise strongly recommends that barns have a heated water bowl available for cats as soon as the weather turns even a little chilly. A heated water bowl, like the [K&H Pet products thermal-bowl pet bowl](#), will make sure your barn cat always has access to fresh water, even in winter temperatures.

Shelter

As for shelter, Heise says that barn cats should have an area where they can cuddle up and sleep. “You want to create an enclosed area where barn cats can escape the cold,” she notes. Heise recommends stuffing this enclosed area with something like hay, which will still keep a kitty warm even if it gets damp. “If it’s cold, a wet blanket will freeze, and that won’t work,” she remarks.

However, if you get a [cat heated bed](#) or house like the [K&H Products outdoor heated kitty house](#), dampness won’t be as much of an issue.

Veterinary Care

Dr. Stacey Rebello, DVM, MS, practices at NorthStar Veterinary Emergency Trauma and Specialty Center in Robbinsville, New Jersey. She says, “In general, my recommendations for caring for barn cats are similar to that of house cats. This includes annual wellness exams, having them spayed/neutered and vaccinated (rabies and feline distemper FVRCP), providing monthly topical flea/tick preventatives, and routine blood work every year for any cat that is 8 years old or older.”

Dr. Rebello adds that barn cats are at an increased risk of infectious disease and intestinal parasites compared to indoor cats, so she often recommends additional infectious disease screening and treatments.

She also says that outdoor cats are more likely to suffer injuries, including wounds resulting from fights with other cats or attacks by bigger animals. “Barn cats should be seen by a veterinarian if they have wounds of any size—even small ones—due to the risk of infection or maggot infestation,” she explains.

Heise agrees regarding the importance of veterinary care for barn cats and adds that [microchipping](#) is highly recommended by her organization.

Heise also notes that depending on the cat, a vet visit may be easier said than done. “Sometimes you need to live-trap barn cats to get them to the vet, especially if they’re feral. We know it’s not easy, but you should, at the very least, ensure your barn cats are getting their annual vaccinations.” If your barn cat is friendlier, you can rely on a traditional [cat carrier](#).

One More Tip

Beyond basic care, Heise recommends adopting barn cats in pairs, especially if they’re feral. “Feral cats tend to live in colonies, so they like to have a buddy. It gives them someone to curl up with when it gets cold and offers a certain level of safety—it’s another cat to back them up,” she says. “It’s not a lot of extra work to have two cats instead of one.”

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