



A feral or semi-feral cat is a cat who has limited exposure to humans and is highly avoidant or fearful of them. At EHS we adopt these felines out as part of our Barn Buddies program. In this guide, we'll share how to care for a Barn Buddy.

Barn Buddies at EHS

This special adoption program pairs cats who are not suited to living indoors with a farm or acreage home where they can have lots of space and as much or as little human interaction as they'd like. This includes cats who:

- are considered feral or semi-feral
- are not necessarily feral or semi-feral, but struggle to use a litterbox for non-medical reasons and thus better suited to an outdoor home

Feral or semi-feral cats who haven't been handled and socialized by humans at a young age are often highly avoidant or fearful of them. Trying to force these cats to live near or with humans is very stressful for them, may lead to a variety of behaviour concerns, and can negatively impact their welfare.

The Barn Buddy program opens opportunities to re-home these cats, who may not otherwise be adoptable.

Over time and with patience, a Barn Buddy feline may come to associate you with food and show less avoidance. It's important to remember they may still require a generous amount of time to make small steps in increasing their sociability and may show avoidance most of the time.

All Barn Buddies:

- Are available by a fee of your choice rather than standard adoption fees
- Are spayed or neutered
- Have at least one set of vaccinations and deworming
- Are microchipped
- May be tested for FIV and FeLV
- Have had a health check performed by a veterinarian

What Behaviour is Typical of Feral and Semi-Feral Cats?

As most of these cats have had minimal exposure to humans, they will typically avoid interactions, and show higher levels of fear, anxiety, and stress when people are near. Behaviour towards other animals will depend on their previous exposure and experiences, as well as the animal's personality.

Observing your cat's body language and how it changes in response to certain situations can help you determine if your cat is experiencing fear, anxiety, or stress.



We recommend using [this guide](#) from [Alley Cat Allies](#) with illustrated examples of cat body language. Fear, anxiety, and stress can manifest as visibly more “passive” or “active” appearances.

Passive: *The appearance of fleeing or freezing*

✓ Freezing	✓ No vocalization	✓ Pretending to sleep	✓ Hiding
✓ Lowered/tucked tail	✓ Ears flattened	✓ Whiskers flat to face	✓ Not eating
✓ Low, crouched posture	✓ Heavy breathing	✓ Disinterested (avoiding people, toys, etc.)	

Active: *The appearance of fight or aggression*

✓ Hissing / Growling	✓ Pacing	✓ Dilated pupils	✓ Swatting
✓ Furrowed brow	✓ Fur raised	✓ Whiskers to the side	✓ Ears lowered to side
✓ Escape behaviours (running, jumping up walls, etc.)	✓ L-shaped tail - first inch horizontal and the rest pointing downwards	✓ Arched back or high back end	✓ Tail raised, fanned out, and flicking side-to-side

Interacting with a Barn Buddy

Less is more when it comes to feral or semi-feral cats. Because these cats have grown up with very little (if any) human interaction, it is not natural or enjoyable for them to spend a lot of time close with people outside of their terms. Over time and with routine, these cats may learn to associate you with food and begin to come out when you arrive or approach them. They may slowly develop more tolerance of you being near, but it is important to remember that small increases in sociability will still take a long time to happen, or may not at all.

Do not try to force interactions by chasing or cornering cats as this can cause them a great amount of stress, which is detrimental to their welfare and can result in injury. Speaking in a calm and friendly tone when feeding and cleaning the litter pan will help them become more familiar with your sound and movements. Move slowly and quietly around them and try not to drop or bump into objects that could startle them. If you are expecting guests over, instruct them to avoid interacting with the cat.

Providing for a Barn Buddy

If you have a Barn Buddy cat they must be provided with adequate shelter, water, food, litter trays (if appropriate), and routine and emergency veterinary care. In Alberta, it is a legal requirement that cats must be given protection from the elements through access to weather-resistant housing such as insulated and/or heated shelters.





Adopting a Barn Buddy and What to Expect Next

Most cats will take at least 2-4 weeks before they feel comfortable in their new home. More fearful cats may take longer. Because Barn Buddies are more fearful it is advised to go slow and gradually allow them more freedom to avoid overwhelming or losing them. For the first month, it is recommended to limit their ability to roam to a designated shelter, such as a barn or garage, which is secure and provides for their basic needs while they settle in before letting them explore and roam more freely.

Before Adoption:

- Have a designated and secure area where they can stay for their first month. Secure potential escape points like gaps in walls, loose boards, or broken window screens. Check the space for hazards like sharp edges, antifreeze, fertilizer, batteries, pesticides, or other things which could cause harm.
- Set up their space with bedding, food, water, and all other supplies they would need before they come home. Preparing ahead of time will let you release them and leave quickly so that they can explore at their own pace.
- Let your neighbors know that you'll be getting a new cat in. This way they will not attempt to trap it and will know to expect that it may visit their property.
- If your cat will live in or have access to a space with an outlet, using a feline pheromone diffuser, such as Feliway can help ease stress.
- Consider a video monitoring system to monitor or review recordings and see how they are adjusting and if anything in the environment is frightening them.

For multiple cats:

- The scent and noise associated with multiple cats in a space can be stressful – when possible, try to keep your cats separate and minimize their interactions to start.
- Consider using a Feliway Multicat pheromone diffuser to help ease the transition for all cats.
- Provide individual litter boxes (if appropriate), food and water bowls, resting spaces, scratching posts, and hiding spaces for each cat.

For extra help: Check out our resource on [Destructive Scratching](#) or our [video guide](#) on how to build your own [Cardboard Cat Scratch Pad](#).

After Coming Home:

- Limit changes to the environment while your cat is still adjusting.
- Keep a routine. Provide daily meals of the same portion at the same time so you can monitor how much they're eating and how often they are coming out. Knowing what to expect and when will help them feel more secure.
- When entering their space, move slowly, speak softly, and ensure doors are secured behind you.



Cat Behaviour Guide

Caring for Barn Buddies (Feral & Semi-feral Cats)



- Check-in regularly and monitor to ensure they are healthy.
- Have a plan in mind for how to safely transport your cat to a veterinarian, should they need care in the future, and consult with your vet on transportation suggestions.
 - Monitor for: vomiting, diarrhea, lameness, or an ongoing lack of appetite. While their appetite may be low initially, they should be eating more regularly within 24-48 hours.
- Ensure your Barn Buddy has ID. This helps people know the cat is owned and can help facilitate them being returned to you should they get lost.
 - We recommend a quick-release collar with an ID tag. Quick-release collars instead of buckled collars are especially important for cats who spend time outdoors as they prevent injuries that can occur if collars become tangled in trees, fences, or anything else outdoor cats are likely to encounter.
 - Ensure their microchip information is up to date and remember to check for their microchip during vet visits.

After the first month

As your cat becomes comfortable in their space you may notice more signs of activity, a more relaxed body posture, and increased engagement with you. At this stage, you can now give them access to explore their outside environment.

Ensure there is a way for them to return to their space that doesn't require you to let them in. You can expect your cat to take day trips off the property as they explore their territory. Although you may not see your cat as frequently once they are roaming outdoors, it is important to continue to leave food and water available for them for when they do return home.

Note: It is not recommended to leave food out overnight as it might attract other animals or cats to your property.

Additional Resources:

For even more Behaviour Resources to help pet guardians, visit our website today:

<https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/what-we-do/education-training/behaviour-resources/>

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behavioural questions by emailing:

askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).