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Best Friends® 25TH ANNIVERSARY

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January/February 2009

\$4.95

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Safe Haven

Florida community protects its feral cat population

Some unlikely residents live in the shadows of the beautifully landscaped yards that grace the private community of Ocean Reef in Key Largo, Florida. Around 350 stray and feral cats share this community of million-dollar homes with the rich and sometimes famous.

Story and photos by Sarah Ause

Three hundred and fifty cats aren't many, though, compared with what the number used to be. Before a trap/neuter/return (TNR) program was started here in the 1990s, the island community was overrun with cats – more than 2,000 of them. Now, thanks to a community-supported spay/neuter clinic, the number of cats continues to dwindle in a humane way.

When Ocean Reef was just beginning to grow from a small fishing camp in the

1960s, the area was full of rats. A grounds-keeper brought in five cats to help solve the problem. The cats weren't neutered, though, so left unchecked, the number of cats quickly multiplied. The rat population disappeared, but then the cats became the unwelcome inhabitants of Ocean Reef.

In the 1980s, while Ocean Reef's residents were trying anything and everything to control the cat population, including rounding them up and killing them, Alan Litman stepped in. An inventor and cat lover, he believed the cats of Ocean Reef were the

community's problem, and as such, it was the community's responsibility to solve it.

Litman had heard about an emerging tactic for feral colony management called TNR and believed it would work for Ocean Reef. He lived full-time in Pennsylvania, visiting his Ocean Reef house one week a month. When he was in Florida, he started trapping cats and bringing them to the local vet to be neutered. But Litman eventually realized that his efforts weren't enough, so, in 1995, he and a group of homeowners opened a spay/neuter clinic in Ocean Reef,

and ORCAT was formed.

During its first year, the group fixed 500 cats, but 163 kittens were born. It wasn't until the third year that the number of kittens born dropped dramatically and things started looking up. The colonies settled into separate groups, complaints from residents tapered off, and donations picked up.

These days, only a handful of kittens are born in Ocean Reef each year, and the older cats are dying off from old age. While feral cats don't usually make it past age five, the cats at Ocean Reef are living into their teens. Around 20 are still around from the days before ORCAT; one of them is 19-year-old Black Jack. "He's old and arthritic now, but he's still tough as ever," says Susan Hershey, ORCAT's director.

Every day, Hershey and her staff make the rounds by golf cart to more than 70 discreetly located feeding stations serving up to 12 cats each. Shelley, a black and white tuxedo, meets her feeders at one station and then jogs with the golf cart

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Opposite: The ferals have the run of the many expensive properties at Ocean Reef. Above: One of 100 cats who live at the center. Below: Area resident John Storm relaxes with one of the cats.



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This elderly cat has been around since the start of ORCAT.



Left, above and below: ORCAT director Susan Hershey feeds cats at the center. Above right: A kitten available for adoption hangs out on the golf cart during feeding rounds. Right, below: One of the ferals wakes up from a nap in the bushes.



to the next station. Henry, a shy old tom with scarred ears, comes running with a spring in his step when he knows he's getting his wet food. And then there's Jellybean, a round black cat, who meows loudly when the golf cart approaches.

The small size of each colony makes it easy to monitor numbers and health conditions of the cats. When someone looks ill or injured, the cat is trapped and brought in for veterinary care at ORCAT's Grayvik Animal Care Center. About 100 additional adoptable cats live there, spending their days lounging in baskets or playing in a large grassy yard surrounded by a tall fence. The cats at the center are the friendlier ones, but because of overcrowding at the center, many cats available for adoption still live at their feeding stations.

Still, the digs are better than they were. For many years, ORCAT was housed in a cramped building, but in 2006 the new Grayvik Animal Care Center opened, thanks to a generous donation from Ocean Reef homeowner Penny Stamps. Besides housing ORCAT's felines, the building contains a full-service veterinary and grooming clinic for residents' pets.

Though they were once considered pests, the cats of Ocean Reef are welcome now, thanks to caring and committed residents who continue to dote on their furry neighbors. Personalized food dishes and custom cat houses, complete with matching shingles, dot backyards where the cats hang out. And every year, the community comes together to support a popular fundraiser for ORCAT, a fashion show in which models strut down the runway sporting clothes from Saks Fifth Avenue, and carrying cats and dogs.

What started as a few homeowners looking after some cats has turned into a neighborhood effort to provide them with lifelong care. "It's so nice to be able to give them what they need," Hershey says. "Every community can do this." 🐾



One of the many ferals, keeping watch.



Grayvik and Penny: A Love Story

In 1996, Penny Stamps' daughter begged her to come look at kittens with her at ORCAT. Sure, the kittens were cute, but someone else caught her eye. It was Grayvik, a chubby tabby that Stamps describes as "cunning and charming." It was a done deal: Grayvik was adopting her. One night a year later, Grayvik woke Stamps up by walking all over her. She soon realized something was wrong. The garage was in flames, and smoke was pouring into her daughter's room through the vent system. The fire destroyed their home with smoke damage. If Grayvik hadn't woken Stamps up, she fears her daughter may have been asphyxiated. These days, Stamps serves as president of ORCAT's board of directors, and Grayvik, now around 16 years old, is still a chubby tabby.