

GMU Tries To Corral Its Feral Cats

Effort to Control 300 Just Scratches Surface

By Lan Nguyen
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The black and white striped cat sat idly underneath tall, prickly trees overlooking a wooded area at George Mason University. Next to it were three kittens frolicking with one another.

That spelled trouble to Joan Ziemba, a university administrator who heads a newly formed group that is trying to control the estimated 300 semi-wild felines roaming the 677-acre Fairfax campus.

"Someone must have had another litter," said Ziemba, watching the striped cat scurry in one direction and the three kittens run off in another.

George Mason's feral cat population has grown dramatically in recent years, in part because its wooded surroundings create an attractive environment for the felines. The problem is fueled by students who keep cats in their dorm rooms or campus apartments—despite a university rule prohibiting pets—then set them free on campus at the end of the school year, Ziemba said.

"And the cats are the ones who end up paying the price for it," said Ziemba, co-founder of the Mason Cat Coalition. "People need to take pet ownership seriously. It's not for your convenience. It's for the life of the cat."

Cats on college campuses are a nationwide problem, college officials say, and groups similar to the Mason Cat Coalition have been formed at several other schools. At Stanford University, the Stanford Cat Network has reduced the number of stray cats on campus from 800 to 150 in eight years, according to the group's co-founder.

So far Ziemba's group hasn't made much of a dent in George Mason's cat problem. Last year, the group captured 18 cats. Three were put to sleep because they had feline leukemia, and the others were spayed or neutered. Of those 15, the coalition found homes for a half-dozen that could adapt to family settings. The others, too wild to domes-



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Many of the cats at George Mason were once pets that lived with students.

ticate, were each marked with a snip on the left ear and set free to roam the campus again, Ziemba said. The group also regularly feeds cats at 10 locations on campus.

Members of the group said they would like to capture and find homes

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— veterinarian Don Powell

for more cats, but are limited by their small budget, which is funded by private donations. Medical treatment for each cat may cost as much as \$100.

The cats hide beneath academic trailers and buildings, in grassy patches and near university housing. Dozens of them live near a cluster of apartments for 300 upperclassmen.

"They're so pitiful," said Kelsie Lanier, 27, a psychology student from South Carolina who hears them purring all night. "I'm glad to see

somebody doing something about this."

The Mason Cat Coalition has raised \$2,500 so far to pay for food and medical treatment for the cats. The group takes the cats it captures to Pender Animal Clinic, in Fairfax, which gives the coalition a 25 percent discount.

The stray cats "are quite a problem," said clinic veterinarian Don Powell. "If it's 300 today, how many in two years?"

Families who adopt feral cats must have great patience, Powell said, because those cats are generally shy of people. "Other than seeing human beings, they have no great desire to interact with them," he said.

University spokeswoman Laura Massie is happy she adopted an orange and white Persian, one of the cats the coalition rescued near the physical education building. Ginger was dirty and flea-bitten and had a respiratory infection and pinkeye, "but she's healthy," Massie said.

"She was a little skittish and nervous, but that's to be expected after all she's been through. She's becoming more open. She's used to me now."