Barn Cat Acclimation Guide

Lifeline of Galveston County

Help your new barn cats learn that your property is home. A secure acclimation space, dependable meals, and a gradual release give them time to adjust to unfamiliar sights, sounds, smells, and people.

Plan for 2–4 weeks of acclimation. Do not release cats immediately after arrival.

1 Prepare a safe space before arrival

Set up a large, secure crate or enclosure in the barn or sheltered area where the cats will live (Lifeline can lend you one, if needed). It must have room for the cats to stand, turn, stretch, and rest comfortably, with food and water separated from the litter box. A small transport carrier or trap is not suitable for weeks of confinement.

- Choose a quiet spot protected from rain, direct sun, heat, cold, and animals that could frighten or harm the cats. Good airflow is essential, especially in Texas heat.
- Provide dry food, fresh water, a litter box, and a small cardboard box or open carrier for hiding.
- Cover part of the enclosure with a light sheet or blanket, leaving one or two sides open for ventilation. Check that the cover does not trap heat.
- Check doors, latches, and gaps. Ask your counselor to explain a safe transfer and cleaning method before opening the enclosure.

2 Establish a predictable daily routine

Keep dry food and fresh water available during acclimation. Offer a small serving of wet food twice daily, at consistent times. Remove uneaten wet food before it spoils, particularly in warm weather.

Each time you feed, use the same phrase or sound, such as “Here, kitty!” This helps the cats associate your call with meals. Scoop the litter daily, clean bowls, and check that each cat is eating, drinking, and using the litter box.

3 Build trust without forcing contact

Spend a few quiet minutes nearby each day. Speak softly, move slowly, and allow the cats to hide. Do not reach in to pet, corner, or pick up a fearful cat. Hissing or hiding is a reason to give the cat space, not to force interaction.

Keep dogs and unnecessary visitors away from the enclosure. Barn cats do not need to become friendly or enjoy petting to settle successfully. Contact Lifeline if a cat seems persistently distressed or you cannot safely provide daily care.

4 Prepare for release

Before the planned release, check with your adoption counselor and make sure the cats are eating normally and have access to permanent shelter and safe hiding places nearby. Keep dogs contained and choose a quiet time without visitors, loud machinery, or severe weather.

Do not release early because a cat seems restless or friendly. If confinement is causing concern, ask your counselor to help adjust the setup or schedule rather than making an unplanned release.

5 Open the door and let the cats choose

Open the enclosure door and step away. Let the cats leave on their own; do not pull them out, tip the enclosure, or chase them. Some leave immediately, while others take more time.

Leave the enclosure, hiding box, food, and water in the same location for at least about one week after release, or longer if the cats still use it as their safe base. Continue offering wet food twice daily with the same feeding call. Keep the enclosure door secured open so it cannot accidentally close.

Cats may hide after release or visit the feeding station when people are absent. Continue the routine and monitor food use and sightings. A camera can help you see who is visiting. If you cannot confirm that a cat is returning, contact your adoption counselor promptly.

6 Continue daily care for life

- Provide cat food and fresh water every day. Never withhold food to encourage hunting; barn cats cannot be expected to live on rodents.
- Maintain dry, weatherproof shelter and places to retreat from dogs and other threats. Avoid rodent poisons where cats live or hunt.
- Keep the feeding station consistent. Once the cats reliably return, move bowls gradually if needed, and remove the acclimation enclosure only when it is no longer their main refuge.
- Arrange veterinary care, vaccinations, and parasite prevention with your veterinarian. Watch for changes in appetite, movement, appearance, or behavior.

If a cat escapes or needs help

If a cat escapes during acclimation, do not chase it. Put food, fresh water, and its familiar hiding box or bedding near the original enclosure. Contact your Lifeline adoption counselor promptly to discuss monitoring and safe recapture. A cat may hide nearby, but there is no guarantee it will remain on the property.

If a cat appears sick or injured, contact a veterinarian and your adoption counselor. If the cat cannot be handled, ask about humane trapping assistance. Do not attempt to grab a frightened cat. Severe injury or trouble breathing requires urgent veterinary attention.

Questions or concerns? Contact your Lifeline of Galveston County adoption counselor through the contact information provided with your adoption.

Adapted from the supplied Shadow Cats TNR barn cat acclimation instructions. Additional relocation guidance: Alley Cat Allies, alleycat.org/community-cat-care/safe-relocation. Published confinement periods vary; follow the plan agreed upon with your adoption counselor.