

Kitten season: Unaltered pets lead to dumping, overpopulation

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKE COUNTY — With summer time comes a baby boom of sorts, what's commonly called "kitten season," and it means a population explosion that crowds the shelters around the United States and here locally.

In many cases, it doesn't lead to happy endings.

The Humane Society of the United States reports that kitten season is really three seasons at once, with cats giving birth to litters beginning in the spring, with the births peaking in late spring and early summer, and coming to an end in fall.

The warmer weather coincides with female cats' heat cycles, the group reports, and with unspayed and unneutered cats being in abundance all over the country — and also here in Lake County — forces coincide to cause a population explosion.

Despite the fact that the county and the cities of Clearlake and Lakeport all have adopted spay and neuter ordinances, there still are many unaltered animals in the county, according to Animal Care and Control officials.

Here in Lake County, Animal Care and Control reports that it's seeing a flood of cats and kittens making their way into the new shelter, located near the Lake County Jail.

"We're getting them in every day," said Officer Eric Wood.

The shelter now has well over 60 kittens, Wood said. "We've already overloaded all of our rescue with them."

That's just a drop in the bucket, according to Shelter Program Director Paula Werner. One week, the shelter saw 130 kittens come in.

She quotes statistics from the Humane Society of the United States that say an unaltered female cat and her unaltered offspring can produce 1.2 million cats in eight years. Werner said female cats can breed rapidly, able to go back into heat again immediately after pregnancy.

Despite the cute and cuddly factor, kittens present a lot of problems for shelters, especially in massive quantities.

Wood said kittens get sick very easily. "We don't have the means to medicate them all the time."

That's why it's critical to get them into rescue care, which the shelter has been very successful in doing in recent years. Werner said in a previous interview that shelter staff have worked hard to form relationships with rescue groups, who have taken animals and helped reduce the county's euthanasia rates.

However, euthanasia is still highest in the county for cats, according to shelter statistics. In fiscal year 2006-07, 3,275 cats were impounded; of those, 2,648 were euthanized. Kitten season often only exacerbates the problem.

Many younger kittens, under 8 weeks old, have to be fed with a bottle, and if rescues don't take them they often are euthanized because the shelter doesn't have the staff to attend to them, said Wood.

The jump in population can often lead to cruelty, when people attempt to rid themselves of the animals by dumping them.

Just such a situation occurred one night last month.

On the evening of June 12, Wood got an after-hours call from the California Patrol reporting that some 30 animals — cats and kittens — had been dumped along Spruce Grove Road near Lower Lake, and that the animals were running down the side of the road.

When he got there around 10 p.m., Wood found some kind-hearted citizens trying to round up the kittens.

In all, they recovered 21 kittens — ranging in age from 6 to 10 weeks old — and two adult female cats, with some others escaping, said Wood. He estimated the kittens were from three separate litters.

"It was definitely a dump job," said Wood.

He added, "I've never seen anyone dump that many cats at once."

No one has yet reported seeing who dumped the animals, he said.

Most of the kittens had some upper respiratory infections but were otherwise OK, said Wood.

The animals weren't wild, he added, but had been socialized. "The 21 I brought in were friendly."

Despite the overload on kittens, Wood said they were successful in getting them out of the shelter and into rescues. On June 13, one of the mothers and six kittens went to rescue, and more were on the way.

"They got real lucky," he said.

Werner added that it's a felony offense, and the shelter is keenly interested in finding out who is responsible.

It's not the only recent dumping situation that's happened, said Wood. Public Works reported finding kittens dumped along Sulphur Bank Road in Clearlake Oaks not long ago.

Wood says he's sure it happens a lot more than they know about.

Anyone with information about dumping activities is asked to call Lake County Animal Care and Control, 263-0278.

E-mail Elizabeth Larson at el Larson@lakeconews.com.

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