

For the Cats

What do you get when you combine a former builder, 500 cats and a village of thigh-high houses? Caboodle Ranch, a refuge for abandoned, stray and feral cats
 Cat Ranching Rural Retreat Provides a Home to Unwanted Felines

By Rosanne Dunkelberger

In a Madison County town named Lee, you'll find a ranch.

Unsurprising, since the town is pretty much in nowhere-ville, just off Interstate 10 a good hour's drive east of Tallahassee in the middle of Big Bend farm country.

As soon as you pull up to the entrance, you realize there is something decidedly different about Caboodle Ranch. For starters, the guardhouse is thigh-high. And although Craig Grant dresses the part of Southern rancher in boots and a cowboy hat, his roots are betrayed when he speaks with the distinctive accent of his native Rhode Island.

But prepare to be stupefied when he hollers up his herd at feeding time with shouts of "Come! Come! Come! I need my babies!"

From between the sand pines planted in neat rows they come — not cows, or horses, or pigs or even goats. It's cats. Dozens and dozens of cats. Cats in all colors and sizes. Fraidy cats and friendly cats. Too many cats to accurately count, but a good guess would be 500. [Click for slideshow.](#)

Caboodle Ranch is Grant's one-man effort to provide a haven for cats without a home: shelter cats that had an appointment with death, stray cats, antisocial feral cats, housecats with bad habits, or cats with owners unable to care for them anymore.

From Zero to Hundreds in Five Years

In 2003, Grant was divorced and living with his son in a rented beach condominium near Jacksonville when his son decided to move out, leaving his cat, Pepper, behind. After doing what comes naturally, Pepper ended up pregnant and had five kittens. Grant reluctantly agreed to keep the kittens until they were weaned, but ended up enjoying their antics and unique personalities and kept them all.

His condo neighbors? Not so thrilled. Grant built a shed on his son's property and moved himself and his feline charges in. Doing property maintenance and construction work, he often came across stray cats on his job sites. He would scoop them up and bring them home. Deciding his growing colony needed room to roam, he traveled down Interstate 10 and bought a five-acre parcel, part of what used to be a tree farm.

It was unimproved — no electric service, no water, no sewer — so Grant, still living in Jacksonville, for two years made a daily 280-mile round trip to deliver food and water in 5-gallon bottles.

"Build it and they will come," he says, paraphrasing the oft-quoted line from the movie "Field of Dreams." "I started bringing them home from job sites and eventually I had a hundred."

Caboodle really took off after stories about Grant and the ranch appeared in the news media, most notably an August 2006 article in Jacksonville's Florida Times-Union newspaper. The donations — and the cats — came pouring in. Grant requires Caboodle cats to be altered and up to date on their shots and asks those who want to drop off a cat to pay \$150 (although there is a multi-cat discount). It sounds like a lot, but not when you consider the cost of a lifetime of food, litter and veterinary care. Within a year after the Times-Union story, Grant had enough money to make the property habitable for him to live on the ranch with his charges full time.

Over the years, Grant has purchased more five-acre parcels and Caboodle Ranch now covers 30 acres.

"I bought enough property so that the cats would never be a nuisance to anyone," he says. While he's not exactly sure how many cats roam the piney woods, Grant says it's well under the 3,000 cats he's allowed — and he has just about maxed out caring for the cats he does have.

"There's no end to it," he says of his 14-hour workdays, seven days a week. "You don't just give 'em food and water." Grant says he has taught himself to treat common cat ailments such as colds and eye infections, saving precious dollars for vet visits for his charges that are seriously ill or injured. But even a cold can be deadly, since cats stop eating when they're stuffy. On this day, Grant walked around with a jar of baby food and a syringe, squirting food into the mouths of cats that seem sick.

"I work so hard to keep these cats healthy," he says.

Grant does not adopt out any of the cats at Caboodle. Instead, he urges people who want a feline in their life to go to their local animal shelter.

NBC's "Today Show" has filmed a segment about his ranch, and Grant is counting on the publicity to propel Caboodle to the next level of success.

"I can't do much more myself," he says. "We're hoping when the "Today Show" hits I'll get enough donations to where I can hire somebody part time, because I do need a little help."

Feeding Time

There are several feeders Grant keeps filled with dry food — about 70 pounds' worth per day — as well as watering stations. But Caboodle Ranch's most amazing sight, what Grant calls "a bit of a phenomenon," comes once every two or three days, when he loads a wheelbarrow with 100 large cans of cat food to feed his herd.

That's when the cats, previously lazing about or hidden in the trees, come out en masse to enjoy a wet food treat. Over and over, Grant plops a can of food on a Styrofoam plate and six or seven cats array themselves like spokes on a wheel to eat. Some eat on the ground; others prefer the top of a picnic table or the steps for their meal.

The feeding serves a dual purpose — to give the cats needed moisture and to allow Grant to lay eyes on most of the cats at the same time, so he can see if any are in need of medical attention — or if anybody is missing.

As they wander up for chow time, Grant points out, pats or picks up some of his favorite feline friends, sharing their stories and their names — Mr. Brewster and Bear, Squeaky and Gingersnaps, Klingon and Stars and Itchy. Many of their names relate to the cat's looks or personality. There's Butch ("My bully," says Grant), Marbles (whose coloration "looks like marble"), and the appropriately named Misty.

"He's my son's cat," Grant explains. "He used to spray in the house, so I brought him out here." And Crackers — short for Cracker Barrel — because he had a big belly as a kitten. And Fuzzy Nuts — no explanation needed.

At one point Grant scoops up Bitchy, who immediately commences to making a noise somewhere between a bleat and a yowl.

"Listen to him. Bitchy was adopted from the Jacksonville Humane Society; the people couldn't put up with him and returned him," Grant says. Apparently, Bitchy's nonstop grouching makes him his own worst enemy. "Bitchy complains every day, and he doesn't like anybody."

Even the cats that haven't yet earned a name have a story. Grant reaches down to tear a paper collar with numbers on it off of a small tabby cat in his receiving area. It, along with about nine others, had recently been delivered from a date with death at a downstate animal shelter.

"There needs to be more places like this," Grant says. "I don't want to sound like an extremist, but isn't it like a holocaust? These lives need to be saved; they need to be preserved."

A Place of Charm — and Danger

Visitors are often surprised that the large number of felines gets along most of the time. Cats fight "very rarely," says Grant, and when they do, "cats will try to break it up, others stand around and root, and some others take off and start running."

A builder by trade, Grant has fashioned a multitude of whimsical buildings that are both charming and serviceable. The site's well empties into Shaky Jake Lake, which features a working water wheel and is ringed by a collection of tiny cabins he has dubbed the Cat Nap Inn.

"This is their resort. They can take the boat out if they want too," he says with a chuckle. While cute, the cabins serve a purpose. In the winter, they're lined with straw and have small heat lamps installed to ward off the cold.

Grant also has constructed a chalet, outhouse, some awesome tree forts and "Gingerbread Lane," a winding avenue of buildings that include just about every type of building found in a respectable small town — a chapel, a school, City Hall, a Christmas house and more. There also is a cemetery, the final resting place of his charges that die at the ranch.

He also has three trailers on the property. One serves as a receiving center, one is his office and the other is his home. All feature ladders and kitty doors to allow the cats to come and go at will, and they are equipped with shelving that allows the maximum number of felines to perch in air-conditioned comfort during the hot months.

In addition, Grant has put his expertise building carports and screen rooms to good use, creating large outdoor enclosures to house cats when they first come to the ranch. When a cat is dropped off, it spends about a month in one of these corrals so it can get acclimated to the new location. The cats tend to congregate in the developed areas of the ranch and the vast majority will stay on after becoming accustomed to the Caboodle property, even though it is not fenced.

Predators such as coyotes do pose a danger, as well as snakes. Both have already killed cats who live at Caboodle. Grant's long-term plans call for installing a fence around the property to keep his charges safer.

And a climate-controlled barn "for the cats and me," he says. "I'm going to live in the loft."

As he takes visitors on a tour, Grant ticks off some of his monthly expenses: \$3,000 for food, \$500 for medicine, \$800 in vet bills, \$400 for flea preventative.

"It takes a helluva lot of money to run this place; well over \$6,000 a month," he says. "I just keep writing checks and hope the donations keep coming in."

Grant has big plans for the ranch. He wants to create a picnic grove on the property so that visitors can bring the family and visit with the felines. He also envisions a Web "cat cam" that would allow people who dropped off a cat to see how it's getting along. And he hopes to franchise the Caboodle operation in other locations.

He is supposed to earn a monthly salary of \$1,000, but doesn't always take it.

"I don't spend much on myself," he says. "The only piece of furniture I have is a recliner that I bought five years ago at Wal-Mart. I sleep in that." A bed, he explains, would just be soiled by the cats.

Most days, Grant will leave Caboodle long enough to go pick up a take-out box of food from a local dinner buffet, which he then eats, standing, surrounded by cats begging him to share. Ditto for morning coffee and doughnuts. He does make occasional runs to Jacksonville to visit his son. His daughter is in charge of maintaining the caboodleranch.com Web site, which includes information about the ranch, photos and Grant's blog, which relates tales of the cats who live there and the challenges faced by all of its denizens.

Despite the relentless work and deprivations, Grant describes his life as "perfect."

In the past, "I had the biggest house on the street when I was raising my family," he says. "All show. I had a Corvette. My wife drove a Volvo. I had a new truck for the business. I had everything, but I was miserable.

Now "I've got nothing, and I'm happier than I've ever been. Isn't it amazing?"

"I think I was too busy trying to make it perfect with money, thinking I could buy my happiness — and all of a sudden it showed up." On little cat feet.

Want to help?

Craig Grant is not accessible via e-mail.

To make a donation using Paypal, visit the Web site caboodleranch.com and click on "Donations." To mail in a donation, mail a check or money order made out to "Caboodle Ranch"; to:

Caboodle Ranch
P.O. Box 299
Ponte Vedre Beach, FL 32004

To volunteer at Caboodle Ranch, call Grant at (850) 971-4417 or (904) 377-1715.

It's Not Easy Being Feral

Searching for Ways to Help Cats Gone Wild

By Rosanne Dunkelberger

Like the fading Southern belle Blanche DuBois in "A Streetcar Named Desire," feral cats have fairly loose morals and find that they, too, "have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

Fortunately for the feral cats in our area, there are kind strangers.

While they may be genetic relatives of the lion and cougar, the "wild" cats one sees either were "or are descended from" domesticated animals. The vast majority of unowned cats can't hunt and kill enough wildlife to survive; they must have an outside source of food "usually in the form of a benevolent person or a Dumpster."

"These cats are abandoned or lost outside. They have very little or no human contact, so they revert back to a wild state," said Kerry Hyde, a Tallahassee cat behaviorist and self-styled "feral cat advocate."

Nobody knows how many stray and feral cats live here, but a census done in Gainesville estimated there were about 36,000 in Alachua county, according to Julie Levy, the "Maddie's" Professor of Shelter Medicine at the University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine.

Leon County Humane Society Executive Director Sonia White said she knows "who's to blame: "it's a human problem. Feral cats exist because people have abandoned their animals."

Most feral cats that survive kittenhood lead lives that are considerably shorter than a pet cat "about two to three years, according to most sources. Petplace.com says the lifespan of an indoor cat averages 14 years.

Unfortunately, there is no formalized system locally for dealing with feral cats. Animal Control officers "do not go out routinely to 'rodeo up' cats," said Ann English, foster-program director and front office manager for the Tallahassee-Leon County Animal Services Center. They will, however, set traps and collect trapped cats in response to citizen complaints. Any cat determined by observation and testing to be feral is considered unadoptable and is euthanized, English said. Feral cats account for "probably one-third" of the shelter's euthanizations, she estimated.

Humane aspects aside, trying to solve the problem by trapping and removing or killing all the feral cats in a community "doesn't work, and it's not even feasible," according to Levy.

"If you trap and remove ferals, you're not going to get the entire colony," English said. "They're going to proliferate more because their food source is greater."

Sanctuaries such as Craig Grant's Caboodle Ranch in Madison County aren't going to solve the feral cat problem either, she said.

"It's such a small-scale solution 'they're always full," English said. "There's also a huge risk that they can deteriorate 'especially if it's a one-man show. Any organization that relies on one person is doomed to fail. If the key person or their key funder disappears, it collapses."

Locally, much of the work of helping feral cats is done by individuals "those who leave food out for neighborhood strays, as well as a few committed individuals such as Hyde, who accidentally found her niche about six years ago.

"I moved to a not-so-great part of town," she recalled. "We had about 30 feral cats and kittens out there." At the time, "I didn't even know what a feral cat was. I started leaving food out. As winter approached, I found a kitten that had frozen to death, then I found a second one.

"I always felt like it was my problem, so I just figured 'I'll spay and neuter them," Hyde said. After catching and paying out of her own pocket to have them altered, "I tried to get them into an adoption program, but I learned that when they're not friendly with people, they're not going to be adopted." The advice she received at the time was to "just let 'em go."

Hyde had inadvertently stumbled upon the concept of "trap, neuter, return" (TNR), a method of reducing the feral cat population by eliminating the cats' prolific reproduction process. Cats are trapped and sterilized, then released back where they came from. TNR cats can be recognized because they've been "tipped" "that is, the top of one ear was trimmed off, indicating it has been altered. While not necessarily new "it's been going on for about 20 years," Hyde said "TNR is still not common knowledge.

“It’s more been under the radar, but it’s all over the world,” she said.

Through much trial and error, Hyde has perfected the TNR process and a year ago created a nonprofit organization, “Meow or Never for Ferals,” to spread the word. She started doing the trapping herself, but it became too onerous, so instead she offers a 24/7 advice line and has posted videos on the group’s MySpace site offering instruction in such things as setting a trap and “urine-proofing” your car.

While the Humane Society does not have a formal program to help feral cats, “We work closely with those who are already doing it,” White said. One of the most intrepid is retired Department of Health administrator Jim Croushorn. He volunteers around the city, trapping cats in feral colonies and then taking them to be neutered. Programs within the Humane Society pay for the cats’ surgeries and other medical care. Many of the kittens under 10 weeks old that he traps can be “socialized” in foster homes and added to the group’s list of adoptable animals. Croushorn has been a one-man operation for two years now; in the first 10 months of 2008, he trapped 90 adult cats and 80 kittens.

“I’m somewhat passionate,” he said. And while he has a great affection for the cats, Croushorn insists that what he does is really a “people project”;

“It’s amazing how the network works. It’s not structured; it’s all informal,” he said. One example of the network in action is a group of people dedicated to finding country homes for feral cats that can’t be re-released where they were trapped. Croushorn, Hyde and others work together to make “barn cats” out of these felines, by giving them to people with barns so that they can earn their keep hunting rodents.

But there are still many needs. Croushorn is sheltering 20 rescued cats that have nowhere to go, including several kittens that have grown up to be young adults in his care. Unlike the Animal Services Center, the Humane Society does not house cats in a single facility. Instead, about 250 animals — including dogs, rabbits, birds and other small mammals in addition to cats — are being cared for by about 85 foster families, White said. More animals could join the program if more people agreed to be foster families, she added.

While feral cats probably will always be with us, many things can be done in conjunction with TNR to slow down their proliferation and the suffering of cats living in the wild.

Much of Levy’s work at UF has been paid for with a grant from Maddie’s Fund, which is dedicated to making the United States a “no-kill nation”;

In one two-year-long “intensive” research project, in conjunction with the local animal control, a team was sent out to canvass a ZIP code area that brought the most animals into Alachua County’s shelter. There was a “very dramatic decrease in admissions,” Levy said, after the workers spoke with residents and offered solutions (such as free spay and neuter) to those who otherwise might have asked for problem cats to be picked up by animal control.

“If you have staff that can go out and say, ‘Let me help you solve the problem without harming the cat,’ almost always we can come up with a lifesaving solution,” Levy said.

UF also offers a once-a-month clinic called “Operation Catnip,” in which faculty and about 80 volunteers do a mass, free sterilization and vaccination of feral and stray cats. In a recent month, said Levy, 326 cats were treated and released.

In August 2008, the group First Coast No More Homeless Pets began the Feral Freedom Program in conjunction with Jacksonville’s animal control to keep feral cats out of the shelter — saving them from euthanization. Twice a day, six days a week, all feral cats that have been trapped are picked up from a location outside of the shelter. They are then spayed and neutered, vaccinated, treated for ear mites and fleas, microchipped and returned to their original location. As of November, more than 900 cats had been treated.

The program is hoping to sterilize 5,000 cats under this program with grant money totaling \$420,000, said Rick DuCharme, president of FCNMHP.

In the meantime, in Leon County, the “catvocates” continue their work, trapping, neutering, vaccinating, releasing, socializing and otherwise helping the region’s feral cats.

“We’re making a dent, but it will be a long time before it’s solved,” Croushorn said.

Local Feral Cat Rescue Groups

Friends of Gypsy
friendsofgypsy.org, (850) 926-1002
Contact: Dr. Janet A. Thompson

ECAH Animals, Inc.
ecahanimals.org, (850)668-1004

Leon County Humane Society
lchs.info, (850) 224-9193
Contact: Dr. Jim Croushorn

It's Meow or Never for Ferals
myspace.com/ItsMeowOrNeverForFerals
(850) 576-2676
Contact: Dr. Kerry Hyde, Cat Behaviorist

Gadsden County Humane Society
gadsdenhumane.org, (850) 539-0505
Contact: Don Gilbar