

Matilda, A Feral Cat Experiment – by Cathy Willcox

March, 1991. I trapped you, full grown, wild eyed & hissing. Filthy and bloated yet strikingly beautiful. When it came time to hand you over to the vet for your feral cat test, spay and ear clip, I hesitated... Falling victim to beauty, I said suddenly: "I'll pay – just don't tip her ear – and give her the works, will ya?"



Now what to do with you, wild thing? I can't keep you, I have too many cats! Well, just for a little while, until you're tame. Then with your beauty, someone will adopt you for sure! Since you're a little Mad Ball, into the storage room you go. Plenty of boxes to climb up on, windows to look out of and hidey-spaces to hide. It's up to you now. I'll call you Matilda.

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Matilda lived in a corner on the floor in my storage room, behind lots of stuff. Although she looked pretty soft, I couldn't touch a hair on her body. After two weeks, she escaped into the field next door. No amount of coaxing or cajoling would bring her in on her own. Had to catch her with the use of my neighbor's handy fishing net. After another month or so, she escaped again. This time, I found her under my car every evening at dusk. I managed to scruff her, only to be attacked – my shoulder scratched and bitten. So I fed her there and continued to call her from the front door. After 7 days of calling, she came into the house on her own! This was a landmark in our relationship because she made a conscious decision to live in my house. I noted small improvements after that -- almost daily, though I couldn't touch her for nearly 3 months. Many improvements were made due to her love of Trader Joe's Tuna for Cats.



2 Months Another tragedy! One morning I found her limping seriously on her back right leg. The vet says she completely blew out her kneecap somehow. How? is the question. Nothing to do except see if she heals.

3 Months She limps less but now I wonder if she'll ever be adoptable because of this? I can only pet her with one finger on her back, near her tail. She comes into the kitchen at dinner to eat with the other cats, but not before batting them a few times. Then afterwards retreats to her "room."



4-5 Months Besides coming out every day at dinner time, she comes into the kitchen periodically to see what's going on. Still bats at the other cats though. I pick her up about a foot and immediately put her down – several times per day.

6 Months I can pet her and brush her on the back only. When she gives me that warning

meow, I back off, then try again later. I pick her up and move her across the floor a few feet or up onto a chair, then immediately let go. I can tell she's starting to get desensitized to being touched & handled. She has taken to rolling on her back and twisting on the kitchen floor as if to say "Look at how cute I am."

7 Months I picked her up too high or too fast and she bit my nose. Very traumatic for the both of us! She comes into the main part of the house now, but I suspect it's because she found another water dish. She has taken up the job of water bowl guard!



9 Months She has learned that since I back off immediately when she gives her warning meow, she doesn't have to lash out with her claws – woo hoo! Obviously this is a big win for me. She is very companionable toward my bird and sometimes likes to "hang out" with her. I wonder how she survived in that horrible backyard – she seems to be so "low prey", so I know she never hunted any dinner...



1 Year I can totally pet & brush her back, can touch her stomach and her feet for about three seconds and I can pick her up in my arms and pet her there a couple of minutes. She still rarely lets the water dish out of her sight and often sleeps next to it.

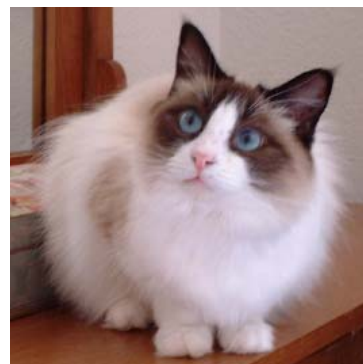
18 Months She'll let me pick her up and pet her almost like a normal cat. Although not exactly sociable with the other cats, she doesn't "bat" them anymore. She plays by herself,

existing in some kind of parallel cat universe.

Now after **1 year and 9 months**, although Matilda doesn't initiate any closeness with me, she loves to be picked up, hugged and cuddled. She licks my face and hands. I can touch any part of her body. She rolls over to have her tummy petted and even other people can pick her up! She'll sleep on my lap or next to me for a long time – if I put her there. She moves about the house with ease and hardly ever wants to go outside. Her coat is absolutely luxurious. And yesterday, for the first time ever, she joined in with two of my other cats for the fishing pole game!

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When I think of you in your younger years, dear Kitty 'Tilda - you're hungry, thirsty, sick, filthy and scared. Neglected in someone's backyard, with never a kind human touch. Give you up? I don't think so. No one else could appreciate how far we've come. We worked hard together to build this friendship and we're buds now.



Cathy Willcox
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June, 2008 Notes

I've never taken in a fully adult feral cat before, had no idea if they were tameable at all – and I've never been more amazed at how trust and patience can completely transform an animal from pathetic to perfectly wonderful. Matilda is a totally indoor kitty by her own choice – her world is in the living room. An apartment in the stereo cabinet, just steps away from the bathroom litter box, but more importantly not more than 6 feet from the water dish. I think she'll always need the security of being near the water – it must have been very scarce in her former life.

She's been my kitty companion for 7 years now, and I'm still seeing progress! This spring she let me clip all 10 of her front nails *at once!* (it used to be one, then two, then 3-4 at a time...). Also, just 3 weeks ago, I was sitting on the couch watching TV one evening and she came over, looked up at me, jumped up on the couch and curled up on my lap. Although completely loving when I pick her up, that was *the first time* she initiated a cuddle session! Matilda is very playful, but she's not on the same plane as the other cats. She never interacts directly with them, though is in no way hostile towards them. She plays with light and shadows – at around 10 a.m. the light coming into the kitchen window throws a shadow of the hummingbird feeder onto the refrigerator. She's always there at that time, swatting hummingbird shadows. Or at night when the lights are on, she chases the shadows of the other cats when they walk by. They think she's nuts!

I still have the scars of her scratches to remind me of when I pushed her too fast. Not everything can be a quick fix or even should be! You do get great rewards after a long journey if you're able to celebrate the small steps forward, be patient, keep a sense of humor, grasp the big picture and understand that animals are not there to serve our emotional needs! It's nice if they do, but I think doing a kind thing for them without expectations, especially if it's difficult, helps us on our journey towards becoming more generous, enlightened, better people. *And it just feels good!*