In the dilemma discussed in the April issue of In Practice, a feral cat had been brought into your practice. It had a simple fracture of the tibia that was eminently fixable, but the cat was feral to the point of being unhandleable. What was the best course of action? (IP, April 2016, vol 38, pp 198-199). David Mills suggested that there were three options: to euthanase; to perform surgical internal stabilisation followed by a rest period, then rehome or release; or to amputate the limb and then rehome or release. None of these options was ideal but a possible solution might be to consider the cat’s values. While some suffering in any veterinary intervention was inevitable, this cat’s suffering could be prolonged and severe. Consideration of the cat’s values and applying ‘critical anthropomorphism’ might help to crystallise thoughts about the animal’s welfare and interests. With the potential for severe suffering with no end gain, euthanasia might be the most ethically appropriate option in this case.

Comments on the dilemma in the April issue: Too feral to save?

If we start from the bottom line that this cat would probably opt to live rather than die if it could express its wishes, and that it has much right to life as any one of us in similar circumstances, the question is not to agonise over whether it would prefer to be killed than caged for six weeks, but whether we are prepared to go to the trouble of finding suitable carers for it both during and after treatment. As a past chairman of the Cat Action Trust (a charity with the aim of promoting the welfare of feral cats), I have treated numerous feral cats. I have been astonished on many occasions at the lack of understanding of many veterinary practices of how to handle them while conscious, don’t keep them in a standard hospital cage. There is no space here to describe the equipment needed, but practices should establish links with their local Cat Action Trust branch or one of the many other rescue organisations with expertise (e.g., Celia Hammond Animal Trust, Cornwall and Devon Animal Rescue). Even if not local, any of these will know of a network of organisations who are equipped to deal with feral cats and will be able to rehome them to supervised sites (e.g., stables and farms) belonging to responsible owners.

I also noted that the scenario stated that the cat was ‘feral to the point of being almost unhandleable’. Trust me, a true feral is 100 per cent unhandleable! A true feral is an animal which has had no contact with human beings. Few vets would attempt to handle any other wild carnivore without proper equipment. They would liaise with or take the animal to a wildlife hospital. But because cats are generally a domesticated species, it seems to be erroneously assumed that ferals can be handled in the same way as domesticated cats.

Furthermore, many domestic cats which have been abandoned and lived rough for some time are (often with good reason) very wary of human contact and difficult to handle; these are often mistakenly labelled ‘feral’. This cat seems to fall into this category, and, in time, will readjust to human contact.

To conclude, I want to stress once again that neither the majority of veterinary practices or large charity clinics are equipped to deal with feral cats and any practice being brought one should make an effort to locate local charities who are. Anyone who would like further advice is welcome to email me at the address below.

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