

# Outdoor Cat Colony Fall Checklist

A Comprehensive Guide from **GILUFUNDS**  
for Community Cat Caretakers.

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## Introduction

Preparing outdoor cat colonies for fall **is crucial for ensuring community cats survive the cooler months ahead.** This checklist provides step-by-step guidance for colony caretakers to transition their cats safely **from summer warmth to winter preparation.**

**Why This Matters:** Cats who enter winter in good condition with proper shelter and nutrition have significantly higher survival rates. Your proactive fall preparation literally saves lives.

**Timeline:** Begin preparations in late August through September, before the first frost in your area.

## Pre-Fall Assessment (August - Early September)

### Colony Health Check

- **Count all cats in your colony** and document any new arrivals.
- **Photo document each cat** for identification and health tracking.
- **Note body condition** - identify any underweight cats needing extra support
- **Check for injuries or signs of illness** that need attention before cold weather.
- **Assess pregnant females - late-season pregnancies** require special planning; we recommend spay abort as there are already too many cats.

### Shelter Inventory

- **Inspect existing shelters** for damage from summer storms.
- **Count available sleeping spaces** - you need at least one shelter per cat plus extras.
- **Evaluate shelter locations** for fall wind patterns and drainage.
- **Remove summer bedding** that may be moldy or pest-infested.
- **Test entrance sizes** - openings should be 6-8 inches (big enough for cats, too small for dogs).

**Critical Note:** Never assume cats will share shelters peacefully. Provide 25% more shelters than your cat count to prevent conflicts.

## Shelter Preparation & Weatherproofing

### Essential Shelter Modifications

#### Bedding: Straw vs. Hay (This is Critical!)

- **Use straw ONLY** - wheat straw, oat straw, or barley straw
- **Never use hay** - hay retains moisture and can freeze solid or become moldy
- **Never use blankets or towels** - these absorb moisture and lose insulating properties when wet

**Why Straw Works:** Straw is hollow inside, creating air pockets that trap warm air. When it gets wet, it dries quickly and maintains its shape. Hay is solid and becomes a soggy, cold mess.

### Straw Application:

- Fill shelters 3-4 inches deep with fresh straw.
- Replace monthly or when it becomes compacted.
- Store extra straw in a dry location.
- Source straw from farm supply stores (usually \$3-6 per bale).

### Insulation Upgrades

- Add rigid foam insulation to shelter walls (use pet-safe adhesives).
- Install reflective emergency blankets on ceiling areas (shiny side facing down).
- Caulk any gaps where cold air might enter.
- Raise shelters 3-4 inches off the ground using pallets or blocks.

### Entrance Protection

- Install wind baffles - small overhangs that deflect rain and snow.
- Create tunnel entrances using PVC pipe or flexible ducting.
- Face entrances away from prevailing winter winds.
- Ensure two exit routes per shelter when possible (safety requirement).

## Waterproofing Essentials

### Bedding: Straw vs. Hay (This is Critical!)

- Apply waterproof sealant to all roof surfaces.
- Install gutters or drip edges to direct water away from entrances (for shelters in barns, porches, or covered areas).
- Elevate shelters off the ground using pallets or bricks to prevent flooding in exposed areas like empty lots or alleys.
- Use waterproof materials like heavy-duty plastic or tarps to shield shelters from rain and snow.
- Add windbreaks such as bales of straw or wooden barriers to protect shelters in open, windy locations.

- Check ground drainage around shelters - add gravel if water pool.
- Tilt shelter floors slightly toward entrances for drainage.

**Pro Tip:** Test your waterproofing by spraying shelters with a hose. If any water gets inside, fix it now before winter storms arrive.

## Food & Water Management

### Fall Feeding Adjustments

#### Increased Nutrition Needs

- Increase food portions by 10-15% as cats need more calories for body heat.
- Switch to higher-calorie food if budget allows (kitten food works well).
- Add wet food 2-3 times per week for extra hydration and calories.
- Monitor individual cats - some may need more food than others.

**Why Separate Food from Sleep Areas:** Food attracts wildlife and pests. If raccoons or opossums find food near shelters, they might take over the warm spaces, leaving cats without safe sleeping spots. Additionally, cats instinctively avoid sleeping where they eat as a safety measure. Placing food inside shelters can discourage cats from using them for rest.

#### Strategic Feeding Locations

- Keep food AWAY from sleeping areas - this prevents attracting rodents, raccoons, and other wildlife to shelters.
- Create dedicated feeding stations at least 10 feet from shelters.
- Use elevated platforms to keep food off wet ground.
- Install covers over feeding areas to protect from rain.

#### Weather-Resistant Feeding Setup

- Use heavy ceramic or metal bowls that won't blow away
- Install feeding station roofs to keep food dry
- Schedule feeding times before storms when possible
- Store emergency food supplies in waterproof containers

### Water Management for Cooler Weather

#### Preventing Freezing

- Install heated water bowls designed for outdoor use (look for "farm grade" models).
- Use dark-colored water containers - they absorb more heat from sunlight.
- Place water in wind-protected areas - moving air accelerates freezing.
- Check water twice daily once temperatures drop below 40°F.

**Heat Pad Safety:** If using heated water bowls or shelter heating pads, ensure they are:

- Specifically designed for outdoor use (weatherproof rating)
- UL-listed for safety (fire prevention)
- Plugged into GFCI outlets (shock prevention)
- Cord-protected from chewing with conduit or cord covers

Never use heating pads designed for indoor human use outdoors - they can cause fires or electrocution.

## Health Monitoring & Seasonal Care

### Weekly Health Observations

- Document eating habits - note any cats eating less than usual.
- Watch for respiratory symptoms - coughing, sneezing, runny eyes/nose.
- Monitor mobility - older cats may show arthritis signs in cool weather.
- Check for parasites - fleas remain active until first hard freeze
- Note behavioral changes - increased sleeping, less grooming, or isolation.

### Preventive Care Priorities

#### Parasite Management

- Continue flea prevention until nighttime temperatures stay below 35°F.
- Watch for increased ear scratching (ear mites spread in crowded conditions).
- Monitor for excessive scratching or visible skin irritation.
- Check for ticks after cats spend time in tall grass or wooded areas.

### When to Seek Veterinary Care

#### Immediate attention needed for:

- Cat not eating for 24+ hours.
- Difficulty breathing or mouth breathing.
- Visible injuries or limping.
- Discharge from eyes or nose lasting more than 3 days.
- Vomiting or diarrhea for more than 24 hours.
- Any cat who stops grooming themselves.

#### Special Considerations for Senior Cats

- Provide extra shelter options - older cats need more warmth
- Monitor arthritis symptoms - stiffness, reluctance to jump
- Consider elevated feeding stations for easier access
- Ensure easy shelter access - ramps instead of jumps when possible.

## TNVR Planning for Fall

### Optimal Fall Timing

- Plan surgeries for September-October - cooler weather aids recovery.
- Avoid trapping during storms - stressed cats recover more slowly.
- Schedule before first frost - easier trapping in mild weather.
- Check females for pregnancy - late-season litters still possible.

### Pre-Winter Population Control

- Prioritize unaltered cats - prevent spring breeding explosion.
- Focus on newcomers - recent arrivals may not be spayed/neutered.
- Document all cats' status - know which cats still need surgery.
- Coordinate with local groups - share resources and transportation.

### Post-Surgery Recovery Planning

- Prepare recovery spaces in protected areas away from main colony.
- Stock recovery supplies - blankets, carriers, heating pads.
- Plan for extended recovery - cooler weather may slow healing.
- Arrange backup care - have helpers available for 2-3 days post-surgery.

## Emergency Preparedness

### Storm Planning

- Monitor weather forecasts regularly from October onward  
Secure loose shelters with stakes or weights.
- Stock emergency food for 5-7 days (storms can delay normal feeding).
- Prepare flashlights for evening feeding checks.
- Identify emergency shelters - garages, sheds, or basements cats can access.

### Emergency Supply Kit

#### Keep readily available:

- 7 days of dry cat food in waterproof containers.
- Manual can opener and canned food.
- Gallon jugs of water (frozen pipes may cut off water supply).

- Battery-powered flashlight with extra batteries.
- First aid kit with basic wound care supplies
- Contact list - veterinarians, rescue groups, emergency contacts
- Cash - for emergency vet bills when cards aren't accepted

### Post-Storm Assessment

- Check all cats within 24 hours after storms.
- Inspect shelters for damage or displaced cats.
- Clear blocked entrances from fallen debris.
- Replace wet bedding immediately.
- Document any missing cats and expand search area.

## Monthly Task Calendar

### September Tasks

- Complete shelter winterization.
- Install heated water systems.
- Switch to higher-calorie food.
- Schedule final TNVR surgeries.
- Stock emergency supplies.

### October Tasks

- First straw replacement.
- Test all heating elements.
- Increase food portions.
- Document cat health status.
- Prepare for time change (earlier darkness).

### November Tasks

- Ensure straw in shelters is in good condition to insulate cats and keep them warm. If the shelter feels empty, refill it before snowstorms and freezing weather begin.
- Replace straw bedding if needed.
- Check shelter structural integrity.
- Review emergency contact list. Stock up on supplies before holiday closures.

## Supply Lists & Resources

### Essential Supplies Checklist

#### Shelter Materials:

- **Straw bales** (wheat, oat, or barley - NOT hay).
- **Rigid foam** insulation boards.
- **Weatherproof wood** sealant.
- **Caulk** and caulk gun.
- **Reflective emergency** blankets.
- **PVC pipe** for entrance tunnels.

#### Feeding Supplies:

- **High-calorie dry** cat food
- **Waterproof food storage** containers
- **Heavy ceramic or metal** food bowls
- **Platform materials** for feeding stations
- **Tarps or roofing** for weather protection

#### Water Management:

- Heated water bowls (farm-grade).
- Extension cords rated for outdoor use.
- GFCI adapters.
- Dark-colored water containers.
- Cord protectors/conduit.

#### Health & Safety:

- Digital thermometer.
- Basic first aid supplies.
- Flea prevention products.
- Emergency contact cards.
- Flashlights and batteries.

#### Budget Planning

##### Estimated Costs (per 5-cat colony):

- Straw bedding (4 bales): \$15-25
- Heated water bowl: \$30-50
- Insulation materials: \$25-40
- Emergency food supply: \$20-30
- Total seasonal preparation: \$90-145

#### Money-Saving Tips:

- Partner with other caretakers to buy supplies in bulk.
- Ask farm supply stores about end-of-season straw discounts.
- Check social media for free or discounted shelter materials.
- Connect with local rescue groups for supply sharing.

### Additional Resources

#### Emergency Contacts Template

**Your veterinarian:**

**TNR organization:**

**Emergency vet clinic:**

**Colony caretaker backup:**

**Local animal control:**

#### Supply Sources:

- Farm supply stores (straw, heated bowls).
- Hardware stores (insulation, weatherproofing).
- Pet stores (food, health supplies).
- Online retailers (specialized colony supplies).

## Final Notes

**Remember that every colony is different.** Urban cats face different challenges than rural cats, and large colonies need different strategies than small groups. Adapt these guidelines to your specific situation while focusing on the core principles: **warmth, nutrition, health monitoring, and emergency preparedness.**

Your commitment to consistent fall preparation **makes the difference between survival and suffering for community cats.** The time and effort you invest now creates a foundation for healthy, stable colonies that thrive through winter and beyond.

### **Need help connecting with a local TNR or cat rescue group?**

Contact us, and we'll be happy to assist you.

We also recommend joining online communities of colony caretakers to share knowledge and encouragement.

This guide is provided by **GILUFUNDS** as part of our commitment to supporting community cat caretakers with practical, life-saving information. **Every successful colony preparation helps reduce feline suffering and supports sustainable community cat management.**