

An unnecessary tragedy

Forever Friends Cat Rescue is a nonprofit organization based in Altona. We operate with volunteers, donations, and support from our community. Our mission is to rescue the lost, abandoned, and homeless cats in our community. We are dedicated to the care and wellbeing of our local feral cat population and to help educate the public on the need to spay/neuter pets, the prevention of animal cruelty, and the importance of responsible pet ownership.

We are grateful for this opportunity to use this column in a number of ways: featuring cats that are available for adoption, sharing stories of cats that have already passed through our rescue (happy ones and sad ones, because those happen too), announcing fundraising events, and providing educational content.

We first became aware of Washington in the spring of 2020. With a face that was easy to recognize, he became a bit of a celebrity cat with our volunteers and team members. Washington was feral, meaning he was a wild cat living his life hunting in the nighttime shadows. He was a very healthy-looking male who showed up during mating season, and he was busy! We have him on camera at three different feral feeding stations. Eyewitness reports have him traveling from one end of town to the other.

It was our hope to capture and neuter him, so that spring we set up a monitored live trap at the first location he was spotted; but there was no way he was going into a trap. He just looked at us and walked away, not to be seen again until he showed up in fall, clear across town. We tried a more stealth approach, but he managed to evade us at every turn. If he only knew we wanted to make his life easier with a neuter and vet treatment, maybe he would have cooperated. We would have released him after his neuter, to live his life as he pleased. He would no longer want to fight other males, mark his territory or yowl for females.

Unfortunately, Washington had no trust in people. He was smart to change his routine often, leaving us waiting for him in one yard, while he was across town in another.

During the winter, he seemed to put down some roots and lived in one of the winter shelters that our rescue provides for cats like him. With a human caretaker to provide food and water, he stayed in that heated shelter, cozied up in the fresh straw. Early spring trapping season started again, and he was seen with many girlfriends. We were determined to capture him this year, as soon as we finished catching all the female cats he was sniffing around. The females always have priority during spring trapping to try and stop the onslaught of unwanted kitten calls we get every spring through late fall.

Two weeks ago, we tried to trap Washington again. We could see that he was not as healthy as when we first spotted him last year. He looked like he could really benefit from some vet treatments, along with his neuter. This time he surprised us by staying in one area and getting himself trapped with minimal resistance. When we got a closer look at him, we could see he was really skinny and had fight wounds all over his body that had not healed. His mouth was ulcerated and his eyes were glazed. We feared the worst. Our vet did a blood test that confirmed our fears, Washington had FIV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus). This is an untreatable virus that destroys a cat's immune system. Cats infected with FIV become vulnerable to infections and often die from simple ailments, but not before they pass the virus on to other cats. Because we cannot allow an FIV positive, feral cat free roam in our community, Washington was euthanized.

Our rescue is devastated. He was a well-known feral cat. His caretaker is devastated. She had been taking care of him for months. We ask ourselves, where did he get it? Was it from another homeless cat? Could it have been from an owned cat that is allowed free roam outside? Was it from your cat? Had we managed to trap him and neuter him sooner, maybe he wouldn't have gotten the disease, which is often passed between fighting male cats. We also ask, did Washington give it to any of his girlfriends? What about the kittens he sired? What about your cat, if you allow it free roam?

We ask all those reading this column, please spay and neuter your cats and save rescues and humane societies some heart break. The work we do is not easy and it generates enough heart aches. Also, please don't allow your cats free roam outside. It comes at a high cost to you and to us, and especially to cats like Washington, who pay the ultimate price with their lives.

If you would like more information on spay and neuter programs in our area, please contact us.

Pembina Valley Humane Society and the Winnipeg Humane Society offer subsidized spay and neuter programs every year. For more information on their programs please visit: <https://pvhsociety.ca> and <https://winnipeghumanesociety.ca>

