



# Feral Night in Belleville

Story and photos by Christopher King

Outside Thrasher's Feeds Ltd. in west end Belleville are a few food bowls with pet food and water. Some bricks have been removed from the base of the building to reveal a space underneath the store. Inside are a few blankets and a blue tote box.

During the day there are signs of life.

Thrasher's is located at the intersection of Coleman and Harriet streets. It is a busy intersection in an industrial area. Transport trucks pass by as part of their regular routes to and from the warehouses and depots.

At night, the picture changes.

All that remains is the orange glow and buzzing of street lamps.

At approximately 9 p.m. every night, Grace Thompson drives to Thrasher's with food and water.

The moment her car pulls into the lot, cats jump out from underneath Thrasher's and come running across the street and from all corners. The sound of her car signals their feeding time.

From a distance, these cats look healthy like any normal house cat and their temperament reveals little about their true nature.

Only when you get close or try to make contact is the picture made clear. The cats are incredibly skittish- they are feral.

"A feral cat is very afraid. When I put the food down for

them, yes they're anxious to come to eat, but if they happen to hear a noise that they're unfamiliar with, it scares them and they run," Thompson said.

Once a cat is feral, their nature changes irreversibly.

"A feral cat will be feral if it has not been in contact [with humans] within the first six weeks of its birth," Thompson said. "Within that six weeks, if it has not been held by human beings, it will not be domesticated."

With Thompson, the cats are not as skittish, but they still won't let her handle them. After feeding, Thompson stays behind to maintain a level of contact and interaction with the cats. She talks to them and on occasion

she can pet them, though they quickly retreat or swat at her hands.

"I usually stay around for another five or 10 minutes, whatever time I have, and I just interact with them. Some of them I give a little pet or talk to them and make them feel like they're my cats. I still want them to feel that they're still being cared for and they're loved by me and make them happy and that makes me happy that I do that for them," Thompson said.

The feeding routine ends with Thompson cleaning their food bowls and pouring in drinking water for them. Within 30 minutes, Thompson is gone and the cats return to their normal

lives.

In her home, Thompson keeps only three cats.

"I know that they are safe where they are living, they have the hole underground. For me to go in there and try to make them domesticated...I respect where they are, they were born there as kittens and that's the environment they are used to," Thompson said.

"I try to show them that I care for them, I do love them. But I don't want to infringe on their space as a feral cat. I let them be as they are, but I cannot change that, so they remain feral," Thompson said.

Thompson has been feeding the Thrasher's cats for about four

years. Thompson was notified by an acquaintance that there were kittens running around the streets near Thrasher's.

"I got hooked, once I saw these cats running around and no food and the kitten was filthy, dirty and malnourished... And then I thought, 'This is ridiculous, and someone needs to do something about this.'"

Thompson attributes her love for cats to her childhood growing up on a farm.

"There was always barn cats around, I just like them," Thompson said. "I like the feeling that I'm protecting them, that I'm providing food for them... It's a nice feeling to be able to provide a cat a good life."



Top: Grace Thompson feeds the cats in separate piles. The feral cats arrange their pecking order themselves once the food is put down.

Middle: Grace Thompson feeds over a dozen outdoor cats every day, but at her home, she only keeps three cats. Buzz was a rescue cat that Thompson brought after she noticed he had an eye infection.

Bottom left: Grace Thompson places food and water out near a warehouse on Wallbridge Crescent. Thompson was notified by a local about a possible family of cats living outside with kittens.



Lower right: Grace Thompson uses a blend of wet and dry food to feed the feral cats



Bottom right: A feral cat chooses a pile of food that Grace Thompson put down. The cat in the background is waiting for its turn at the pile of food, suggesting it might be lower down in the pecking order.