

WINTER CAT SHELTERS

by Pat McNeilly, StreetCats Volunteer, formerly of Michigan (so she knows winter!)

It seems every year I hear from someone who started feeding a poor, lost kitty that showed up in their yard in the spring. As winter approaches, they realize they have a cat who continues to come for food. Unlike the hummingbirds who conveniently leave for the winter, if you've been feeding a cat, you have an animal dependent on you. But besides food, this kitty will need shelter from the cold, wind, snow or sleet. Don't worry - building a winter shelter for outdoor cats can be both simple and inexpensive.

There are many ways to build a shelter. Here are some ideas for an easy, quick, and inexpensive shelter.

- Styrofoam bins. These can be found at various stores like Target, Walmart, etc. or come as large cooler.
- Rubbermaid™ plastic storage bins with removable lids. It's important the brand is Rubbermaid™; otherwise, the plastic walls may crack in cold temperatures.

All good shelter designs consist of these qualities:

- Strong insulation – needed to trap body heat. Use **STRAW**, not hay or blankets, towels, etc. Blankets draw body heat out of the cat and wet cats can freeze to the blanket in freezing temperatures.
- Minimal air space – a smaller interior area means that less heat is needed to keep the cats warm.
- Smaller shelters can be heated by only one or two cats. Larger shelters with only one or two cats inside will remain cold. Two smaller shelters are better than one large one.

Make the door as small as possible.

- Cats need an opening of only about 5.5 or 6 inches in diameter, or the width of their whiskers.
- A small door discourages larger, bolder animals, such as raccoons, from entering.
- A smaller opening keeps in more heat.
- If there is a need for an escape door, do not cut holes directly across from each other, as this creates a draft.

Don't place the shelter directly on the cold ground.

- Use two 2/4s or patio bricks to raise it off the ground and place straw underneath.
- Rain won't splash up through an above-the-ground door.
- Snow is less likely to trap the cats by blocking an above-the-ground door.
- If dogs are a threat, place your shelter behind a fence where the dogs can't get in.
- Have the entrance face a wall so only cats can get in and out.
- All shelters and feeding stations should be out of sight, no matter how friendly the area may appear. Place between bushes or behind a shed.

TO ASSEMBLE:

- If you found a thick styrofoam box you can use that alone but turn the box upside down so the bottom becomes the top. Place the lid as the floor and secure with waterproof tape, wrapping it around to seal the edges.
- A thinner walled styrofoam box should be placed into a Rubbermaid™ plastic storage bin. You can stuff the sides around the styrofoam with straw. You can also just use another smaller plastic bin in place of the styrofoam. If using a thinner styrofoam contained inside a tote then keep it right side up so you can remove the lids to replace straw periodically.
 - Start by cutting a 6" diameter hole in the tote to act as an entrance. I prefer placing the entrance on the wide side, off center near the end. This prevents wind blowing in on the cat. Place **STRAW** in the bottom of the tote.
 - Insert your styrofoam cooler or smaller plastic bin into the tote and cut a matching 6" diameter hole to match the tote. Stuff **STRAW** inside the styrofoam cooler and tuck more between the cooler and tote for extra insulation.
 - Add your Styrofoam lid and secure in place with a few pieces of duct tape.
 - Place more **STRAW** on top of cooler then put tote lid on tightly.
 - That's all there is to it. In Michigan, I lined the cooler with Mylar. That's probably not necessary in locations with milder winters.

The main thing to remember is to build something that will keep the cat dry. If water gets into the shelter it is not going to keep the cat comfortable and warm. **Stuff with a lot of straw.** Cats love to burrow down into it. NEVER put food or water inside the shelter. Place patio bricks on top to keep the shelter steady in the wind. Good luck and bless you for building a feral/stray shelter.

Here is a picture I found online but I would cut the doorway on the side of the tote as noted in this article.

