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For **motherless kittens**, spring's a desperate time; Volunteers save many unweaned cats from euthanasia at shelters.

BYLINE: Carla Hall, Times Staff Writer

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In the iconography of cuteness, few things hold greater heart-melting sway than kittens.

Hallmark, the world's largest greeting card company, owns 1,230 images of kittens and has put at least some of them on 894 products in the past decade. Corbis, a leading stock photography source, offers more than 1,400 images of kittens online for licensing. And ratemykitten.com proclaims it has posted 117,179 photos of people's kittens.

But in the real world of urban Los Angeles, where the biology of cats, the human acceptance of outdoor felines and the shortage of surrogate cat mothers all intersect, the story is not so cute. In the 12 months ending March 31, city shelters put to death 5,622 unweaned kittens. That's slightly more than twice the number of pit bulls -- possibly the most reviled dog on the planet -- that were euthanized during the same period.

Los Angeles County, which takes in far more animals than the city, has its own grim statistics.

The county's Department of Animal Care & Control killed 7,994 unweaned kittens in the fiscal year that ran from July 1, 2005, to June 30, 2006.

April is the start of the cruelest months if you are an unweaned feline -- a kitten incapable of surviving without a nursing mother or human intervention. L.A. Animal Services statistics for the last six years show that the shelter intake of unweaned kittens increases dramatically in April, spikes in May and generally stays high through September.

"This is kitten season and it's a terrible time of the year for every shelter," says Marcia Mayeda, director of Animal Care & Control for Los Angeles County. "There are a number of animals that adapt to make sure babies are born in spring so they don't die in the cold. That's why all of a sudden we are overwhelmed with kittens."

County and city shelters have foster programs that train volunteers in the care of unweaned kittens, but the ultimate solution to the problem of the kitten overpopulation, Mayeda said, is spaying and neutering cats and changing human attitudes. She added: "I think there are so many cats because they haven't been given the same consideration as dogs -- from an animal welfare standpoint and from a public moral and ethical perspective."

When packs of dogs roam the streets, Mayeda said, people sound the alarm. "There are feral cats roaming around, but they don't bother anyone."

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Cheri Shankar, a founder of Shelter Animals of Los Angeles, a nonprofit group that raises funds for local shelters, added: "People are afraid of being attacked by a pack of dogs; people are not afraid of being attacked by cats. And people have a perception of cats as being independent and not needing people so much. They can go out and catch their own food."

Nothing could be less true in the case of neonatal kittens whose eyes don't even open until they are 1 to 2 weeks old.

The shelters also cope with neonatal canines but the number of puppies turned in is a fraction of the kittens that arrive.

Saying they lack the staff to administer the intensive care the newborns need, shelters created foster programs that train volunteers to feed and care for the kittens for several weeks until they are weaned and ready to be returned to the shelter for adoption.

"We don't obligate anybody to keep them," said Deborah Knaan, assistant general manager of operations for the city's Animal Services. "If someone says after two days, 'This is more than I can deal with,' you can return them to the shelter."

The care is demanding. Kittens have to be fed with a tiny bottle of special formula (unweaned kittens should not have cow's milk) every two hours and kept warm on a towel-wrapped heating pad or hot water bottle. "You have to rub their bellies. Their anuses have to be massaged to make sure they go to the bathroom," Mayeda said.

"Our foster parents are saints," said the city's Knaan. "Or insomniacs."

But even with orientation and training, "it's not unusual for the very best volunteer to lose a few kittens," Mayeda said. "They're such delicate little creatures."

Occasionally, the shelters get cats with their litters and volunteers can care for an entire family, which is actually easier than a human trying to mimic a nursing feline.

"Sometimes if we have kittens that have lost their mothers and mothers who have lost their kittens, we'll put them together," Mayeda said.

Sometimes, people will mistakenly believe a litter of mewling kittens under a bush means the mother has abandoned them and people will take them to a shelter. Others turn in an unwanted litter from a house cat. Shelter workers offer vouchers for free spay services for the mother and encourage people to return litters to the mother cat for the several weeks it takes to get them weaned.

The foster program helps, but it has not stopped the killing of kittens. Even as L.A. Animal Services touted a dramatically low euthanasia rate for March, the city put down 68 orphaned kittens. The agency did, however, place 204 neonatal kittens in foster homes.

Not surprisingly, shelter officials believe the time-consuming task is well suited for certain types of people. "Shut-ins, people who have a difficult time making long term commitments," said Ed Boks, general manager of L.A. Animal Services. "It would be a great program for clubs or senior places."

"What I would like to see is a kitten neonatal unit," said Shankar, who approached a member of the L.A. City Council about setting up a partnership between volunteers and the city to run such a space in a shelter. "All the kittens come to one central location." Then, she said, volunteers would share the duties of ministering to the kittens.

"I think people are intimidated by bringing these tiny little kittens to their homes. But if you come to one place, there's a community that can do it. It takes a village to help the little kittens."

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To volunteer with the county call Ken Kramer, (562) 256-1367. To volunteer with the city, call Pat Ott at (213) 305-9068.

carla.hall@latimes.com

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: LITTLE LOST KITTEN: A 3-week-old orphaned kitten is fed with a small bottle at North Central Los Angeles Animal Services. PHOTOGRAPHER: Gina Ferazzi Los Angeles Times PHOTO: (IE)LITTLE LOST KITTEN: A 3-week-old orphaned kitten is fed with a small bottle at North Central Los Angeles Animal Services. Shelters have started foster programs to help keep kittens alive. PHOTOGRAPHER: Gina Ferazzi Los Angeles Times

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