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Feral Cats Put to Work

By Dana Bartholomew

Fe-9 team called in for rat control

There's a new kind of cop at LAPD Foothill Division.

"They're our feline warriors," said Foothill Captain Kirk Albanese of three recruits to his new cat patrol force, which will soon hit the streets around Foothill Station to defend against area vermin.

The Fe-9 corps, conscripted from feral cat populations city-wide, have already purged the station's basement of rodents and will be moved outdoors this month to nab and deter rats and other pests. "Nothing works better than Mother Nature," said Albanese, who two years ago worked with a Los Angeles rescue group to turn wild cats at Wilshire Division into a defensive force against vermin. "I've used more traditional methods and they weren't effective."

It was less than a year ago that rats and mice had the run of the 43-year-old Pacoima police station, according to police. They ran down the halls. Scampered past the duty watch commander. Sauntered past detectives. Scoffed at jailers. And taunted the records keepers – who jumped on chairs in fright.

And then they ate their way through a labyrinth of internal police records.

Enter Melya Kaplan, executive director of Venice Animal Allies, the rescue group which converted the feral colony at Wilshire Division. Seven months ago, she introduced the three feral females into the Foothill basement.

Within weeks, most of the rats were gone.

It was Kaplan that also introduced a feral cat force five years ago at the Flower Mart downtown to deter rats with a fondness for red carnations.

Within months, her colony of 20 cats had sent the rats packing.

The secret: "eau du cat", a feline scent that shivers the whiskers of unwelcome rodents. "They're not domestic house cats, they're working cats," said Kaplan, who is working to institute cat patrols at the city's 18 police stations.

In charge of the cats at Foothill is Sgt. Christy Donorovich, who has set up a smorgasbord of kibbles and treats in the Foothill basement. "It's our own little cat patrol," said Donorovich with pride. "Since the cats have been here, nothing, absolutely nothing."

The Fe-9 cats will soon be trapped and taken to the parking lot where they will live in cages for two weeks to become accustomed to police life and then released. "They're going to be some fat cats," said Officer Filipe Benavidez, a bicycle cop heading out on patrol. "I'll sleep safer at night."