

“They’re more like two-year-old children than anything else. Very high energy level, very intelligent little animals and along with that they have a very sophisticated psychological profile.” — Karl Brodhecker, on ferrets

Rescue ranch



Circle F's Walter Paetkau.

People who contact the Circle F Horse Rescue ranch in Abbotsford to surrender their horses are often in a state of distress.

“The last one came to us because the woman couldn’t afford to feed it,” says founder Walter Paetkau. “It was standing in water and mud and she asked whether we could take it before she had to neglect it.”

Walter spends about \$40,000 a year rescuing horses that have become a burden for their owners. He recovers some expenses through dinners, auctions and a small grant from the B.C. Gaming Commission.

His retirement project pays off when he finds new homes.

“The good news is that a family in the Pemberton Valley adopted Michika and Maverick this week,” says Walter. “We were hoping they could go together because they have been a pair for many years.”



Donna Stewart and her son Scott with the family corgis. Roxie, rescued from certain death at a shelter in New Mexico, is on the left.



Sylvia Au and Lisa Hutcheon, of the Small Animal Rescue Society of B.C., depend on a network of foster families to take in pets such as (from left) degus, chinchillas and rats. ARLEN REDEKOP — THE PROVINCE

For the birds



Audrey Wilsenack with Theodore, an African Grey who likes to cause a ruckus.

Audrey Wilsenack, who operates 911 Parrot Alert Canada, says she “felt like an idiot” the day she walked around her Abbotsford neighbourhood whistling at the trees and calling for Alex. “But you have to do it,” she explains.

Losing a parrot is so easy. People leave windows open or they get so used to having a bird on their shoulder that they

forget when they step outside to get the mail.

Audrey’s online database of missing Alexandrians, cockatiels and Congo Greys — 10 to 15 cases every week in Canada — is part of a parrot recovery network across North America. She not only posts pictures of missing birds but instructs distraught owners on how to find them — by

putting out the cage and a familiar toy or walking around the neighbourhood ringing a bell and calling out a name.

“Familiarity will often trigger a response,” says Audrey. “They may answer to your voice whereas they wouldn’t for a stranger.”

Audrey also volunteers for the Greyhaven Exotic Bird Sanctuary in Surrey.

From previous page

One day in November, Janice Gillett, founder of the Hearts On Noses Sanctuary for Vietnamese Pot-Bellied Pigs, was called out to the woods near her home in Maple Ridge by someone who’d spotted a piglet limping down a country lane.

Janice and the guy who’d called eventually found the tiny Yorkshire porker in the bush, suffering from a busted leg.

“I scooped her up and drove home with her on my lap and brought her into the house,” says Janice. “I took her in for X-rays and sure enough her hip had been shattered and her leg had been broken and fused.”

Today Rose is 450 pounds and doing well — still limping but learning to fit in with her 22 Vietnamese companions.

Pot-bellies have long been a fad for the kind of people who like to be the centre of attention by taking exotic animals down to the beach or the park. But finding new homes for them when their owners get bored isn’t easy. Some Lower Mainland municipalities have bylaws that prohibit domestic swine.

The well-meaning family that rescued Pebbles from a slaughter yard, for example, didn’t know that their new pet was an illegal resident.

“They took her home and had her for a year,” explains Janice. “She probably spent 95 per cent of the time in the house. Then somebody in the neighbourhood reported her.”

“The bylaw officer felt terrible about it because obviously Pebbles was loved and properly taken care of. But it’s against the law and they were given a month to find a new home.”

Janice found Pebbles a temporary placement with a foster family in Saanich until a space was eventually freed up at Hearts on Noses.

One of the most active pet welfare organizations in Canada is the Small Animal Rescue Society of B.C. (SARS), which depends on a network of some 200 volunteer foster families. SARS claims to deal with at least 15 times more cases of unwanted pets than all the SPCAs in the Lower Mainland combined.

Its president, Lisa Hutcheon, says about half of the animals they rescue come via SPCA shelters that are unable to cope with the sheer volume and variety of abandoned pets.

Earlier this month, workers at the Kamloops SCPA arrived at work to find a box of 24 rats dumped on the doorstep. When one of the females gave birth a

few days later, SARS was called in to help. They already have adoptions pending for three of the little ones.

“There’s quite a rat network out there,” says Lisa, whose group also stepped in last June when more than 1,000 rats were recovered from a house in Petaluma, Calif. SARS helped coordinate a “rattie train” up the coast and B.C. families opened their hearts and doors to 12 of them — like the two who arrived by plane to begin a new life in Prince George.

SARS has seen a huge increase in abandoned bunnies and chinchillas. Another “statement pet” that’s been showing up at animal shelters is the African pygmy hedgehog.

“People don’t know how to care for them so a lot of them will be covered in mites or they’re undernourished because they’ve had the wrong diet,” says Lisa.

“A lot will be housed together even though they’re solitary animals — so a lot of them come in injured. This one fellow just surrendered two because he got them for his kids and didn’t know they’re nocturnal.”

SARS recently recovered 32 degus from a house in East Vancouver — unlikely victims of the B.C. drug trade.

“They sell them to the pet stores to get money for drugs,” Lisa explains. “There are also people we know about who’ll pose as a grandfather looking for small animals for his grandson — but they’re really looking for snake food.”

Lisa’s nine-to-five job involves caring for humans in her role as manager of patient programs at the B.C. Heart and Stroke Foundation.

But rescuing animals that many people consider lower forms of life than cats and dogs is her passion.

“It’s everything I do,” she says. “You take a lot of a disappointment and a lot of heartache. It’s just depressing a lot of the time but in the end it’s so worthwhile, especially when you find them a home.”

And that includes rats.

Lisa’s hoping *Province* readers will check out their cute little faces on the SARS website — Camilla, Wanda, Harriet, Bernie, Nigel and the rest of them — and put in an application to adopt.

“You know what?” says Lisa. “They make the best kids’ pets. They’re hardy, they’re social, they’re smart, they’re interactive, they’re *not* nocturnal — and they’re super clean.”

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