

Donkeys suffering from years of neglect find help in Corvallis



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CORVALLIS - Tamara Lewis had never done anything quite like this before.

The little white miniature donkey she had her arms wrapped around quivered as Dave Schram carefully trimmed its twisted hooves grown long from neglect.

"This is a real nasty one here," Schram said, as he cradled the misshapen hoof in his hand. "It's going to take some time before these animals are walking around again without pain."

The donkey was one of 31 recently rescued from the struggling Montana Large Animal Sanctuary and Rescue, located 15 miles north of Hot Springs.

All around the barnyard just off Willow Creek Road east of Corvallis, other teams of volunteers worked Wednesday morning to trim hooves and perform other medical checks on both miniature and full-size donkeys.

"It's my first involvement in something like this," Lewis said, as she surveyed the scene. "It's really heart rending. Hopefully, the lesson that comes from this is everyone has their limits. ... It might start out as good intentions, but at some point you have to say enough is enough."

Earlier this month, rescue organizations from across Montana descended on the Hot Springs sanctuary after hearing its owners were no longer able to care for the 1,200 large animals they'd accumulated on their 400-acre ranch.

The owner said he'd lost a major funding source and their regular supplier of hay cut off deliveries after the sanctuary fell \$40,000 in the hole.

Phyllis Ruana, president of the Montana Animal Care Association of Corvallis, spent several days at the ranch helping get the process started to find new homes for the hundreds of llamas, horses, cows and camels.

She took one look at the pen filled with donkeys painfully ambling about on hideous-looking hooves and decided where her early focus would be.

"The majority of the animals on the property were not like this," she said, while looking at donkeys with turned-up hooves that looked a bit like elf shoes. "These hooves were caused by years without maintenance. ... We knew we had to get something done and soon."

When an animal's hooves get to this point, it hurts just to stand, said Rob Detlaff, a farrier from Melrose.

"It's like having an abscess under your fingernail and then turning around and sitting down on top of your fingers," Detlaff said. "This isn't something that happened in a few months. This isn't something that happened in a year. This took years to get to this point."

On Wednesday, a crew from Shawn Gleason's Corvallis Veterinary Hospital used a portable X-ray machine to see the extent of the damage.

There's a chance that some of the animals might have to be euthanized if their hooves are compromised, said Jane Heath, executive director of the Montana Horse Sanctuary.

"It wouldn't be fair to have them spend the rest of their lives in pain," she said. "We hope that won't happen."

Most of the donkeys - both large and small - will be available for adoption through the Montana Horse Sanctuary. People interested in adopting one of the animals will need to fill out an application that can be obtained by e-mailing Heath at ht@mt.net.

The adoptees are required to keep the animal for life or return it to the Montana Horse Sanctuary organization.

"We do not want these animals to fall through the cracks again," Heath said. "We want them to go to a forever home."

For those people who are faced with taking their own animal to a sanctuary, Heath urges caution. There are no regulations governing animal sanctuaries. Some are certainly better than others.

"People should go see the place and ask questions," she said. "If they are a nonprofit, people can ask to see their financial records. ... People just assume that it's going to be OK to leave their animals at a sanctuary."

"Sometimes it just isn't," Heath said.

Shannon Alexander of the Western Montana Equine Rescue and Rehabilitation of Corvallis helped organize Wednesday's gathering.

While she was impressed by the number of people willing to drop whatever they were doing to come and help, Alexander really wasn't surprised.

"When I started doing this, I found that there are lots of people in the valley who do everything they can to help," she said. "A lot of them fly under the radar. They are good people doing what they can."

"Changing the life of one animal might not make a huge difference in the world, but it means the world to that animal," Alexander said. "I think that is why all of us are here today."