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Wendy Haugen visits with 5-month-old kitten “Emma” at the La Plata County Humane Society’s animal shelter. Haugen, a board member with the LPCHS and founder of the Foundation for the Protection of Animals, has given logistical and financial support to the local “Trap-Neuter-Release” (TNR) program aimed at stemming the feral cat population./Photo by Jennaye Derge

Cat crusader Wendy Haugen named “Animal Advocate of the Year”

by Jen Reeder

When Christy Campbell and her husband moved onto their 200-acre ranch near Ignacio, there were a couple of stray cats on the property. Campbell is an animal lover, so she put out food for the strays. But by the end of 2014, there was a full-blown feral cat colony on the ranch.

“All of a sudden, it bloomed overnight and I was taking care of five or six litters of kittens. They grew to about 40 head,” Campbell said. “I was spending nearly \$30 a week just on cat food. I was just really overwhelmed.”

So she was relieved when a friend told her about the Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program at the La Plata County Humane Society. Thanks to financial and logistical support from board member Wendy Haugen, the shelter offers a free service to people with feral cat colonies. Haugen and an assistant will drive to the property, humanely trap the cats, bring them to the shelter to be spayed or neutered, vaccinated and ear-notched for identification, and return the cats to the property the next day. Since feral cats are virtually impossible to adopt as pets – they often scratch or bite if someone tries to hold them – TNR is a solution that avoids euthanizing cats while preventing them from giving birth to homeless kittens.

“I was ever so grateful that I did not spend a dime getting these animals fixed so I don’t have repeat litters coming up all the time,” Campbell said. “It’s a great program – Wendy was really professional, really polite. She did her job really well and I sure do thank the Lord for people like her.”



Since Haugen started her TNR program a year ago, the number of cats having to be put down at the Humane Society has dropped significantly, from nearly 200 to no more than a dozen./Photo by Jennaye Derge

Accolades like these led the La Plata County Humane Society to name Wendy Haugen the 2015 Animal Advocate of the Year.

“Wendy has really helped our Humane Society with grants for spay/neuter,” said Chris Nelson, LPCHS shelter director. “Her efforts to reduce the populations of feral cats – and pit pulls – and to end the suffering of those animals is something she’s been doing a lot of years, so we felt she deserved to get some recognition for it.”

Nelson said the introduction of the TNR program in fall of 2014 has helped dramatically reduce the number of feral cats euthanized at the shelter.

“Five years ago, we were euthanizing 150 to 200 feral cats a year. Now we’re barely euthanizing – maybe a dozen this year. We’re either getting them adopted as barn cats or stopping them from coming in here ... by fixing them and putting them back we’re saving our space and resources for animals who are truly in need.”

Haugen had worked in animal welfare for years when she founded the nonprofit Foundation for the Protection of Animals in 2006 with the inheritance she received after her father and stepmother died of cancer.

“They were both self-made, so they instructed me on the ways of not wasting money,” Haugen said. “That’s why I went into spay/neuter – because I really believe it is the most cost-effective way to end the suffering of homeless pets.”

Haugen researched statistics for animal shelters throughout Colorado and found feral cats and pit bulls were most commonly euthanized. So through her foundation and its operating arm, Spay Colorado, Haugen has offered spay/neuter grants to communities around the state as well as the Four Corners region for low-cost sterilizations. On an even more grassroots level, she scans Facebook and Craigslist every day for people advertising a litter of kittens or pit bulls/mixes, and sends them a message offering to pay for the animals to be spayed and neutered.

“Sometimes it just totally makes their day,” she said. “People really can’t afford \$100 to \$200 to fix these free cats that just showed up. So if someone says, ‘I’ll solve this problem for you,’ it really makes people happy, and I love doing that.”

She also loves being hands-on with the local TNR program.

“When you fix a cat, they don’t have any more babies, so there are fewer little creatures that are going to be fending for themselves out there and dying horrible deaths.”

She said kittens as young as 8 weeks old can be spayed or neutered and returned to their colony. If they haven’t been handled and socialized by that age, they can’t compete with other kittens available for adoption.

The issue of feral cat overpopulation is not unique to our community. There are tens of millions of feral cats in America, so Trap-Neuter-Return has been endorsed on a national level by groups like The Humane Society of the United States and The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), which describes TNR as “the most humane, effective and financially sustainable strategy for controlling free-roaming cat populations” in a position statement on feral cat management.

Haugen urges anyone in the community with a large colony of feral cats to call the shelter about the TNR program, and for people to “put the pressure on” their neighbors to try the program.

“I love going to people’s houses and solving problems. It’s super rewarding. Now that I’m doing more hands-on work, I can see how it helps people and not just the animals.”

While Haugen was honored to be named the LPCHS “Animal Advocate of the Year,” she said she could name “20 people off the top of my head” who were more deserving of the award, such as those who foster animals for the shelter. She gave a shout out to others who have worked tirelessly in spay/neuter, such as Padgie Kimmick and the staff and volunteers of Dogster’s Spay & Neuter Program, Blackhat Humane Society and Soul Dog Rescue.

“Just because I’m the one who got the award doesn’t mean I’m the only one doing this. I think everyone needs a pat on the back – and this whole community does. Because this is a great place to be an animal compared to a lot of other places in the world,” Haugen said. “If you are an animal in La Plata County, you pretty much scored.”

For more information about the La Plata County Humane Society’s TNR program, call 970-259-2847.

More on spay/neuter

- Spaying and neutering pets is considered a key to reducing the number of homeless animals. Each year in the United States, an estimated 1.2 million dogs and 1.4 million cats are euthanized in shelters, according to the ASPCA.

- A fertile female cat has an average of one to two litters a year, with an average of four to six kittens per litter.

- The American Animal Hospital Association has a position statement that supports neutering cats and dogs as young as 8 weeks of age.

- Studies have shown spaying and neutering has a number of health benefits for dogs and cats, and that sterilized animals live longer on average than unaltered pets.

- While some people want their cat to have a litter before being spayed so their children can witness the "miracle of birth," animal advocate Wendy Haugen notes there are many pregnant cats at shelters that could be fostered instead.

For more information, visit:
www.humanesociety.org

– Jen Reeder

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