

Southwest Florida sanctuaries for big and unusual animals face a raft of tests and triumph

BY: Emily Begley

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NAPLES, Fla. - Running an animal sanctuary comes with early mornings, late nights and little free time. It also means a lot of money, constant research and adapting to new situations.

In other words, “There’s a whole business to it, even though it’s not a business,” said Cynthia Gilbert, who runs the Horse Rescue of South Florida from her Golden Gate Estates home.

When the going gets tough, rescuers face the question: What needs to be done to keep animals happy and healthy?

The answer is a complex one, incorporating everything from medical needs and vet bills to necessary training and food.

“You can only do so much with cats and dogs, but these guys are a whole different ballgame,” said Shy Wolf Sanctuary fundraising chairman and member of its board of directors Mark Scarola.

Photo gallery: Kowiachobee Animal Preserve

(<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/kowiachobee-animal-preserve>)

Caring for exotic animals comes with weighty medical bills, physical demands and expensive food and maintenance — and sometimes, staying in operation becomes impossible. That happened with the George L. Davis Potbelly Pig Sanctuary in Fort Myers, once said to be the largest in the country. It closed when its founder became ill. He later died, and the pigs had to go to other shelters around the country.

In other cases, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission has closed sanctuaries after allegations of improper or inadequate care. Their animals also go to other local preserves, such as Kowiachobee Animal Preserve in Golden Gate Estates.

Current rescues in southern Florida face new challenges by the day. But through all of the obstacles, the animals remain a top priority as caretakers nurse them to health and prepare them to be placed, when possible, in permanent homes.

SHY WOLF SANCTUARY

Nancy Smith's day begins at 5 a.m., long before the sun has risen. Her husband, Kent, is already up, working in the couple's backyard.

It's a typical morning for the Smiths, who transformed their home into Shy Wolf Sanctuary 22 years ago. Now, the backyard is a refuge for dozens of exotic animals, including wolves, coyotes and prairie dogs.

Keeping the more than 50 animals happy and healthy is a round-the-clock job, but Nancy isn't complaining.

"If it ain't from the heart, it ain't from nowhere," the 69-year-old said.

The home sits on 21/2 acres, but dozens of spacious enclosures and pathways make the sanctuary appear much larger than it is.

"It was never intended to get this big," Scarola said. He is one of about 20 volunteers who regularly help the Smiths with their daily chores.

Because the center's population continues to grow, the need for a new location is crucial. The Smiths' home is in a residential area off 27th Street SW, which raises several challenges, including a prohibition on advertising the center's services.

The sanctuary has set its sights on a new, 10-acre location in Bonita Springs, which they hope to acquire by October. It's reached the zoning process, but is meeting some opposition from City Council. Nancy said she is very hopeful, but that it all comes down to the votes.

All of the sanctuary's residents are rescued, and none (beside a Florida panther) are native to the state. The majority were either former pets or found in hoarding situations, Scarola said. He said the idea of owning an exotic pet appeals to many people who later realize they cannot provide proper care.

Scarola said prairie dogs were sold in local pet stores. They are good examples of exotic pets being unpredictable. Although some have a mild nature similar to that of a pet rabbit or guinea pig, others — like Shy Wolf's Diablo — are aggressive toward humans, much like they would be in the wild.

He added that many exotic pets are sold online, using the example of a tiger purchased for \$500.

"The more people buy them, the more they're going to breed them," Scarola said. "It's an endless cycle."

None of Shy Wolf's volunteers are paid; its entire \$120,000 annual budget is put toward the animals. Although this seems like a lot, Scarola said, the money is used quickly on things such as food and medical care. The wolves consume 3,000 pounds of chicken — and that's only part of their diet — every month.

On Aug. 5, Shy Wolf began working with the Harry Chapin Food Bank in Fort Myers, which provides leftover food for the animals.

Shy Wolf does have a very few adoptable pets including four wolf dogs.

KOWIACHOBEE ANIMAL PRESERVE

Roars, barks and calls fill the air when guests arrive at Kowiachobee Animal Preserve in Golden Gate Estates.

The sanctuary, owned and operated by Grace and John Slaby, is home to about 130 animals that include miniature horses, donkeys, leopards, bobcats, panthers, skunks and one micro potbellied pig named Wilbur.

Kowiachobee (pronounced co-WHY-uh-CHO-bee) is a Native American word that translates to “big screaming cat.” Slaby said she and her husband decided on the name to emphasize the importance of keeping Florida panthers alive.

“It seemed fitting,” she said.

The animal lover prefers to refer to the animals in her care as re-homed instead of rescued; many came to Kowiachobee after their previous sanctuaries closed.

At her home, the animals come first. Slaby said a raccoon might feast on lobster tails while she and her family opt for hot dogs and beans — it all depends on the day.

Right now, the biggest challenge is finances.

“We are really struggling,” Slaby said, explaining the family-run business depends on donations that are not required of the people invited to meet their animals.

Although the county now prevents children from taking field trips to the property — a result of it not being zoned for public visits — Grace and John still focus on educating children about exotic animals.

“What we try to do with the animals we take in is use them for educational purposes,” Grace said.

To do this, the couple makes lectures and presentations at community events. But in

the offseason, these opportunities are much harder to come by.

Feeding, cleaning and maintenance for so many animals is expensive, especially because many, such as the couple's year-old zebra, require special diets.

The zebra, named Zahara, was saved by Kowiachobee from a business that raises exotic animals to be hunted as game. Her diet includes nutritious pellets that are high in protein, as well as carrots and apples for treats.

"With monetary donations, we're able to purchase exactly what they need," Slaby said. Care and feeding of the animals costs an average of \$4,000 a month. This doesn't include veterinarian bills.

The center is also looking for volunteers — 18 years or older — to help with daily chores.

"Everything has to be in tiptop condition every day, and that's the way we want it," Slaby said.

Kowiachobee currently has about 25 volunteers.

HORSE RESCUE OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Thoroughbred horses stand side by side in Cynthia Gilbert's backyard, eating from a green wheelbarrow parked in the grass.

The geldings are two of five horses temporarily housed at the Horse Rescue of South Florida in Golden Gate Estates, which rehabilitates injured racehorses with the goal of getting them healthy and ready for adoption.

"They really want to get it right; to make you happy," Gilbert said of the thoroughbreds, adding that the breed is the equine equivalent of a Labrador retriever.

Founded in the summer of 2012, the rescue provides its horses with the medical attention and training they need to adjust to life off the track.

This transition involves retraining the horses. Cynthia used the example of jockeys pulling back on the reins to signal a horse to gallop. In pleasure and show riding, such as Western and English, the same move tells the horse to stop.

She and volunteers work to “bring them to square one.”

“Cynthia puts everything into this place,” said Amy Cisek, one of only five regular volunteers at the rescue. “Everything she does is for these horses. Very little is about her.”

Cisek referenced a favorite quote from Gary Ross’ 2003 film “Seabiscuit:” “You don’t throw away a whole life just because it’s banged up a little.”

The job requires daily chores and constant planning, Gilbert explained, including significant financial responsibilities.

With medical bills, food and care, the average horse requires about \$500 a month — an ongoing responsibility Cynthia compared to making a car payment.

Thoroughbreds also require more food than other breeds, so bills can be even higher.

Veterinary attention varies by horse; a trip to the vet averages \$1,200, but the bill can reach as much as \$10,000, Cynthia said, depending on a horse’s injuries and needs.

The rescue organizes events such as tack sales to help raise money for its horses, selling items including bits, bridles, helmets and boots.

Despite hefty financial requirements, Cynthia said the most challenging aspect of the rescue is the responsibility to both the horses and their adopters.

“We can’t fix everything, but somehow you feel you should be able to, even though it’s not possible,” she said in an email. “Especially with the really sick ones.”

But the biggest responsibility of all is sending her horses out into the world.

“You don’t want to place the horse in a home that is not suitable, and of course you

can't control the future, but you certainly feel responsible for it all.”

For more information about adoptable horses, contact Gilbert at tbredrescue@gmail.com.

More sanctuaries

In central and southern Florida, a number of exotic animal sanctuaries aim to educate the public in addition to rehabilitating animals and finding them permanent homes:

BIG CAT RESCUE

What: Rescue organization aimed at big cats, including panthers and tigers.

Where: 12802 Easy St., Tampa

Phone: 813-920-4130

Info: bigcatrescue.org (<http://bigcatrescue.org>)

Visit: By online reservation

FLORIDA EXOTIC BIRD SANCTUARY, INC.

What: Rescue and rehabilitation center for exotic birds.

Where: Tampa

Phone: 813-545-5406

Info: flabirdsanctuary.com (<http://flabirdsanctuary.com>)

MCCARTHY'S WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

What: Rehabilitation center for sick or injured native animals.

Where: 12943 61 St. N, West Palm Beach

Visit: By appointment only (call)

Price: Adults \$25; children \$15 (children under 5 not permitted)

Phone: 561-790-2116

Info: mccarthyswildlife.com (<http://mccarthyswildlife.com>)

OCTAGON WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

What: Rescue for exotic animals including bears, big cats and primates.

Where: 41660 Horseshoe Road, Punta Gorda

Hours: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Price: Adults \$10; children 8-17 and seniors 55 plus \$5; kids 7 and under free (cash or check only)

Phone: 239-543-1130

Info: octagonwildlife.org (<http://octagonwildlife.org>)

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