

Trap, neuter, return helps feral cats

SHANNON KIRK

kirk.shannon1@gmail.com

Darlene Fudge-Richard shelters and feeds a cat she has never touched.

The Eastern Passage homemaker has turned her backyard into a sanctuary for feral cats. One has been living on her property for about seven years.

"I don't put any pesticides or anything," she says. "I make places in my flower beds ... 'cause she likes to sleep in my flowers."

She even cut a hole in her fence to ensure the cat can enter and leave the yard with ease.

"I think that the cats in my yard talk to their friends and tell them to come. 'You get a warm meal over here, and a nice warm place to sleep,'" Fudge-Richard says with a laugh.

She took in the feral cat almost seven years ago as part of a program called TNR – trap, neuter, return.

Sonya Higgins, who runs Healing Animal SCARS – Sonya's Cat and Animal Rescue Society – captures, and provides veterinary care for stray cats.

Since she started the society in

2006, Higgins estimates she has taken in more than 700, many of them feral.

Feral cats are "descended from domestic animals that, due to human neglect, have been forced to live as wild animals," according to the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies.

The TNR method, which is promoted by animal associations across North America, involves neutering and vaccinating feral cats and returning them to the locations from which they were taken, in an effort to control and reduce the population.

A 2009 report estimated there are between 40,000 and 100,000 feral cats in the Halifax area.

Sandra Flemming, the provincial animal care director with the Nova Scotia SPCA, says TNR is a vital part of dealing with cat overpopulation. The only other option for dealing with feral cats within city limits is euthanization.

At Meow Movers, an event held last weekend at the North Dartmouth Community Centre, Healing Animal SCARS was one of many booths selling cat toys, crafts and used clothing to raise money for shelters and rescues.

Higgins uses donations primarily to cover veterinary costs. Last year alone, vet bills for the 138 cats she took in came to almost \$33,000.

Those cats were treated at Eastern Passage Village Veterinary Hospital where veterinarian Dr. Courtney Sherlock says Higgins' society is doing great work.

Besides controlling the number of stray cats, Sherlock says bringing them in allows her to check for, and treat, health problems such as feline leukemia or worms. The vet also administers vaccines as required.

Adoption is the ideal option for the strays Higgins takes in. But if the cat is too wild, it enters the final stage of the TNR process.

This last step, returning the cat to the place where it was found, is done with the help of volunteers like Fudge-Richard, who own the property on which the cat was living.

An outdoor shelter is erected, and the volunteer is responsible for putting out food and alerting Higgins to any apparent health problems in the future. But not everyone is as dedicated as Fudge-Richard.



Sonya Higgins has taken in more than 700 cats. (Photo by Shannon Kirk)

Higgins says people are sometimes resistant to the idea of allowing a wild cat to make its home in their yard. They have a dog, or young children, or they simply don't like cats.

Often Higgins is able to bring them around to the idea. She explains that a neutered male cat, having laid claim to one's yard, will keep other cats away. As well, a neutered cat is unlikely to howl and fight. She also mentions ro-

dent control.

Higgins shares her own home with five cats, a dog named Porkchop and four foster cats awaiting homes.

Higgins used to have a government job, but now she rescues cats full-time.

"I'd rather be at home working with animals and not getting paid," she says. "Right now, the animals need me."

Shubenacadie Sam greets fans with good news

KAREN MCCOLL

krmccoll@yahoo.ca
@krmccoll

If this week's heavy snowfall is any indication, Shubenacadie Sam was out to lunch when he gave his Groundhog Day prediction last weekend.

The four-pound rodent did not see his shadow when he was coaxed out of his house at the Shubenacadie Wildlife Park in front of a crowd of about 400 people. According to the North American Groundhog Day tradition that started in the 1880s, this means an early spring.

The furry rodent was given a few moments to stretch his legs under the cloudy sky before he was scooped up and brought to the ear of East Hants' town crier, to whom he "whispered" his prediction for spring.

"The rodent news is beneficial," shouted Anita Benedict, dressed in an ankle-length red velvet skirt, a cape and a black feathered cap, "soon we shall see the many bright spring colours."

Unfortunately, statistics indicate otherwise.

According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia* website, Nova Scotians might have been better off



Theresa Adams greets Shubenacadie Sam. (Photo by Karen McColl)

if Sam had seen his shadow. The site says there is approximately a 50 per cent chance of a Halifax groundhog seeing its shadow on Feb. 2 – based on whether the sky is likely to be cloudy or sunny – but only a 42 per cent chance of it accurately forecasting spring.

Regardless, park staff have confidence in Sam's predictions.

"Sam is absolutely accurate," said assistant education coordinator Theresa Adams with a straight face. "But sometimes the weather doesn't agree with him."

Shubenacadie local Keith Penman and his family were in the throng of parents and children vying for space around Sam's enclosure during the prediction. When

asked if he was surprised by Sam's verdict, Penman laughed.

"No, not today. It's a little overcast."

It was the Penmans' first time attending the event, but not the Nieforth's, another local family, who come every year for Groundhog Day.

"It's fun. It's a nice event," said Krista Nieforth. "We started (coming) when the kids were small."

She said last year it was minus "bazillion" outside, so they were happier with Sunday's weather, with temperatures around freezing.

But not everyone was happy on Sunday.

Just before Sam's appearance at 8 a.m., one woman at the back of the crowd yelled, "Too much media, the kids can't see!"

Journalists were allowed into Sam's pen, while everyone else had to jockey for space on the outside. There were about 10 media people present, several with tripods and large cameras.

Sam also got a bit cranky after a few minutes in the spotlight and started biting at the hands of Adams, who was carefully handing him to people for photos. She passed him off to his handler, who tucked him under her jacket and

patted him gently.

Organizers said that because of Nova Scotia's geographical location, Sam is the first North American groundhog to predict spring each year. Willow in Winnipeg, Fred la Marmotte in Québec and Balzac Billy in Alberta agreed with Sam's verdict but Ontario's Wiarton Willie and Pennsylvania's Punxsutawney Phil (where North America's Groundhog Day tradition began) did not – they saw their shadows, predicting six more weeks of winter weather.

After Sam retired to his house for another year, families trickled into the park's visitor centre for cookies and face-painting, where kiosks and education displays reminded people of World Wetlands Day, also on Feb. 2.

Park staff estimate 1,200 people visited the park for the 26th annual Groundhog Day festivities. Admission was free and visitors could walk through the park, which houses several species of mammals and birds.

As for the winter weather, Nova Scotia's famous groundhog makes no apologies. "Sam" tweeted on Monday: "Heard @PeterCoade (CBC meteorologist) talking about a Nor'easter ... Remember I said early end to winter not an immediate one."