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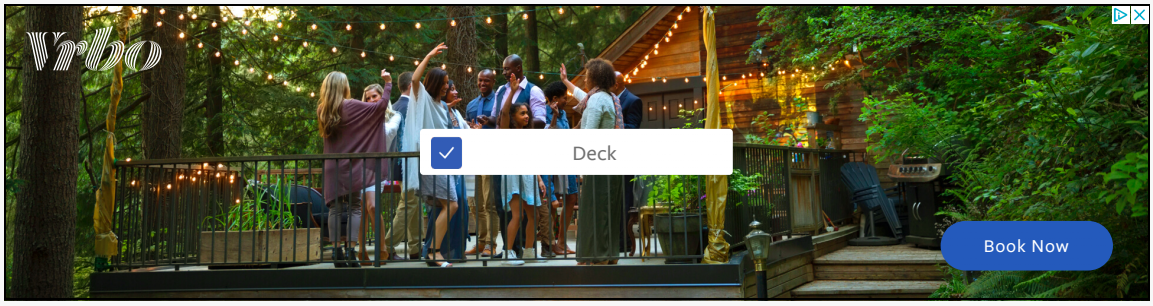

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Wabasha County breeder shares animal love

"When they're five weeks they make me laugh every day. The way they jump and run," said Heather Fitzpatrick. "I also really enjoy watching the people, I never know who's going to pick what puppy."

Heather Fitzpatrick of Hidden Valley Doodles with her Saint Berdoodle puppies in Millville, Minnesota on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022.
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin

By Rebecca Mitchell
January 04, 2023 09:36 AM

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MILLVILLE — Heather Fitzpatrick knows her dogs.

And as a breeder, she guarantees "they come pre-loved." As the owner of Hidden Valley Doodles and Jungle Cats and Cubs, she has five to six dogs with an average of two litters at a time.

Fitzpatrick, 52, shares her soft heart filled with animal love with families at her Millville-based business in Wabasha County. From experiences as a horse trainer and dog and cat groomer, she enjoys working with animals who need her.

"They give me so much peace, they give me so much happiness," Fitzpatrick said.

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Heather Fitzpatrick, owner of Hidden Valley Jungle Cats and Cubs, shows the Toyger cat's coat, which is often called "glitter," in Millville, Minnesota on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022.
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin

She's learning about breeding cats, too, with Bengal and Toyger cats joining the pack in 2021. The most recent additions have "glitter," or their glistening coat nicknamed by breeders for the Toyger cats, which are a cross between a Bengal and a domestic cat. There are about 150 Toyger cat breeders worldwide .

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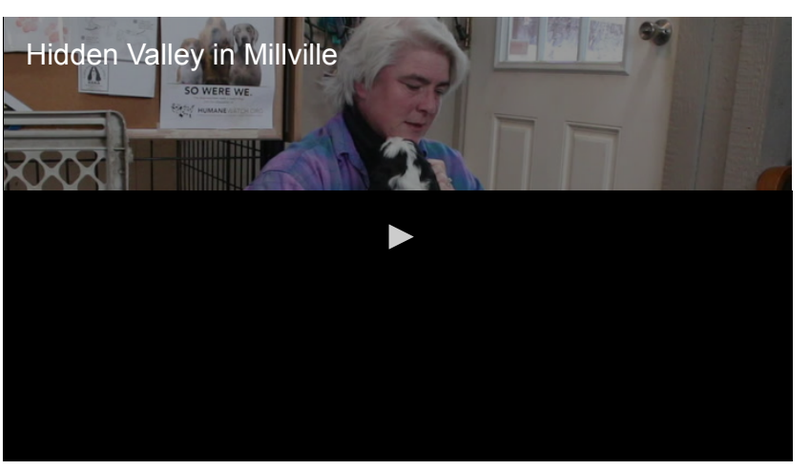
"They always want to play, even at 10 years old they're playing with toys because they have that drive to play. They're also cuddly because they have enough of the domestic cat in them," Fitzpatrick said.

On a recent Thursday afternoon, a litter of 5-week-old Saint Berdoodle puppies bumbled over each other to relax with Fitzpatrick — and untie her shoes. She met her first Labradoodle as a mobile groomer and fell in love with their personality.

"When they're five weeks they make me laugh every day. The way they jump and run," Fitzpatrick said. "I also really enjoy watching the people, I never know who's going to pick what puppy. I make them wait until they're four to five weeks old. I believe personality has a whole lot more with it than color."

While she started Hidden Valley full-time in 2010, each new litter brings praises of "they're so beautiful, they're so smart, they're so good."

"I never get over that miracle," Fitzpatrick said of puppy births.



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With Hidden Valley nestled in the valley hills along the Zumbro River, two small cabins for the dogs resemble relaxing getaways for humans. Fitzpatrick spends hours in the “she-shed” with heat, electricity, Wi-Fi and cameras. She sleeps with the dogs for 10 days before babies are born and two weeks after.

Her favorite puppy age is three to seven weeks when they search for their pack leader and share their personality. For example, Chewie of the Saint Berdoodle’s litter was the first to see and first to play. Another, Leia, loves to show off her excitement and gazing skills.

Though all dogs love treats, Fitzpatrick spends her hours finding their favorite treats, spending time together in the house and figuring out their favorite activities.

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After 30 years as a groomer, Fitzpatrick changed to breeding to do things “different” with health and temperament testing. Fitzpatrick said the temperament testing shows what type of family companion the offspring could be since dogs have the personality traits of their parents.

“I want my crazy, active puppy to be with the six kids because that puppy can handle it. You don’t really want your quietest dog to go with six kids, it’s going to be traumatic for the dog and the kids are going to be like, ‘This sucks, this dog doesn’t play it’s just scared of us,’” Fitzpatrick said.

There’s a simple answer for why Fitzpatrick loves animals and shares that with people: “I don’t know how you don’t.” She breeds for the Doodles and children, and Fitzpatrick said most breeders have similar reasons.

“They’re not all puppy mills, they’re not all bad breeders,” Fitzpatrick said. “I wish we didn’t all get grouped into the same lump of puppy mills because we’re not all the same and some of us, and more so than not, are in it because we love that specific breed, or we’re breeding for the children.”

Heather Fitzpatrick, breeder and owner of Hidden Valley Doodles, cuddles with a Saint Berdoodle puppy in Millville, Minnesota on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022.
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin

The close bonds carry “heartache” too when the animals leave the farm or pass away at a young age. When one of her moms had a single pup litter, Fitzpatrick connected with a vet to find puppies who had lost their mother. Within days, Cricket was set to care for four additional puppies — but Cricket would not accept them. Fitzpatrick used Cricket's favorite snack, butter, to coat the puppies and draw them together as a family.

"It's just the companionship that no other person can provide, it's never-ending love," Fitzpatrick said. "If I am blue, because even though I'm surrounded by puppies, I have bad days, and my bigger dogs they just get it. Mia will go bring me her toy and I'm like, 'How does she know?' She just gets it that I'm having a tough time."

The cats are also drawn to Fitzpatrick, including one Toyger and one Bengal between her three cat pens. The pens have heated pads, water dishes, cat houses and beds. Fitzpatrick said the Toyger is a unique breed with "bold and beautiful" looks, a sweet personality and enjoyment of walks, swimming and playing fetch.

"My goal is not to bring more cats into this world, there's a lot of cats, these are specifically bred for families with active kids, active families who want to take a cat somewhere," Fitzpatrick said. "These cats don't hide from company."

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Fitzpatrick did, however, want "micers" for her farm and the active curiosity of the Bengal answered this need. The active cats, such as Chester, "travel" on an exercise wheel to release their energy. He even teaches the kittens how to use the exercise wheel.

"My Bengal (Chester) will actually bring his harness to me because he wants to go exploring," Fitzpatrick said.

Chester, a Bengal cat, exercises in his wheel at Hidden Valley in Millville, Minnesota on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022.
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin

While dog and cat breeding is her business, Fitzpatrick believes in caring for them with heart and purpose.

“My heart is senior dogs. If I ever could just not … have to make a living this whole farm would be senior dogs because I don’t know why they’re homeless as a senior they shouldn’t be. It’s a lifetime commitment,” Fitzpatrick said. “It just always makes me sad to see a dog that’s 12, 13, 14, and (the owners) want a puppy.”

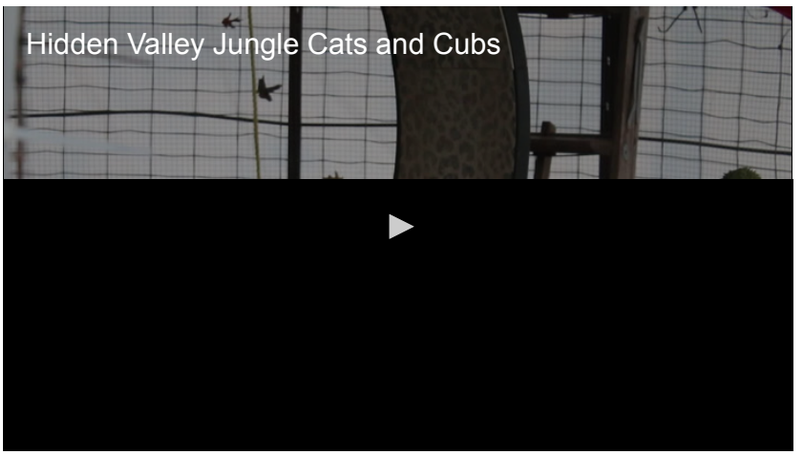
In the future, Fitzpatrick hopes to work in dog photography or dog transportation. But she has many more animals to love before her “next phase.”

“They (animals) give me love, they give me joy. I give it back to them,” Fitzpatrick said. “I try to make their lives as happy as I can.”

The Saint Berdoodle puppies return to their kennel for a nap at Hidden Valley Doodles in Millville, Minnesota on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022.
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin

A birth certificate and pawprint canvas are sent home with each puppy from Hidden Valley Doodles in Millville, Minnesota. The items are pictured on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022.
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin

A list of Saint Berdoodle puppy names at Hidden Valley Doodles in Millville, Minnesota on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022. The puppies were named after characters from "Star Wars."
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin



Heather Fitzpatrick, owner of Hidden Valley Jungle Cats and Cubs, shows the Toyger cat's stripes in Millville, Minnesota on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022.
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin

Heather Fitzpatrick carries dog supplies to two small cabins at Hidden Valley Doodles in Millville, Minnesota on Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022.
Rebecca Mitchell / Post Bulletin

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By Rebecca Mitchell

Rebecca Mitchell started as a Digital Content Producer for the Post Bulletin in August 2022. She specializes in enhancing online articles as well as education, feature and health reporting.

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