





PUPPY L♥VE

Finding forever homes is a community effort

By Julia Duchesne

One day, Karla Scott was contacted by the humane society in Dawson City. Mia, a puppy in its care, was suffering from a nasty bladder infection and needed an experienced foster home. Scott agreed to take Mia in.

She's a nine out of 10 pup. The only reason she's not a 10 out of 10 is because she's got this raging infection. And that is not her fault, Scott recalls thinking. She cared for Mia for more than three months. With regular vet appointments and TLC, the little black Labrador came through.

Because of the damage done by the bladder infection, it was possible Mia might be incontinent, even when fully grown. Nonetheless, an adopter turned up who was happy to handle the risk of an errant pee. Today, Mia is no longer a puppy in pain. She's living her best life—paddleboarding, hiking, and canoeing with her adoptive family.

Saying goodbye to Mia was hard for Scott, but she loves giving puppies a second chance at life. “The reward is so great, and I often feel that I do it selfishly because it makes me feel so good,” she says. “Letting go, and the hurt that comes with that, is a small price to pay.”

For Scott, it all began in 2014 with a “foster fail,” when she took her daughter, Emily, to see a litter of puppies waiting for adoption. That’s when they learned about fostering—temporarily

caring for an animal before adoption. Although they hadn’t planned on it, they took a female puppy home to foster. She had lice, and Scott spent weeks picking bugs and eggs out of her fur. When it came time to send the puppy back, Emily said, “No way! We’ve been taking care of this dog for too long.” Meeko was home to stay.

A few years later, Emily fell for Hunter, a redheaded, blue-eyed husky-shepherd cross. Meeko and Hunter are now part of the Scott family foster team. Meeko keeps the puppies in line; Hunter teaches them how to play. Since 2016, they’ve fostered over 20 dogs.

They’re part of a network of Yukoners devoted to helping animals. “It takes a community to rescue an animal,” says Scott. “It’s not just one person who makes this happen.”

Animal helpers in the Yukon include humane societies in Whitehorse and Dawson, each running a shelter; and smaller organizations like Yukon Animal Rescue Network (YARN), in Watson Lake; and Yukon Small Animal Rescue and Advocacy. All rely on volunteers to foster, walk dogs, cuddle cats, raise money, and much more. Yukon businesses, from Air North to groomers and carpenters, pitch in, too, transporting and bathing animals and building enclosures. The shelters and rescues work with Yukon veterinary clinics to spay and neuter animals, treat pets in crisis, and help low-income owners pay for treatment.



Left: Karla and Emily Scott with their rescue dogs, Meeko, Hunter, and Willow. Willow just moved from her foster to her forever home.

Middle: Socializing the puppies is a big part of fostering. Murray Lundberg says having enthusiastic volunteers like Halia Fritzen Pealow helps.

Right: When he's fostering puppies, Lundberg sets up this large, portable pen in his garage. He likes the noisy morning greetings from the puppies.



Photo left: Mann Kasperhoff. Photo middle and right: Murray Lundberg

"I GET PAID IN PUPPY KISSES AND PUPPY CUDDLES, THAT'S WHAT I TELL PEOPLE, AND I GET PAID REALLY WELL."

The Yukon has plenty of animals in need of homes, especially puppies. Many hail from the territory's smaller communities, which have limited access to vet care. (The only vet clinics are in Whitehorse and Dawson.) One unsprayed female dog can have many litters over her lifetime, resulting in a steady stream of puppies looking for homes. Whitehorse-based Alpine Veterinary Medical Centre used to conduct vaccine and spay and neuter clinics in the communities. But with increasing demand for their services, vets are feeling the crunch.

"The vets here are juggling as many pets as they can during the day and trying to offer the best service that they can," says Chad Egli, Alpine's administrator. "In the last three years, we really just haven't had the manpower to support the communities directly."

Alpine's seven vets perform at least eight spay or neuter surgeries each day. A spay surgery costs \$350–450, but the Yukon government covers \$250 of that for people from the communities.

Five hours east of Whitehorse, Cheryl McGrath's home is full of puppies. She has a full-time job managing the Big Horn Hotel, in Watson Lake, but she also finds time to run YARN from her home. The organization offers a "litter deal": if you surrender a pregnant dog or a litter, McGrath will find the mama and puppies a safe place to stay together during their first 10 weeks of life, find adopters for the puppies, and spay the mother before giving her back. The puppy adoption fees cover their vet care and their mama's surgery.

"My entire goal for doing this is to lower the future overpopulation," says McGrath. (She calls it "over-pup-ulation.") "That is where I feel that YARN really has the biggest impact."

McGrath has helped over 160 litters since 2014, placing more than 1,600 dogs in what she calls "forever" homes. She's known for her distinctive puppy names, themed by litter to help her keep track. (Think Opal and Onyx from the gemstone litter or Glad and Dumpster from the garbage litter.) The puppies stay at her home and a network of foster homes in Whitehorse.

"I couldn't do what I do without those foster homes," she says. McGrath is an extremely busy person. In November 2021, she had 40 puppies in foster care, but there's an upside to all the work.

"I constantly have puppies. It's impossible to be unhappy for long around here," she laughs. A puppy's tiny pink tongue kissing her nose is all the reward she needs. "I get paid in puppy kisses and puppy cuddles, that's what I tell people, and I get paid really well."

While some fosters specialize in puppies, others take in adult dogs to give them the time and space to recover from a rough start in life. Regardless of the dog's age, fostering takes loads of work. Fosters provide food and shelter, but also much-needed love, guidance, and socializing.

As one of McGrath's volunteers, Murray Lundberg knows this well. He started helping YARN by shuttling supplies and puppies between Whitehorse and Watson Lake. Then, in 2015, he adopted a YARN puppy. Since then, he's fostered about 70 puppies and driven that 400-kilometre stretch of the Alaska Highway countless times. "Some of the trips have been quite noisy," he laughs. "At one point, I actually had 17 puppies in the back of the Jeep."

Puppies remember the love and security they experienced in Lundberg's home. He met up with one former foster puppy, nicknamed Peanut, a year after saying goodbye. The erstwhile Peanut was so excited he ran towards Lundberg, jumped up, and knocked him backwards into the snow. "That was wonderful," says Lundberg. "That's when you know you've made a difference."



Like rescue networks, shelters are grappling with a high number of dogs coming through their doors. The problem is exacerbated by the Yukon's housing crisis, which forces some pet owners to choose between keeping their pets and having a home. Last year, Whitehorse's Mae Bachur Shelter helped 296 animals. That kept staff busy, especially when the shelter had to close to on-site volunteers. Luckily, there were lots of pandemic adoptions by people seeking companionship.

Further north, the number of animals coming into the Dawson shelter "pretty much doubled" after the pandemic began, says Aedes Scheer, president and founder of the humane society there. Between May 2020 and 2021, the shelter helped 46 surrendered or stray dogs and housed a further 35 dogs for the city's animal control. Most of the dogs came from Dawson, but others came from Pelly Crossing, Old Crow, and Mayo. The demand for adoptions doubled, too, but finding homes for all those dogs was a great deal of work.

Dawson has changed since Scheer arrived, in 1994. Then, the town had no vet services or humane society and a big problem with loose dogs. Many people didn't neuter or vaccinate their pets, and each summer seasonal workers picked up puppies when they arrived and left them behind in the fall. Bylaw officers would sometimes shoot loose dogs for a bounty, says Scheer.

Since founding Dawson's humane society, in 1995, Scheer has promoted animal welfare to kids in schools and worked cooperatively with trappers, outfitters, sled dog race organizers, and city council. The days of the loose dog bounty are long gone, she says. Now, Dawson City animal control has a much friendlier face—bylaw officer Jalen Henry is known for taking sweet selfies with the dogs he picks up around town and posting them on Instagram. And, after decades of work by shelter employees and volunteers, Scheer says it's no longer a battle to get people to spay, vaccinate, and deworm their pets.

"It can be really heartbreaking, hard work," she says about running the shelter. But she's motivated by helping animals find homes where they brighten people's lives. "Why not try to make that life better, regardless of whether you're a human being, or a cat, or a horse?" **Y**



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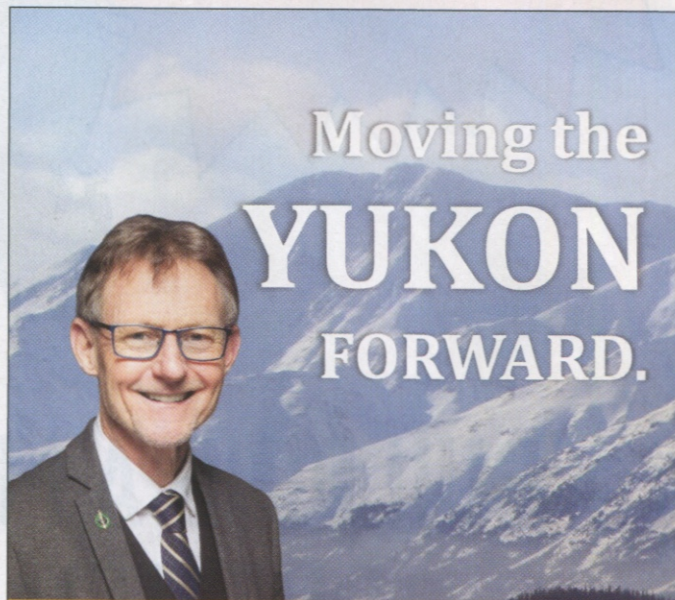


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