

RIGHT: Volunteer Claire Peachey sets a trap for feral cats at a Sierra Vista West End home where a proliferation of cats were roaming through the property. David Kelso, a BAR volunteer for 10 years, looks through the property for free-roaming cats.

foster care and adoption, while treating 2,142 cats, many which were feral, through its spay/neuter, vaccinate and return program.

That's no easy feat, especially in Cochise County, which Kelso says has an incredulous 15,000 feral cat population that continues to grow.

"In Bowie, the fire department estimates there's at least 3,000 feral cats roaming the streets," said Kelso, who serves as a board member for Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative. "We put 10 traps on a driveway, and when we turned around, a cat was already inside one. They were everywhere."

That weekend, BAR volunteers descended on Bowie, trapping 170 cats while a veterinarian surgical van neutered every single one before releasing them.

"That was a major project," said volunteer Claire Peachey. "It took all of our volunteers to pitch in to make it work. It was a long weekend."

Border animal rescues like BAR have been on the rise for decades in various states in the U.S., particularly those bordering Mexico and Canada with high shelter populations. Some organizations try to lighten the burden on shelters by transporting animals to more adoptive homes, according to Stateline.org, the nation's largest state-focused nonprofit news organization.

Locally, what BAR does in Cochise County comes with a big price tag.

"Last year, medical expenses ran between \$85,000- \$88,000," said Kelso. "Like with everything else, it's only going to keep going up."

Ten years ago, those expenses ran \$68,000.

Like their mission itself, finding money to pay for surgeries, vaccinations and food is a constant challenge for BAR, which became a 501(c)(3) charity in 2006. While Kelso said private donations, ranging from \$25 to \$1,500 per year, come from compassionate community members, it's grants the group applies for annually that often pick up the slack.

"Sometimes we receive up to 10 a year, in amounts from \$500 to occasionally \$15,000," said Kelso, who learned how to become a grant writer on-the-fly. "We receive support when people donate to Arizona's Spay and Neuter of Animals Fund by purchasing a pet license plate, which has been extremely helpful for keeping us afloat."

Along with fostering animals for adoption, the heart of BAR's mission is its spay/neuter- vaccinate-and-return program (TNR) that traps free-roaming cats and returns them to where they were caught as well as feeding feral cats colonies. It also helps low-income families who can't pay for neutering or spaying their pet.

BAR is never not busy. Calls for help, or reporting colonies of feral cats come in almost on a daily basis, never stop.

"We probably average 2-5 phone calls a day," said Kelso, who is currently fostering about 20 cats at his home. "Some-



times we get 10 calls, some days none, so it averages out."

Since 2020, BAR has adopted out 800 pets.

But the bulk of its frontline work is setting traps for feral cats like it did at a mobile home park on Sierra Vista's westside in late April.

"We get calls from compassionate people who see two roaming cats and know that can quickly become 30," said Peachey. "Laying out traps with food is a big part of what we do."

BAR isn't Superman, and Kelso and the volunteers know they can't help or save every animal when calls come in.

"Last week I had a call from Douglas where eight puppies were dying from parvo," said Kelso. "I thought we might save one, but it didn't work out. Sometimes it's like that."

There are more good outcomes than bad ones, thanks to PetSmart adoption centers, where BAR places treated cats for potential families to adopt.

"There's a meet-and-greet room, where people get to know them and many get adopted," said Peachey. "We foster them until they get a permanent home. Eventually the right person comes along."

For now and the immediate future, BAR's mission of helping the unwanted is never-ending.

"It's a big part of our lives," said longtime volunteer Mary Anne Behnke, who started when the organization first began. "I can't imagine not doing this."

Interested in donating or volunteering? Call Border Animal Rescue at 520-432-7964. ■