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FLYING FUR!

How Volunteer Pilots Fly Thousands of Animals Out of Death's Reach

BY PATTI MURPHY

On a blustery winter day in Boise, Idaho, a small cargo plane touched down at the airport carrying within its belly some very special passengers—49 dogs of all sizes, ages and breeds who, just hours earlier, had faced the grim fate of euthanasia at an overcrowded Arizona animal shelter.

Tucked securely into crates for the short flight, these barking, wagging fur balls were getting their second chance at life thanks to Dog Is My Copilot (DIMC), a volunteer organization that uses private planes to transport animals from overcrowded, high-kill shelters, to no-kill shelters that are underpopulated and in need of more animals to adopt out.

The dogs on this particular flight were headed for Boise's Idaho Humane Society, one of several shelters throughout Idaho that receive animals from DIMC. However, DIMC

also partners with the Animal Shelter of the Wood River Valley and last year delivered about 40 animals to the Hailey facility.

Nadia Novik, animal operations manager and veterinary technician for the Animal Shelter of the Wood River Valley, said the animals typically come in from California.

"They haven't caught up with spaying and neutering services and, unfortunately, those shelters are filling up like crazy," Novik said. "Nobody wants to be a kill shelter, but when you're out of space, you only have so many options. What adds to the problem is they can't just drive the animals to the next shelter up the road because they're overcrowded, too. They have to fly them somewhere else."

Flying Animals to Safety

Enter Peter Rork, a private pilot and retired orthopedic surgeon who practiced

medicine in Sun Valley in the 1980s, then retired to Jackson, Wyoming, in 1990. That's when he decided to dedicate his life to rescuing doomed animals from shelters.

"What we provide is long-distance transportation to a whole new set of shelters in a different region that would otherwise be unreachable," Rork said about DIMC rescue flights. "You can't pack 25 or 50 dogs into crates and drive them 20 hours in a van. That's tough on everyone, especially the dogs. But we can knock a flight out in four hours."

Rork said some animals get sick and pass gas while flying, which fills the plane with an uncomfortable odor. "I've gotten used to it," he said with a laugh and noted that before the flight medical professionals and animal rescue workers carefully screen all the animals. All of the animals have medical certificates when they board.



Rork co-founded DIMC along with Arizona attorney Judy Zimet in 2012. He does the flying, often in his own Cessna, and Zimet serves as ground control, flight coordinator, and liaison to the media and various shelters. DIMC flies in and out of 11 states in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific West regions. In the past three and a half years the organization has transported almost 3,500 dogs and cats to safety. Recently DIMC acquired a larger Cessna Caravan aircraft that can carry up to 150 animal passengers at one time.

The Animal Shelter of the Wood River Valley also partners with a second animal flight organization, California-based Wings of Rescue. Founded in 2011, Wings of Rescue has about 25 volunteer pilots who use their own planes to fly rescue missions, and also charters a larger Metroliner aircraft that can carry up to 160 animals. Since its start, Wings has transported about 16,000 animals and currently flies to 10 states and Calgary, Canada.

Both DIMC and Wings require that the receiving shelter is a no-kill facility and that the shelter must first help their local pets, meaning local animals won't be displaced to accommodate the transfers.

Novik said that the Wood River shelter's free countywide spay and neuter services have been so successful that it has resulted in more space for transferred animals. "We're fortunately not seeing the number of strays or puppies and kittens in our area that used to overwhelm us, so about 40 percent of our animals come in as transfers.

"The concept of this is amazing," Novik continued. "The fact that we're getting animals from shelters in California where they are literally being euthanized for space and bringing them here relatively easily and in large quantities is incredible. Think of all the lives we can save."

'My Dog No Longer Matches My Drapes'

The stories behind some of these rescued pets are both heartwarming and heartbreaking and confirm why the life flights are so needed.

"We just transported a puppy that somebody threw in a dumpster," said Cindy Smith, co-founder of Wings of Rescue. "He just had a big hernia and needed some surgery, but someone threw this 6-week-old, 2-pound puppy in the dumpster. There are all sorts of animals in shelters," she added.

"Moms with newborns who get put down. Pregnant dogs and cats that get put down. There are seniors and purebred dogs, all highly adoptable, that get euthanized every day, and it just doesn't have to happen.

"I know there are dogs that will be put down because there is no room on one of our flights," she sighed. "They could be adopted within days; it's just that we can only fit so many on the plane."

"You can't pack 25 or 50 dogs into crates and drive them 20 hours in a van. That's tough on everyone, especially the dogs. But we can knock a flight out in four hours."

— Peter Rork, pilot

Ric Browde, volunteer director of logistics for Wings, recalled transporting a dog that was perfectly healthy and well behaved but was voluntarily surrendered to a shelter by his owner because, as the owner said, "he no longer matches the drapes."

Novik said she is not surprised by such stories. "You learn in animal welfare that nothing is unbelievable," she said. "People think, 'Oh, shelter dogs are obviously discarded for a reason,' but it is so untrue. The dogs we get in are incredible. There's nothing wrong with so many of these animals. I think people just get overwhelmed. Perhaps they couldn't afford to spay and neuter, and now they have 15 dogs and they end up at the shelter. The people are probably heartbroken, and I truly get it, but these dogs are just incredible."

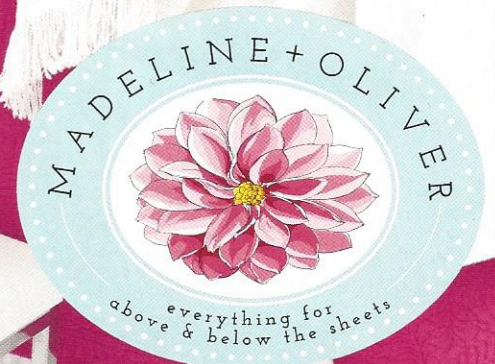
Browde described some of the amazing dogs that Wings has been able to save. "In February we flew 80 dogs to Seattle who were scheduled to be euthanized in a gas chamber in an Oklahoma shelter," he continued. "Among the dogs on that flight were two purebred Great Pyrenees, a St. Bernard, and several Labrador retrievers."

But, amid the stories of abused and throwaway pets, there are also stories of how these rescued animals, in turn, can become the rescuers. "We flew a pit bull into Coeur d'Alene, and he was put in a big adoption event," said Smith. "The backstory was this woman was driving by, and she was ready to just end it all. She was actually driving to go kill herself, and she happened to see the big event



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going on. She stopped and ended up adopting the dog. This dog basically saved her life."

Too Many Animals, Not Enough Room

An estimated 3 to 4 million animals are killed in U.S. shelters each year due to overcrowding, and most of them are completely adoptable.

"We have to keep in mind it's not a dog problem, it's really a people problem," said Rork, who stressed that the primary reason for shelter overcrowding is pet owners who don't spay and neuter their pets.

Browde agreed and said, "People tend to vilify the shelters that have to do the euthanasia, but it's not the shelter's fault, it's the community's fault. When they only have 192 kennels, and they get 100 dogs a day, what are they to do?"

The Cost of Saving Lives

While flying animals from one state to another offers a new level of hope for thousands of dogs and cats, it is not cheap. Both Dog Is My Co-Pilot and Wings of Rescue are nonprofit and depend completely on donations and the volunteerism and generosity of private pilots who offer their time, personal aircraft and sometimes pay for the fuel. Neither organization charges the sending or receiving shelters for their transport services.

"The way it works is that we pick the animals we would like to have transferred from a California shelter and we call that shelter, then they make arrangements for the transport. The animals are flown directly into Hailey," Novik explained.

It can cost between \$80 and \$250 per animal on each rescue flight, which adds up quickly when you are transporting more than 100 dogs. There are also costs involved in vaccinating, spaying and neutering, micro-chipping, flea treatments, heartworm tests, and other necessary vet services prior to transporting the animals. Both organizations make several flights every week, and both are continually seeking donations, which can be made through their respective websites, dogcopilot.org, and wingsofrescue.org.

Saving Animals Is a Team Effort

"The real heroes are the people who take care of the animals before they are transported and who receive them, groom

them, foster them, socialize them and adopt them out," said Rork.

"I will say that the Animal Shelter of the Wood River Valley is a terrific group and they never say no to transports. Also, they always bring me a sandwich and a bottle of water, which I so appreciate since I've been cooped up in an airplane for hours. We need to clone them."

Browde agreed. "You can really tell there is a lot of love at the Wood River shelter."

When asked what people can do to help, Rork and Browde both echoed an identical message: "Don't shop, adopt. If you can't adopt, foster. If you can't foster, volunteer. If you can't volunteer, donate. Every animal that someone adopts saves two: the adopted pet and another animal that can take its place in the shelter and possibly be adopted as well." ❁

FUREVER HAUS SANCTUARY FOR SENIOR DOGS & CATS



Furever Haus was founded by Kim Coonis, who was executive director of The Connection senior center in Hailey for 15 years. This shelter provides a home for senior dogs and cats whose owners have died, moved to a senior facility or are terminally ill and can no longer care for their pets. "We saw such a huge need for this program," Coonis said, "because these older animals were being dumped at shelters and were the first ones to be put to sleep. Nobody wants to adopt an older dog. They were a forgotten population, so we wanted to create a safe haven where they could come and live, and their owners would know they are taken care of."
fureverhaus@gmail.com