

The cat catcher of Asotin

Mayor Vikki Bonfield works after hours to round up and fix the town's exploding feral feline population



Kerri Sandaine/Lewiston Tribune

ASOTIN - It's quitting time for the employees at the Asotin County Courthouse.

As they walk to their cars and drive away, the epicenter of Asotin grows quiet. Other than the slight breeze blowing on this summer evening, nothing is stirring on Second Street.

Wait. Something just darted under the antique tractor parked in the downtown gazebo.

"Here they come," whispers Asotin Mayor Vikki Bonfield. "They always show up at dusk."

As promised, the feral cats arrive on cue. Close to a dozen scamper under antique farm equipment housed near the Asotin Museum. Two more hide under a boat and a black kitten hangs around the fire station.

They all bolt when a couple of kids ride by on bikes, but before long, the cats creep out of the shadows for another round of hide-and-seek with the town's top official.

Bonfield quietly places two traps deep in feral cat territory and waits for the smell of tuna fish to draw in her prey.

Over the next six hours or so, the dedicated trapper makes frequent visits to the downtown area to see if the bait has done its magic. Sure enough, just before midnight, two kittens and a mama cat are confined in the crates sitting next to the Asotin Fire Department.

"They are wilder than a March hare," Bonfield says. "You don't dare handle them without heavy gloves."

This latest cat catch brings Bonfield's tally to 45.

She traps the wild felines on Monday and Wednesday nights and takes them to the Lewis Clark Animal Shelter to be spayed or neutered.

The city of Asotin pays the shelter \$100 a month to fix two cats a week, an agreement Bonfield calls a "godsend." The arrangement has been in place since January.

"The Lewis Clark Animal Shelter has been absolutely awesome," she says. "Our feral cat population is a serious problem."

It's more humane to try to cut down the populations through sterilization than see the cats starve to death or become diseased, Bonfield says. The goal is to make a dent in the fertility rate and reduce the colonies.

"We do what's best for the animal," she said. "It would really help us if people would spay or neuter their pets."

Once they're fixed, the cats are returned to Asotin or adopted by approved households as barn cats.

"Do you see that beautiful calico by the boat?" Bonfield asks. "She is fixed. You can tell because her left ear is clipped."

Once a kitten is more than 8 weeks old, it's too wild to become a house pet. Some of the younger ones can be tamed. The rest roam around town and several Asotin residents feed them.

"It's amazing to me how wild they are, yet they know where to go to get what they need to survive," Bonfield says. "They mostly hang out downtown and come out at night. They know all the best hiding places. They get real wise to me. The ones I really want to catch are smart."

After she catches a cat, Bonfield takes the wild critter to her garage and then transports it to the shelter the next day.

Her weekly cat-catching chores take a lot of time, but Bonfield hopes it's helping.

"I'm not sure how I got stuck with this job," the mayor says with a laugh. "But someone's got to do it."

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