



Concord's Nature Connection Brings the Outdoors Inside

BY PETER GOLDEN

Central to the lives we enjoy – and as much of a personal right as the air we breathe – is our sense of freedom: limitless, all encompassing freedom.

While there are many freedoms we enjoy, we often live almost unaware of their value unless suddenly deprived of them. Consider for a moment the freedom to step outside and discover the scent of spring upon the air, to stroll in the woods, to dig in the garden, or to enjoy the company of a favorite pet.

Those freedoms – the ability to make connections with nature and animals – rank among the most important pleasures of our lives. Deprived of them we can begin to feel cooped up, cranky, even overwhelmed and saddened.

If you've ever been confined to a hospital bed for more than a few days, especially when those days happen to fall in the midst of a stretch of lovely spring weather, you know exactly what we're talking about.

BOB LOTZ



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So when there are groups of people who have lost those freedoms due to illness or infirmity, confinement, or old age, then you just might hope they get to reconnect again through a “nature connection.”

What if people could experience the pleasures of forest, field, and stream without getting out of their seats? That question motivated Sarah Ward, back in the 1980s, to found a group called Animals as Intermediaries. It was a great idea at the time – to “bring animal and nature programs to people with limited access to the natural world” – and still is today.

But over the years, while Animals as Intermediaries successfully reached out into the community and did some great work, being an “intermediary” began to sound a little stuffy.

So the group decided to change its name, and now is known as The Nature Connection, a perfect fit for the organization, which is based in Concord’s Emerson Umbrella building and has a compact army of enthusiastic volunteers.

Buddy Dog Humane Society

YOU’VE PROBABLY PASSED Buddy Dog, a no-kill pet shelter, a thousand times if you live anywhere close to Rt. 20 in Sudbury. And if you have kids, you’ve probably heard a particular pleading cry coming from the back seat a thousand times.

“Mom-Dad, can we have a dog (or cat), please can we, please?”

On the day we visited Buddy Dog’s offices and kennel, both housed in a low, yellow building (My wife Tina was along for the ride.), we were greeted in the office by Pedro, a Chihuahua mix

(“Mix” is a term you hear a lot around Buddy Dog, although they have their share of p[eds].)

Small, saddle brown, and with those dark, appealing eyes that define his breed, Pedro latched on to Tina, who had sat down for a minute to let a small horde of kids, parents in tow, pass by on their way into the kennel. “We come here a lot, just to look,” said Kristin, a mother from Sudbury of Jack and Kiley.

“To look?” I responded, wondering how many times you can schlep two kids in and out of a place where an instantaneous declaration of love can travel like lightning along a furiously wagging tail.

“Well, we already adopted a Buddy Dog,” Kristin, responds. “But you never know. We might just do it again.”

Gina Letteri, outreach coordinator for Buddy Dog, led us back into the kennel area to meet the chorus in residence. Just inside the door, a right hand turn opened into a special area reserved for cats and puppies.

The puppies included a few exceptions to the rule. If not exactly pups, Princess and Missy (mature) are, respectively, “a teacup poodle and a Yorkie,” Letteri explains. At four pounds each, those two tiny bundles of cuteness with firecracker energy just begged to be brought home.

“On average, we have about 20 to 25 cats on any given day and about twice that many dogs,” says Letteri, whose organization places upwards of a thousand pets annually, many of which come from



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The Nature Connection people meet frequently at their offices, where they store their trove of moss, wood, and other natural materials. But the organization really lives in volunteers' homes, where a host of small, very furry, be-whiskered or be-feathered creatures have found comfortable refuge. Many of the little crea-

All about the Sudbury Branch of the Woof & Wag Choir!

animal control officers in local communities, or families that are moving or where age and indisposition have led to giving up a pet.


Interested in taking a look at the whole, wonderful pack? Be warned: If your kids are anywhere around your computer (The Buddy Dog Website is buddydogs.com where you can view an active list of adoption candidates online.), it's time to shoo them out of the room. One slip and Missy, Rico, or Max could be headed right to your house faster than you ever imagined.

Gina Letteri observes that about 90 percent of Buddy Dog adoptions work out, with the other 10 percent having the option of returning their pet for a swap.

Here's how things worked out for one local family: Allison Larew and her kids Sophia and Vivi visited five shelters before they met "JP" at Buddy Dog. He's a Bassett Fauve de Bretagne (yup, a rare and very genuine purebred), which is nice, because Allison and her husband John take the kids to France a lot. According to the Larew kids, JP is so cute and sweet *and* smart he just may be the best dog in the whole world!

Which pretty well defines all the pets at Buddy Dog. But why not see for yourself?






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tures have permanent disabilities, so the idea of having a human support network is a pretty good one.

In fact, The Nature Connection has gotten so good at caring for rehabilitated wild animals  that it has received a state wildlife rehabilitative license. Nevertheless, the crow with a bad wing and the old owl don't get to take it easy all the time.

Multiple times every week, Nature Connection teams head out to nursing homes and hospices, senior centers and kindergartens, and even special-purpose schools – places where people may have lost their own, personal nature connection.

And that's how The Nature Connection, in modest but meaningful ways, is making a difference in a lot of lives.

That's what attracted Nature Connection director Sophie Wadsworth to the organization back in 2002. "I was browsing around in a Concord bookshop," she says from her home, her new son Hugh perched on her hip, "when I came across a table filled with The Nature Connection literature that talked about bringing animals to people who couldn't get out. I was hooked, right away."

"We've got 48 volunteers," she says, "who receive special training with all sorts



ERIN PRAWOKO



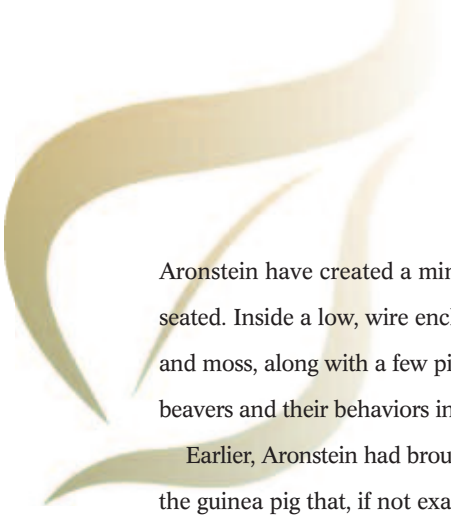
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of animals, including everything from hedgehogs to birds of prey.”

“When we make a site visit, we begin by making a space in which transformation is possible – a circle in which people can deepen their connection with the natural world and animals,” she adds.

Rebecca Graessle of the Natick Senior Center joins me to review a Nature Connection presentation that has just taken place in a nearby meeting room.

It’s a cold winter’s day outside, but eight seniors have turned out and are sitting expectantly in a circle. It’s easy to see why – volunteers led by The Nature Connection’s Josey Kirkland and Jude



Aronstein have created a miniature woodlands environment around which the seniors are seated. Inside a low, wire enclosure a furry rabbit and a guinea pig are surrounded by leaves and moss, along with a few pieces of gnawed wood, brought along to foster discussion about beavers and their behaviors in the wild.

Earlier, Aronstein had brought out the black and white rabbit to be touched and held, then the guinea pig that, if not exactly enthusiastic, was none-the-less willing to be petted. There

was plenty of that going on as Aronstein circulated around the room.

“It’s so nice when seniors have an opportunity to experience nature first hand,” says Graessle, who coordinates volunteers at the Natick center. “The Nature Connection creates a whole experience for our seniors whenever they come here. Many of our people have limited mobility, so being able to run their hands through a clump of moss, to take a figurative walk in the woods, or to gently hold an animal and be expressive – that’s really special.”

The Nature Connection receives wide support from foundations and from individuals and businesses in the many communities it serves west of Boston. On May 28, folk singer Laurie McKenna will come to the Emerson Umbrella Theater for a Nature Connection benefit.

“We do a big wildlife event in Concord every year,” concludes Wadsworth. “We featured a live wolf from the Wolf Conservation Center, and over 400 people turned out. Recently, we brought a live eagle to the Alcott School.”

In Concord and scores of surrounding communities, The Nature Connection is evoking something many of us have lost touch with – a sense of what wild life and the natural environment look and feel like. ★

PETER GOLDEN writes about history, the environment, and technology with a focus on the communities west of Boston.