

Doña Ana County-Las Cruces animal shelter seeks homes for just-orphaned exotic cats

By Diana M. Alba/Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES - The Doña Ana County-Las Cruces animal shelter is seeking homes for about 35 exotic-breed cats that were turned over to county officials this week.

Thursday, the Bengal and Savannah cats were feeling the stress animals experience from being in the shelter, said Beth Vesco-Mock, director of the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley. Two seemed ill, she said, but others were ready to be adopted.

"Some are extremely adoptable; some are not," she said.

Vesco-Mock said she was going to carry out a strict interview process to ensure potential adopters weren't seeking the animals simply because they were special breeds. She noted that people will have to be aware that the cats might be more standoffish than an average house cat, partly because their breeds tend to be independent-minded, and because she's not sure how much they've been socialized.

"We don't want someone adopting it because it is exotic," she said.

The adoption fee is \$50 per cat. Adopters must fill out an application and go through an interview process. Vesco-Mock said there's not a requirement that the person live in Do-a Ana County.

Bengals are seven generations removed from a cross with a Leopard Cat, and Savannahs are seven generations removed from a cross with a serval, a cheetah-like cat. A family member of the previous owner said the cats could sell for between \$800 and \$1,200 apiece.

Vesco-Mock said the cats are known for their unusual pattern of black markings.

News of the cats being impounded at the shelter caught the attention of Victoria Hutchings and Gina Berrigan, both of San Francisco, who happened to be in Las Cruces this week visiting family. They stopped by the shelter Thursday to look at the cats and were considering adopting one.

"The story just broke my heart; I said here's an opportunity to do a good thing," Berrigan said. "I get Cat Fancy magazine, and I read about (the breeds.) They look really cool."

But Berrigan said if she didn't find a pet among the Bengals or Savannahs, she might adopt one of the shelter's other cats.

Vesco-Mock said some of the cats are spayed and neutered, but the ones that aren't will be altered before they're adopted out. Also, she said the animals will be vaccinated and microchipped. She said the shelter is in the process of collecting past vet records from the animals' last veterinarian, so basic information about their medical histories will be given to their new owners.

Shelter officials estimated the cats weigh 10 to 12 pounds. They have short hair.

Vesco-Mock said the case does cut into space available for animals at the facility.

"It's impacting the amount of room; we were fortunate we had 10 rabbits adopted out, so these cats will go in that area," she said.

Curtis Childress, director of the county's animal control department, said family members of the previous owner contacted the county animal control department after concerns about whether the owner would be able to continue paying for the upkeep. Otherwise, the cats were healthy, and they had good living conditions, unlike most typical cases of hoarding. The only problem, he said, was the owner hadn't applied to obtain a county permit that allows a person to own more than six animals.

Said Vesco-Mock: "She took good care of them, so she was not a hoarder on any level."

The cats were turned over to the county Wednesday.

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If you adopt

What: adopting pets from the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley

When: • noon to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday
• noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Where: Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley, 3551 Bataan Memorial West, Las Cruces

Information:

- 382-0018
- cat adoption fee: \$50
- dog adoption fee: \$75