



MONTANA FOLKS

DURRAE AND JOHN JOHANEK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KURT KELLER



Everyone was sure Sammy was lost in the forest and had died. But one day Michelle Feldstein saw the thirty-year-old palomino running loose along the road near her ranch in Paradise Valley. Sammy was a retired National Park Service horse that used to carry water to rangers in the backcountry. Michelle was given permission to keep him for the summer, but at the end of the season the park service told her they were required to dispose of animals by auctioning them off, so she found herself in Billings bidding against canners. Sammy moved in with Michelle and husband, Al, and she and the family dog spent Sammy's first night sleeping nearby in the camper to keep an eye on him. He received his own bucket and personalized sign, was put on supplements, and thrived for another four years. She notes, "Sammy was the first horse buried on our property."

There's a similar story behind Beasty, Thumbellina, Tain, Beauty, Bozo, and Finean—just

a few of Michelle's rescues. On the 270-acre ranch south of Livingston, life is good for her three dogs, thirty-two cats, fourteen llamas, twenty-three chickens, forty-two equines, and counting. Michelle is emphatic that she's not competing with the humane society and doesn't accept kittens,

puppies, and abandoned Easter bunnies but instead takes in the hard-to-place geriatric and special-needs animals. Michelle gets emotional talking about Daisy the cow, who, at twenty-three years old, came to live at the ranch because her owner was too

old to take care of her. She lived comfortably for another two years. "She was a wonderful cow."

Michelle and Al came to Paradise Valley in 1990, falling in love with Deer Haven Ranch at first sight. The guesthouse was perfect for her daughter, but little did Michelle realize that later it would help fund the enormous medical and food bills her menagerie would generate. At \$1,000 a

ANIMAL RESCUER

MICHELLE FELDSTEIN,
LIVINGSTON

month for the veterinarian, she probably gets a real nice Christmas card each year, and the local feed mills are always glad to see her. "My vet bill each month is a given, and the farrier comes for two days at a time." Neither could she know how much work it would take to tend the flock: "I spend two hours each day just cleaning up." But she's not complaining.

Michelle has never had to go looking for new tenants; they find her. She has a hard time saying no, especially to the hard-luck cases. Deer Haven started out like a typical ranch: three healthy horses, a dog, and one cat, but "my daughter was working at the humane society, and before long our cat population grew." Word got out, and soon older and larger animals showed up. Oliver, a huge white horse, was headed toward the glue factory because he was prone to seizures when she took him in. Stormy wasn't in much better shape; he was four hundred pounds underweight and wasn't expected to live two weeks. "I got three hundred pounds back on him in no time," largely through

her research and use of supplements, vitamins, and minerals, which she swears by.

The views of the Yellowstone River and Absaroka Mountains grab your attention when you enter the house, but only until you realize you're surrounded—by cats, lots of cats. However, this is only part of the group; the rest are lounging in the heated tack room in the barn, where they have their own couch. Once accepted, all of Michelle's cats are spayed or neutered, but many of them have issues. "Princess was abused and has social problems. We don't ask much of her; she relaxes in front of her own fan now." It becomes obvious after watching Michelle serve as a doorman that there are no cat doors in the house, and for good reason. "They bring in critters," and her hospitality stops at snakes. She wouldn't hurt one, "but they aren't welcome."

At her guesthouse, people *are* welcome, with one provision: "You must like animals," and she means it. Michelle screens paying guests through phone conversations and doesn't accept

tourists off the road or one-nighters. It's not a bed-and-breakfast; Michelle doesn't cook but keeps the pantry stocked and provides eggs from her flock of chickens, acquired through the local classifieds: "These birds were destined for table fare, now they're providing it." But not all guests sleep in—kids staying with their parents often volunteer to help clean the corrals. Word of mouth, the family Web site (www.alfeldstein.com), and Al generate the revenue to keep the Feldstein ark afloat.

Although she's careful about who rents, she's even more particular about the occasional house sitter. "My trust factor of humans is very thin. I need someone who gets as much comfort out of taking care of my animals as I do. They need to check them every day for cuts or bruises, clean the stalls, and give them the love and attention I would." She has horror stories to tell and won't hesitate to fire anyone who doesn't work out.

The toughest thing for Michelle is having to put an animal down. "It never gets easier, no matter how many you have, but I want my animals to die with dignity. Even when they're buried I won't allow them to be dragged; they must be carefully placed in the ground," she says, adding, "Grief isn't limited to humans. I've seen horses mourn."

She gently pats the ranch's celebrity, Ima—as in "I'm a horse"—who pulled the doctor's carriage in *A River Runs Through It*. "There was so much wrong with this horse that the vet told his owner to euthanize him, but he's still here and in fact has taught all my grandchildren to ride." Sharing the pasture with Ima, burros, donkeys, miniature horses, and Shetlands is Lady, a forty-year-old pony bought at auction by someone wanting to play a joke on a friend. After the joke wore off, no one wanted her. Thanks to Michelle, she's now in paradise, having the last laugh. ♦