

Sanctuary is paradise for cats and cat lovers

by Barbara Moss

I was bursting with excitement when Habitat for Cats secretary Phyllis Sweeney invited me to see the Sanctuary.

I followed Phyllis' car down a quiet country road. We turned. Then turned again until our cars were creeping along a long, single-lane dirt and gravel driveway.

We passed a house, then lawns gave way to impenetrable viney woods. We pulled up to a small house and shed - not a cat in sight. We walked up to a gate. And that's when I saw them. Some 20 kitties with round curious eyes and tails flying high were trotting toward us. At the animal shelter where I got my cat Mo, kittens meowed piteously at visitors and scraped at the front of their little cages, but these cats were happy. They did not try to slip through the gate to an uncertain freedom. Some purred around my legs. Most gazed at me with frank feline curiosity judging my potential as an interesting visitor. Apparently I passed inspection because we had quite an entourage escorting us through the sanctuary. I didn't know that Phyllis was carrying sliced turkey treats, but the cats sure did.

In the center of the sanctuary is a grassy meadow abloom with wildflowers. Little cedar trees served as natural scratching posts. As I looked around, cats were everywhere. None were obese or underweight and all had fine shiny coats. I saw one pouncing at something in the grass, a vole perhaps, and another sat up on her haunches batting at a white moth. She was having a wonderful time and the moth seemed to enter into the spirit of the game. He didn't come close to being caught--not this time anyway. .

My guide showed me several sheds and hutches converted to cat winter quarters for one, two or several cats. All were insulated and heaped with fresh straw bedding. What really impressed me was that no entrance way, no cat flap, opened directly into the main area. Each had a little entrance hall, a foyer, or an alcove so no cat entering or leaving would let in a blast of winter wind on the animals already inside. Around the meadow are woodsy areas where the more feral cats could retreat to privacy. Phyllis explained how the Sanctuary worked on a kennel system. New arrivals are placed in roomy fenced-off yards so that they can adjust to the sanctuary environment and gradually to the other cats . They remain in the kennels for two weeks to a month. Kittens also have a special house and yard that protects them from big bossy cats and where volunteers come to play with and socialize the kittens

We came to a gully crossed by a heavy board. Two cats were crossing a little bridge as we approached. On the other side in a shaded area was a giant sandbox that any daycare center would be proud to own. It was a communal litter box to provide cats an alternative to a walk in the woods. Feces were removed regularly and placed into a nearby organic composter - a sort of chemical toilet. As we completed our circuit I could not help but notice the beautiful plantings on the property. I saw bulging orange rose hips belonging to *Rosa rugosa*. A pear tree's branches ached bent with fruit. A lovely hydrangea with huge conical white blossoms sent sweet fragrance upon the breeze. While we walked, Phyllis told me of the circumstances that brought cats here. Now numbering over 70, most were feral but there were cases of abandonment and cruelty. Surely this is the Garden of Eden and a paradise on earth.