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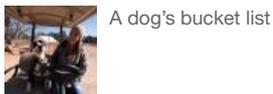
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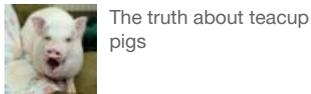
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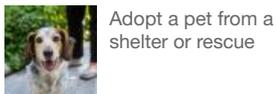
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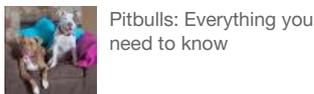
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Bulgaria: Diane Rowles

| May 17, 2009 | [0 Comments](#)

Three years ago, Diane Rowles lived in Scotland and owned a local pub. Today, she lives in rural Bulgaria where she is on the frontier of caring for the country's stray animal population.

By: Sasha Dudding - Best Friends Volunteer International Writer

The Situation in Bulgaria

Animal welfare initiatives currently have a small, but growing, presence in Bulgaria. While awareness of the need to care for the country's large stray population is on the rise, attitudes towards strays remain largely indifferent and many citizens are unable to feed, shelter and care for the animals living on their streets. Most of the thirty existing Bulgarian animal shelters are overwhelmed with limited resources. Most strays that go to Bulgaria's shelters will never be adopted and those left on the streets will continue to produce future generations as spay and neuter programs are few and far between. Fortunately, things are changing for many of the dogs in Rudozem, Bulgaria. They have found a savior in Diane Rowles, the operator of a registered foundation and an animal welfare entrepreneur, who has made it her mission to save Bulgaria's strays.

Diane's Story

Born in England, Diane moved to Aberdeenshire, Scotland in 1993, where she worked in health care and then bought a village pub. When the pub began to fail, Diane, her husband, and her four children turned to their longtime dream of moving to Bulgaria, where they would be able to live inexpensively on beautiful land near the forest.

Their plans did not include becoming a registered charity and caring for numerous stray animals. However, this is just what they have done since moving. "We had no idea at the time that we would ever be doing rescue work with dogs," says Diane, but when she moved, "it was a shock to see the number and the condition of the street dogs." It didn't take long for Diane to realize that she had to do something to help the strays and change the situation in her new country.

Today, Diane currently houses 11 dogs, regularly cares for 5 in the neighborhood, and feeds up to 10 additional dogs each day in the town center. Most recently, she adopted six puppies that she found in a garbage dump. Understanding that a garbage dump is no place for a puppy, Diane adopted all six and added, yet again, to her ever-growing family. Realizing that her work alone to help the strays will not change the situation, Diane founded the charity Rudozem Street Dog Rescue, which educates the community about stray dogs, adoption and humane population control and that partners with animal organizations in Western Europe to help find homes for the many strays in Bulgaria.

Through these partnerships, she has already helped dogs get adopted or move to foster homes. She arranged a trip in late April for eight dogs (including Samson, pictured above) to travel to Holland. Six of them were adopted into permanent homes, where they are currently settling in with their new families. If funds allow, she hopes to send more dogs over in June. Diane has discovered her role in her new home, and says, "Now I know that the reason for us being here is to help these dogs, I just didn't know it when we moved."

Her Mission

Diane's main goal is to reduce the number of Bulgarian street dogs, ultimately by building a shelter that can care for them. This shelter would be able to neuter dogs to prevent unwanted offspring, and provide medical attention for many more dogs than can currently fit in her home.

"We realize we can not take all the dogs off the streets but this will reduce the numbers in the future," she explains. In the meanwhile, "the municipality has said they will provide us with premises. Although they are

obliged by law to provide shelter for street dogs, there is currently not enough to house every stray dog." Diane hopes that her organization will grow and that, as a result, she will be able to drastically reduce the number of strays living on the street.

Overcoming Obstacles

Every day, Diane must overcome many obstacles - language, the number of dogs she houses, and lack of funds. Especially in a recession, she says, "raising money is our biggest challenge. But it has to be on a par with not having premises." Caring for the street dogs requires Diane to continually seek donations, both money and donations-in-kind such as collars and medical supplies. So far, she has received these things from supporters overseas, from a raffle she held on her website, and from selling ads on it.

Without a shelter, Diane keeps almost all of the dogs she cares for in her own home. While she does feed some every day around the town, she does most of her work at her house. This means that she must be careful not to upset her neighbors with the high noise levels that are an inevitable part of housing eleven dogs. "Some nights, we get no sleep due to dogs barking," she says. Despite these challenges, Diane remains committed to helping as many dogs as possible and towards working to obtain a premises for her shelter.

Language is also a large obstacle in her rural home. Diane has had trouble finding the translators she needs in order to collaborate with local officials, but has so far taken action by putting up posters in the town center that clearly state the animal welfare laws of Bulgaria, most of which are unknown to the public. Diane also sent translated letters to the municipality that speak out against the illegal shooting of dogs, and has a version of her website in Bulgarian to further raise awareness. Diane says that, "when we do have help and someone who can translate, we intend to go into the schools and villages," and teach people there about the plight of the street dogs. Diane understands that without the support of the community, things will not change.

Thanks to Diane, street dogs in Bulgaria are now living with loving families and enjoying the safety and comfort of a loving forever home. Although the work can be difficult, Diane knows that helping Bulgaria's strays is what she was meant to do. "We can't just do nothing," she says. "We think, how much more heartache can we let ourselves go through? **In my heart, I know there is only one answer- as much as it takes until all these dogs are safe.**"

Support Network

When experiencing frustration and hardship, Diane turns to the Internet, which she has used to build a support network for herself. She has a group on Facebook and a blog on her website, both of which have led to donations as well as friends and words of encouragement. The group's members and blog's readers follow Diane in her daily ups and downs. "You are never alone," says one supporter. People root for the dogs when they have gone missing, and celebrate when they return. They sympathize with Diane over loss, and console her when she is having a difficult time in Rudozem. "Belonging to this group, one gets very involved," says a member of Diane's Facebook group.

How You Can Help

To get further involved Diane suggests that people "try and care for dogs where they find them. If they have premises, then sterilize as many animals as possible. Most of all is to stay strong" in the face of difficulties and disappointments. The problem of stray dogs spreads far beyond Bulgaria. As an English expatriate who lives in Bulgaria, works with people in Holland, and has an international support network, Diane has certainly proven that it is an international issue. She has also proven that stray animal populations is an international issue that we can work to resolve by getting involved and by supporting one another.

For More Information

Follow Diane's

[Facebook group](#) and show her your support for the work she is doing to help Bulgaria's stray dog population. Learn more about the Rudozem Street Dog Rescue by visiting Diane's charity's website at www.streetdogrescue.com.

Photos provided by Diane and Rudozem Street Dog Rescue

Lead photo: Diane Rowles and Lucy, one of her beloved rescued street dogs.

Also pictured: Antony Rowles, Diane's husband and partner in her mission;

Samson, who was rescued by Diane from Bulgaria's streets and now lives with a family in Holland;

Pippy, who was found wandering the streets with Poppy, and who both now live with Diane's family until they are adopted;

Yola, photographed by Claudine Anton, at her forever home in Western Europe.

Posted by Candace Ritz – International Team Leader



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