

## **Friendly or Hungry? Free-Roaming Dogs on the Navajo Nation**

This article is an attempt to share information about free-roaming dogs on the Navajo Nation and some of the complexities involved in helping them.

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Two years ago I was traveling through the Navajo reservation on my way to Utah. In one of the towns, I noticed groups of dogs restlessly searching the ground in the parking lots of the fast food stores, the market, the motels, and the gas stations. There were people all around, but nobody seemed to pay the dogs any mind. Instead, people acted as if they weren't even there.

There were all sorts of dogs, including a mother dog with teats hanging down, puppies following closely at her heels. All seemed in search of food. They licked the pavement of gas stations, seemingly for crumbs. They lay under cars outside fast food joints, or circled ceaselessly among the cars. They lay up against stone abutments in front of the motels, panting in the heat.

Inevitably, I went into the market and bought bags of dog food and plastic bowls for water. Feeling very conspicuous, I set out food and water for the dogs. As I traveled, I fed groups of dogs in several towns. Coming to the next town, the next gas station, and seeing more dogs, I was unable to just pass on by. I went into the nearest fast food place and bought five dollars of hamburgers for the dogs. I found that I could not approach the dogs directly. But, if I sat inside my car and drove slowly up to the scavenging dogs, opened my door and flipped them a burger, they would get the food. The troubled gaze of the dogs after I fed them, the way they looked at me, with such a mix of confusion, fear, hunger, and distrust penetrated my being and stayed with me, long after I was home again.

On the Navajo reservation, there are an estimated 160,000 free-roaming dogs.\* A number this big boggles the mind. Instead, you get a sense of the constant presence of animals looking for food, whether in a town or out in the middle of nowhere. You see dogs with their ribs showing, limping dogs with messed up legs, dogs itchy with mange, bullet-ridden, hungry dogs. They are like ghost beings, yet their palpable suffering is a constant presence.

Visitors from off the reservation are accustomed to having publicly-funded animal control officers, animal shelters, veterinarians, and often humane societies in the county where they live. The Navajo Nation currently has five animal control officers covering the entire reservation, meaning each officer's territory covers several thousand square miles.\*\* Many towns do not have a veterinarian within 50 miles. The closest thing to humane societies are small groups of volunteers who rescue and then foster animals in their own homes, without the benefit of a shelter. Even a simple trip to the market offers opportunities for rescue, and it is common to find puppies left in cardboard boxes by the roadside. All of the rescue groups are overloaded with needy animals.

"... this is the main reason that people should contribute to the humane groups on the reservation so that the volunteers can continue to swing into action when the non-ending reports of desperate animals pour in. ...if you, yourself, in any way

can help an animal in need, assume the responsibility and PLEASE DO SO. Don't expect SOMEONE else to take care of it.... there are several possible remedies, and many of them can be done by individuals passing through the area. The individual is a great hope for a lot of the dogs. I must know ten people with one rez dog each."  
--Susan, a rescuer

The free-roaming dogs one sees may range from feral, meaning wild, to completely tame, or anywhere in between. The degree to which they are non-tame determines how difficult they are to catch and ultimately to be helped. In addition, some of the dogs on the Navajo Nation are working dogs, who were born with and live with the sheep. I have stopped out of concern for a dog scavenging roadkill out in the middle of nowhere, and then realized that the dog was actually moving along with sheep in a nearby field. These working dogs may be somewhat feral, depending upon how much handling, socialization, and human contact they have had. For the purposes of this article, semi-feral is the term used to talk about the free-roaming dogs that are partly wild and partly tame. These are dogs that have had some dealings with humans, but who shy away from human contact.

A true feral dog has never been touched by human hands, and was born in the wild of a feral mother. They are extremely wary towards people and will avoid contact if at all possible. Some hide during the day and hunt at night, making it difficult to accurately gauge their numbers. While not depending directly on humans for food and shelter, many ferals depend at least somewhat on food inadvertently provided by people, like garbage, and ferals are often found around the edges of where people live. Increased dog fighting, dogs being bred for aggressiveness, and reduced animal control in urban areas in the 1980's led to an increase in the feral dog problem. In August, 2003, National Geographic News reported on the world-wide nature of the problem of feral dogs.

True ferals often travel and hunt in packs, turning to each other for their primary bond rather than humans. They breed and spread diseases such as parasites, distemper, rabies, parvo, and mange. They survive by predation, often injuring and destroying livestock, sometimes biting people, and can become a huge public health problem in a community. Children and the elderly are most vulnerable to attack. There are 6,000 dog bites a year reported on the Navajo Nation.\*\*\* (There is no information on how many of these bites come specifically from feral dogs.)

Semi-feral reservation (rez) dogs have had some contact with humans. They were born in the wild and then sporadically fed (begged food), or animals that left home (sometimes from hunger or abuse), or dogs who were abandoned or dumped by their owners. They are wary and fearful of people, not necessarily aggressive unless cornered, and very difficult to catch. Semi-ferals are often targets of animal cruelty, with bullet wounds, broken legs, and injuries reflective of their status as outcasts. Dead dogs are commonly seen alongside the roadway. Hungry dogs (feral or not) will cannibalize road-killed dogs to survive, and by doing so contribute to the spread of disease.

The haggard, desperate appearance of dogs roaming fast food, market, hotel, and gas station parking lots on the rez is distressing to tourists. Enticed with food, the dogs might venture closer, and possibly even tolerate the brush of a hand, but their friendly demeanor is actually directed towards the food, not the people.

"There are those people who travel through the Navajo reservation, who become fixated on helping a dog (or dogs) and want to find SOMEONE to help the poor animals. Those are the people who confuse what they think is 'friendly' but is really starving, because on the surface, the behavior may look the same. The dogs seem friendly because they know they have to approach humans for food, but they are not looking for human contact or interaction."

--Susan

### **September, 2003**

#### **Navajo reservation**

Some of us find we can do things on behalf of the animals that we would never do for ourselves alone. Two years before, the troubled gaze of semi-ferals had captured my attention, and haunted me ever since. Even though I live in California, I was compelled to get involved with people and groups working to ease the suffering of animals on the Navajo Nation. I helped mostly from afar, doing a website, creating flyers, sending money, crates, blankets, and helping coordinate some resources for the rescue groups. Now I was driving into Page, AZ, 800 miles from home, to meet someone I had never met before but had networked with for the last year and a half. I felt very sick, but attributed it to nerves. I was determined to show up because we planned to travel to a remote location and rescue some dogs. A person alone could not lift the trapped dog back into the truck. I pulled over to puke into a plastic ice bucket taken from the last hotel. I had to step back and chuckle, wondering when I had let go of the social graces. Meeting someone I had never met before while puking my guts out would be nothing short of a nightmare in my normal life.

The person I was meeting (I'll call her Susan) had experience in rescuing dogs, including semi-ferals, on the Navajo reservation.

Susan and I had been planning and preparing for this meet for several weeks. We communicated via phone calls and email. She brought experience in rescue. My strength was in networking. My participation included being the second person on the catch and gathering a network of help for the dogs after capture. I had secured veterinary services and temporary foster care in Flagstaff, with a plan for moving the dogs on after that. The dogs would be my responsibility after the catch.

Susan's preparations consumed her days. She had home-built wire traps whose design evolved as she learned more from each rescue situation. Her pickup truck was now loaded with special sticks, traps, transfer cages, and a cooler of wet, smelly food. She was entirely primed, mentally and physically revved and ready to go. Like an athlete before a marathon, she exuded intense focus, the single-minded ferocity required to catch a feral.

To get me in the right mindset, Susan described the need for quiet, calm movements. More people were not necessarily helpful, but a second person to quickly close the door behind the dog, and help lift the trap afterwards, was helpful. Susan would stay in front of the dog with food.

I had never done anything remotely like this rescue and felt averse to even the idea of trapping. I dreaded all the unknowns, and imagined scary scenarios, what it might mean to take responsibility for the animals so far from home. Susan attributed my nausea

to nerves before a catch. She herself had what she referred to as "the Kayenta stomachache."

We discussed the situation of these particular dogs. They were first brought to my attention by a tourist passing through the reservation on her way to [Best Friends Animal Sanctuary](#) in Kanab, Utah. Alongside the road, miles from a town, the tourist noticed several roadside dumpsters, with four starving dogs scavenging for food, one of whom had recently had puppies. She interrupted her trip to feed, water and ultimately rescue the friendliest of the bunch. Her home was 2000 miles away and yet she was able to find placement for that dog. That was amazing enough in itself. When she returned home, she sent emails and photos of the remaining dogs, desperate for someone to help feed and water them. They haunted her sleep at night: homeless, dumpster dogs, out in the middle of nowhere.

Living many states away, she called around until she reached someone who worked at the trading post, a mile from the dumpsters. She sent money asking that the dogs be fed. She tried to stay in touch, but the local person had no phone at home. It was uncertain whether the dogs were actually being fed. I also called around, trying to come up with more solid help, but the nearest rescuer was thirty miles away, in another town, and fully occupied with the animals there. Someone we knew had checked on the dogs a week before, and left food for them. With all our planning, we still would have to show up, take our chances, and then deal with whatever we found.

As we discussed the situation and the options for the dogs after the catch, it became clear that the resources I had set up for the dogs would not be adequate. Even after two years of working to help the animals on the reservation, I had not recognized that these dogs were semi-feral; dogs that can't be handled, dogs that need to be trapped to be caught, dogs that might be unadoptable. I didn't have any resources for those kinds of dogs, nor do they commonly exist.

Susan had 11 dogs at home (in another town), most of whom were from the reservation, and 3 of whom were semi-feral. She and her husband had altered their entire lifestyle to accommodate care of these dogs. Since the semi-ferals could not be handled, many routines taken for granted in animal care were difficult to accomplish. They had to be securely caged or penned at all times. If they escaped early in captivity, they might be gone for good. Transporting or moving them anywhere, even around one's own property, required that they be caged. Getting them into the cage meant "herding" them. Medicating them for any reason, could be complicated. The most difficult aspect of taming was getting them to function on a leash. Getting them used to being touched was a time-consuming ritual of patience that took months with most. All of this was nerve-racking and exhausting. Yet Susan was passionate about finding more help for semi-ferals, and longed for someone with 20 acres somewhere, someone willing to learn about and care for them.

Talking through all our options, we decided to call off the catch, due to not having the right follow-through. We continued to discuss the dogs, however, and whether there was anything we could do for them. I had to use the bucket every half-hour and Susan finally commented, "Hmmm, I think you might have the flu." Suffering terrible cramps and chills, I had to agree. I asked her to help me find a place to stay with my dog. She did, and I went to bed. I continued to throw up every half hour into the evening, feeling totally rotten and succumbing to the flu. Then, fifteen hours after I had first started throwing up, it was finally over. Susan arrived and we talked and walked around Page for several hours. She finally convinced me to buy a regular collapsible wire cage that would

fit in my tightly packed car, and leave the next day to check on the dumpster dogs. She made sure I was prepared in case there was a dumpster dog that could simply be picked up.

The next day I drove an hour south to the dumpsters, located in a fenced area near the highway. I climbed the dumpster ladders to check inside and also searched underneath. After a long time of searching, it was clear the dogs were gone. I continued south to a Trading Post and trailers. Panting dogs and cats lay in the dust and shade amidst an untidy sprawl of cars and trailers by the highway, cars zipping past. Another rescuer, checking on the dumpster dogs, had perfectly described this scene. She had spoken to the elderly man living in the blue trailer. Obviously poor, he told her the dogs were his, although he had never touched them and had no access to vet care. This was not uncommon on the reservation. He told her he received food from the Humane Society, which was hard to believe, because the closest was 80 miles away. A dog would periodically get up and meander across the highway. By prior agreement with Susan, I was not going to intervene here. We practiced triage, making judgments designed to maximize the number of survivors, and choosing to use limited resources in situations even more desperate. Unless occupied with the care of the dumpster dogs, Susan and I and another rescuer planned to meet the next day at another location that we had been monitoring on the rez.

Kayenta is a town of 4,000 people that many others pass through when heading elsewhere. Twenty miles from the Utah border, near Monument Valley, Lake Powell, and in the vicinity of the Grand Canyon, tourists are drawn by dramatic desert scenery and Navajo culture. In stark contrast to the scenic elements, roaming, abandoned dogs haunt the Burger King, McDonald's, Basha's Market, Chevron station, and Holiday Inn parking lots, located near the main crossroads of Highways 160 and 163. Black Mesa, a huge strip mine run by Peabody Coal, is a local landmark to the south.

The person we were meeting (I'll call her Jane) had moved to Kayenta within the last 6 months. Her trailer was already full of dogs rescued from town. The three of us met at high noon and traveled to a location about 15 miles east. Several days previous, tourists on a cross-country trip found four "skin and bones" starving, "friendly" puppies by a rock formation, but were unable to take them on their trip. They called the Best Friends Network, fearful that the puppies wouldn't survive another 48 hours without help. I was visiting Best Friends and when told of the situation, I called the rescuers in Kayenta. Jane and another person responded right away, leaving before nightfall to look for the puppies. What they had found, instead, in the semi-dark, seemed to be a scary pack of Rottweilers with some smaller dogs in the mix, and a nearby carload of women with parrots, whose car alternator had quit. Their vehicle crawled the shoulder of the road in the dark. The rescuers helped the women with the parrots back to town.

Susan, Jane, and I were going to try one more time at that location. The striking maroon-colored rock formation stood out for miles across the desert. Once we reached it, we scouted the base of the rocks to find one dead puppy being eaten by the others. We could see four puppies, alive, black and tan, and staggeringly thin. Susan immediately grabbed one of the puppies by the scruff of the neck and placed him in a cardboard box in the car. We moved closer, and the other puppies retreated, back into the rocks. I reached out to grab a puppy but hesitated to get my hand too near his teeth. Susan crawled out on the thinning rock ledges and grabbed him. The other puppies moved out of reach into a crevice in the rocks, that turned out to be their den. They were also entirely afraid of us and turned on each other, snapping viciously, when we approached. They huddled in the

back of the den. Wedging myself into the crevice, I confirmed that the den was beyond reach. Susan went to the truck where she had prepared special food for the catch, chicken, and especially pungent, wet dog food. She then crawled as far as possible over the thin ledge, putting out globs of the food to lead the remaining two puppies out and away from their den. It took a long time to entice them from the rock, a lot of waiting alternating with lobbing more food onto the rock ledge. One puppy finally crept out hesitantly, sniffing the air, intent on the food. Jane was able to grab him.

At one point, a pack comprised of two Rottweilers and six other dogs came running around the other side of the rock formation. They surrounded me, jumping and barking. Wearing shorts and sandals in the heat, I stood there without protection. They could rip me to shreds. I tried to calm them down but they leapt on me in a frenzy spurred by the odors of the food, leaving long scratches down my legs. Susan grabbed a 40 pound bag of dog food and lured them away by dumping the food at a distance on the ground.

Even with three of the puppies caught, it was unclear whether we would be able to catch the shyest, most fearful fourth. But, the dead puppy below the rocks bespoke his fate otherwise. Susan kept lobbing more food onto the ledge while I climbed up and hid behind a protruding spur waiting for the puppy to come within reach. Finally, I was able to grab him. He squealed as if he were being killed and peed himself. With palpable relief we moved him and the others to a more secure cage in the truck. Concerned about the heat, we drove them back to town. We set them up in crates with food and water, as they clung to each other in terror. We were hopeful that if they ate and drank, they might survive. If they did survive, with enough handling and socialization, they had the possibility of becoming friendly and adoptable. They were young enough to have a chance at a very different life.

With that success under our belts, we moved on to the last location. Again, tourists traveling through had alerted us to this location, a motel and gas station on the highway, about 35 miles outside of town. There were numerous dogs milling about. Like the dumpster dogs, the friendliest dog at this location had also been rescued and then emails and photos about the plight of the remaining dogs followed over the summer. A network of concerned people monitored the situation.

The rescued dog was given veterinary care: bullets were found in her elbow and her belly. She couldn't use one leg, but wasn't in pain, and was very, very sweet, using her injured leg to bat at her foster person when she wanted attention. She was fostered alongside a new baby, and was described as an angel, a total love. She eventually was adopted to a fabulous home in Phoenix.

Several people had fed and watered the remaining dogs at the motel in the intervening months. Susan had come through this location the previous week to get her own sense of the situation, and picked out a skinny white, female dog who appeared to have a broken pelvis. The female was still able to get around, but Susan worried that if this dog were to get pregnant, she would probably die. The dog's injury made it very compelling to try and catch her. All of the dogs that Susan brought home had been rescued from life threatening situations: injury, disease, or environmental hazard. The last dogs that Susan had rescued from Kayenta were three semi-ferals who were quilled by a porcupine. Susan and two other rescuers had spent five hours chasing them down until they were able to catch them all. Semi-ferals are so afraid of people that sometimes they have to be at death's door before they will allow themselves to be caught

When we arrived at the motel and gas station, there were five adult dogs and one puppy running around, and a chained up pit bull. Two of the loose dogs, the white female and a black and white female with longish hair, were dogs we had been monitoring. The other three dogs and the puppy were new. Food and water bowls, left by the other rescuers, were empty, but still there. We spoke with the man who lived there, the owner of the pit bull, and he gave us permission to take the puppy and to try and catch the white female dog with the broken pelvis and the longer-haired black and white female. He wanted to keep the other three dogs, along with his pit bull.

Susan organized the three of us, and placed the trap, a walk-in wire cage with doors that slide shut. Jane immediately picked up the puppy, who was covered with mange, and very passive. He was white with brown patches, had pinkish markings around his lips that made him look like he was wearing lipstick, and pale, jade-colored eyes. The man who lived at the motel said the puppy had been recently dumped. Susan gave me the task of distracting the dogs the man wanted to keep, enticing them with food away from the trap, to keep them from interfering with the catch of the two females.

Susan's traps were made in such a way as to have a very open feeling, to minimize scaring the dogs. Susan spent a long time lobbing strong-smelling food in a deliberate trail into the cage. The two female dogs followed their noses and took turns eating the food and moving part way in, but then would back out. They were smart and fearful and would not step all the way into the trap. After several hours of trying everything we could think of, we eventually agreed that we were not going to be able to catch these two.

In the hours we had spent at the motel, we realized, again, that the dogs we were trying to catch had turned out to be semi-feral. We also learned that the two females were born and had lived their entire lives at this motel, and were related to one another. If we had caught the dog with the broken pelvis, we might well have had to return her to the motel after getting her spayed. It would be wrenching to save her life, but have to abandon her again to life on the fringe. Her main bond was with the other female we couldn't catch, and this place was the only place she had ever known. They were two semi-ferals with no other place to go. Again, it was a matter of triage.

It was disappointing not to be able to catch the dog that needed our help. If we lived near that location and could feed every day, possibly the animals would become familiar with us and their fear would lessen. A friend in California who runs a rescue recently captured the "wild daughter" of a feral along with the feral's latest batch of puppies, over the course of many days of feeding. But, before the mother dog could be caught, the rescuer found her, shot, dead, her body left in a field. The youngest pups of the feral mother were rehabilitated, but the "wild daughter," about 7 months old, was so afraid, that every time the rescuer came into the pen to feed her, the wild daughter pressed her quivering body as far away as possible against the fence. Should she face life in the pen, or be returned to the location where she was found? These are questions rescuers face every day.

Those who are willing to take responsibility for the lives of the animals search their hearts and do what they can, always with guilt for the ones that cannot be saved. Perhaps guilt itself is a part of the hold these wild creatures have on our hearts, along with empathy and compassion, the wish to ease their suffering. The writer David James Duncan describes it thus, "The intuitions that save lives are almost all purchased, like so many mercies, with an earlier being's innocent blood."

We three rescuers parted ways as the shadows lengthened. Getting on the road, we drove away in three different directions, the one puppy returning with Jane to Kayenta.

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**"The individual is a great hope for a lot of the dogs."**

**--Susan**

Several years ago, I made a vow to the rez animals that I would do what I could to help them. The vow carries me on journeys, encountering places, people, and sometimes brutal difficulties, where I wouldn't otherwise dare to venture, for the benefit of the animals. The commitment itself becomes a pathway to follow, a bridge to the unknown. We get involved and see where it takes us. Learning what is really needed can take a long time. The questions of how to help and what's next just keep unfolding. Following, one gains an education, the heart's own tutelage.

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If you would like to donate to this cause, [Blackhat Humane](#) is a rescue and foster group with members in many towns on the eastern side of the reservation. Also, [Plateauland Mobile Veterinary Clinic](#) performs mobile/spay neuter on the Navajo Nation throughout the year, and is conducting a capital campaign for their new Second Chance Animal Hospital on the outskirts of Flagstaff.

\* This estimate is from the Humane Society of the United States.

\*\* These figures from an [article](#) published in the Navajo Times, October 9, 2003.

\*\*\* Data courtesy of Maxine Hillary, Navajo Nation Washington office, spring, 2003.

Note: Navajo Nation law does not allow dogs that are companion animals and guard dogs to roam free. They are required to be either in a fenced area or on a leash. Working dogs that herd sheep are allowed to roam free.

Names of the rescuers were changed to protect their privacy. Many thanks to 'Susan' and 'Jane' and all the rescuers who do everything they can to help the animals. Photos courtesy of Patricia Klemick, Krista Bauer, Deb Eaton, Jason Lin, Cristy Twombly, and Tamara Martin. Special thanks to Cathy Williams, and the many people who contributed their knowledge and feedback in the shaping of this article.

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