

TRAVEL ONTARIO

Ontario

Visiting Ontario's Donkey Sanctuary

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"Wilson! Come here Wilson," Sheila Burns, founder of PrimRose Donkey Sanctuary, a farm for abused animals, calls over to a donkey grazing blissfully in the grass.

He looks up slowly upon hearing his name but then goes right back to his task. I wonder out loud if Wilson, along with all the other donkeys, can recognize their names.

In a heartbeat, Burns quips, "They do, they just have selective hearing."

This sanctuary currently harbours 20 donkeys, four mules and one pony. There are potbelly pigs, sheep, a goat, numerous cats and one dog. Each animal has a name and each has a history, but often it's a sad one.

For example, there is Joey, a lovely boy, as Burns describes him. He was tied to a tree and beaten with a baseball bat by his owner before being rescued. But you would never guess the terrible abuse he's been through as he stands patiently while visitors pet him.

One of the sanctuary's mandates is educating the public. Burns and her legion of volunteers work hard to dispel all the misconceptions that surround donkeys and mules. Popular culture portrays them as being stubborn and dumb, but those attributes couldn't be further from the truth.

Burns explains that donkeys are cautious animals, so it's not obstinacy that keeps them from following directions. As well, their sense of loyalty may keep them from doing what they've been told to do.

Jed the donkey was such a case. Burns was asked to pick up some neglected animals from a farm one day and a

donkey was among the group. As she tried to load the hungry donkey into a trailer he refused to enter and kept returning to his dirty shed, even though he was being enticed with tasty food.

Perplexed, Burns returned to the shed and found the reason Jed wouldn't leave the farm: A pig was hiding in there. She loaded the pig into the trailer and Jed followed.

Given their nature, it's no surprise donkeys are very good livestock keepers and will protect their flocks at all costs. With all of these traits going for them one must wonder why they have such a bad reputation.

"Donkeys are throwaway animals and are often sent to auctions to be sold for dog food. They can take a lot of pain and become easy targets for abuse," Burns explains with sadness in her eyes.

After moving to a 2.5-hectare farm in Roseneath, Ont., Burns wanted to get some barn animals. A friend knew of a pregnant donkey with a foal that needed a good home. Her name was PrimRose and she became the namesake for the sanctuary.

Afterwards Burns began getting calls from the Humane Society and the police letting her know of not only donkeys, but other animals in need of rescue. It has become a huge endeavour that not only includes looking after the animals, but also rehabilitation and running an adoption program.

Throughout the years, Burns has adopted out many donkeys to local farms to work as livestock protectors or companions to horses. Although they are adopted out, the animal still remains under the auspices of the sanctuary, which conducts inspections at these farms to make sure their former charges are happy and healthy.

Rehabilitation is an important part of the work the sanctuary does as well. Virgil, a miniature mule who was badly abused in the first year of his life, has been at PrimRose for a while, but it was only recently that he's allowed people to pet his back. He's slowly beginning to trust humans again.

Helping with all of this work are 35 dedicated volunteers, the youngest who is only 10 years old, who feel that the work they do benefits them more than the donkeys.

Without them, Burns says, the sanctuary just wouldn't exist.

PrimRose is open to the public on Thursdays and Sundays from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Volunteers are on hand to give tours of the sanctuary where visitors can interact with the rescued animals. There's no fee to visit, but donations are gladly accepted. Check their website to find out what type of donations the sanctuary needs most. Requests include apples, cat food and Canadian Tire money for farm supplies.

IF YOU GO

PrimRose Donkey Sanctuary is about a two-hour drive northeast of Toronto. For more information, including directions from Hwy. 401, contact 905-352-2772 or primrosedonkeysanctuary.com.

<http://www.torontosun.com/2011/05/11/visiting-ontarios-donkey-sanctuary>