

Herd of turtles: Local group has love for shelled reptiles

By GARY HERRON

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She's not well known in her Enchanted Hills subdivision as "the turtle lady," but that's what Nancy Hoffman has become.

Sure, she could have been known as the dog lady if she had dogs constantly howling, the rooster lady if she had roosters greeting each day or the cat lady if she had felines prowling the neighborhood looking for a good fight.

But turtles? Who knew?

She's been fascinated by the little guys since she got her first one; now, she's serving not only as a foster parent for turtles recovering from illness or injury or needing new homes, but also as the treasurer for the Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club (rgttc.info).

Hoffmann also is the club's membership director — she noted there were 114 household memberships in the most-recent newsletter.

Yeah, that's right: There's a local club for turtle and tortoise lovers, and it meets the second Sunday almost every month. The newsletter is called "Shell Keepers' Notes."

These people really love their turtles, even knowing some of these ancient reptiles will out-live them.

Hoffmann has several enclosures for her turtles in her backyard, each escape-proof — "As clumsy as they look, they're great escape artists," she said — and when she's not at her Albuquerque job as a pharmacist, she's studying them.

"It's observing nature up close," is how she describes it. "(And) a lot of us like providing for their needs."

Yes, you'll want to know she names her turtles — among them, Moose, Finnegan (her first) and Sheldon. And, of course, she can tell them apart. Turtle club members take photos of their pets and the best 12 go into a calendar for members.



Shelled friends

Nancy Hoffman of Rio Rancho owns and fosters a number of tortoises. She is also a member of the Rio Grande Turtle and Tortoise Club.

Tired of all the rain in Seattle — she remembers one 42-day stretch in which it rained every day — she and her husband decided it was time to pack up their two kids and leave Washington.

“We picked New Mexico; we got Rio Rancho off the Internet,” she explained, recalling being impressed with a listing that rated the City of Vision as one of the 10-best places to live.

“We came for a weekend,” she said, and lodged at an extended stay motel, and liked what they saw.

“We called it ‘Survivor New Mexico,’” she said, and moved here in 2007. Son Nate graduated from Cleveland High School, where daughter Heidi, a sophomore, will wrap up her high school years in 2016.

The turtles are a more recent addition, and, again, blame the Internet.

Hoffmann was checking out Craigslist in 2012 when she came upon the idea of fostering turtles.

“I love to have different kinds of pets,” she said, as her cats, nicknamed “Skinny” and “Fatty,” roamed around the house.

She’d had dogs before, and she and her husband Nate had some “rodents and rats” when they were living in Seattle. Getting more rodents wasn’t an option, she said: “He said, ‘No,’ over his dead body.”

Turtles have numerous advantages, she pointed out: They don’t bother the neighbors, they don’t smell, they’re not socially demanding and they hibernate for part of the year and require zero care then.

Drawbacks, she was asked? They’re not cuddly, of course, and there’s no personal feedback, like purring or a wagging tail, and they do have special-care requirements, namely their diet, which she carefully prepares (Ever heard of Purina trout chow? Turtles love it!), and they always need water.

“Salmonella, like all reptiles, is a danger,” she added. “They have the same risks, so we have to wash our hands. And vet care can get expensive.”

Something very intriguing Hoffmann pointed out to a naïve reporter — a cat guy — is that turtles must see their food to eat. Thus, eye injuries or diseases that seal up their eyelids mean they won’t eat — “and it’s a slippery slope after that,” she said.

But Hoffmann is enjoying that slope, of course, saying, “I take pleasure in making their habitats, their caves. It’s fun for me.”