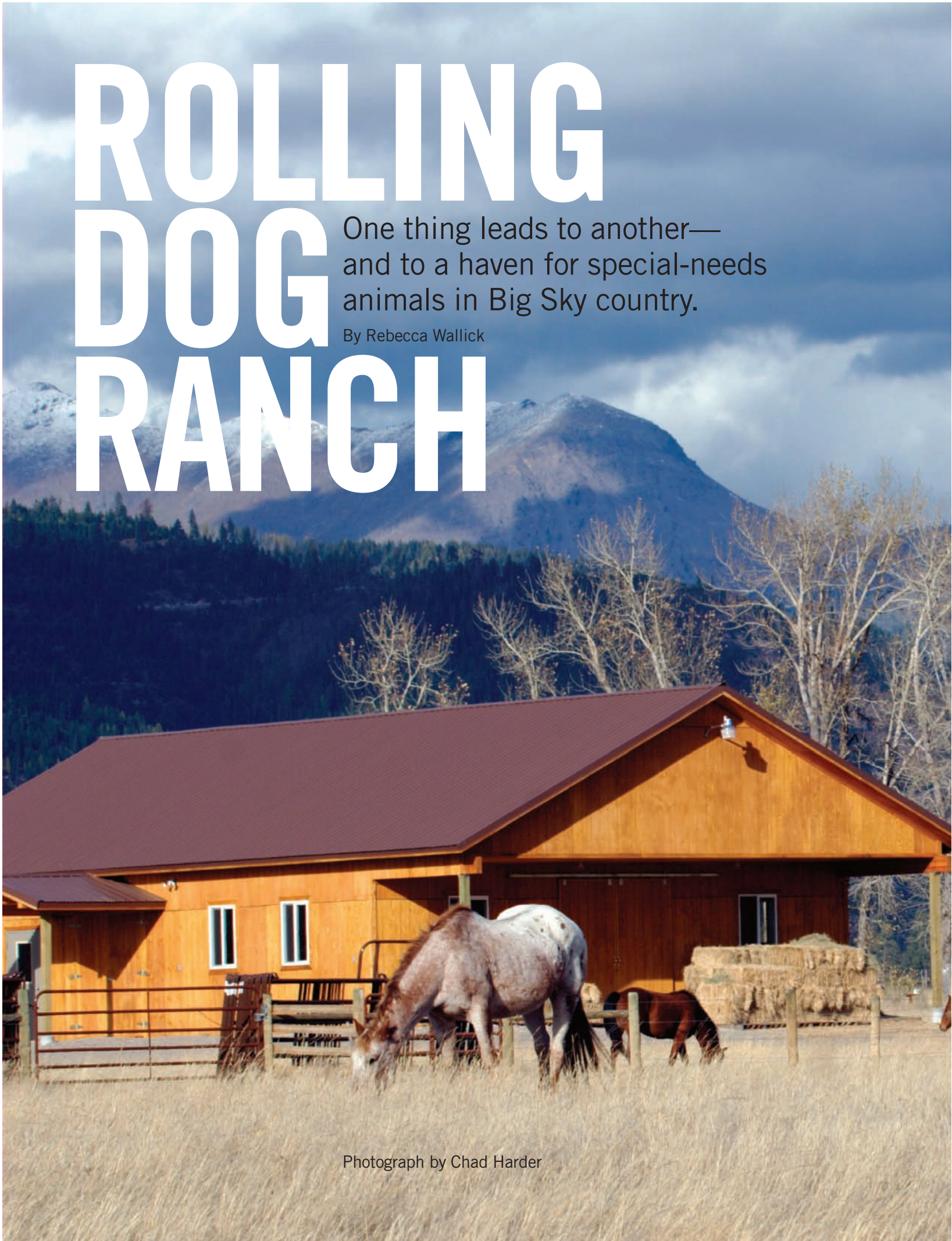


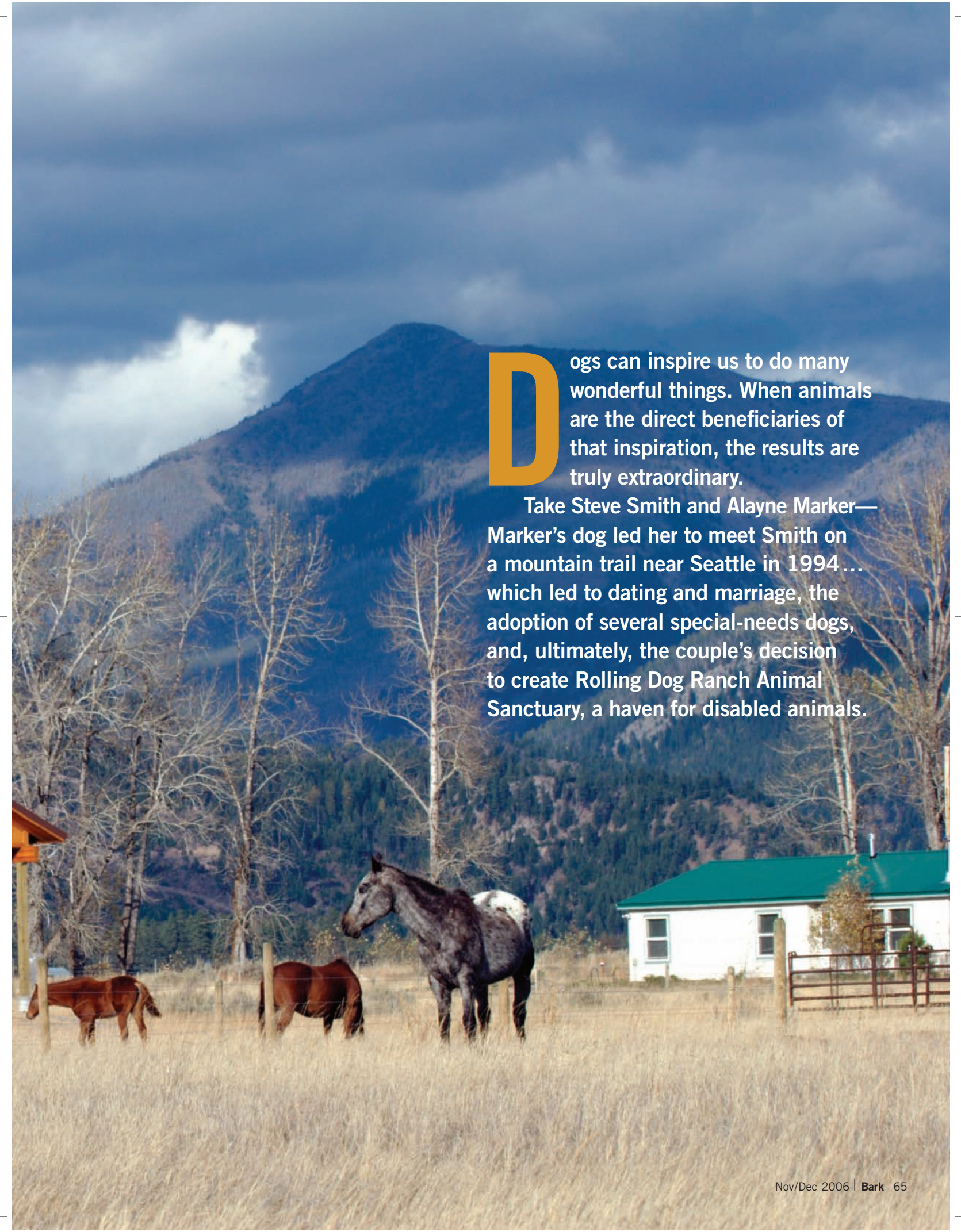
# ROLLING DOG RANCH

One thing leads to another—  
and to a haven for special-needs  
animals in Big Sky country.

By Rebecca Wallick

Photograph by Chad Harder





**D**ogs can inspire us to do many wonderful things. When animals are the direct beneficiaries of that inspiration, the results are truly extraordinary.

Take Steve Smith and Alayne Marker—Marker's dog led her to meet Smith on a mountain trail near Seattle in 1994... which led to dating and marriage, the adoption of several special-needs dogs, and, ultimately, the couple's decision to create Rolling Dog Ranch Animal Sanctuary, a haven for disabled animals.



Preceding: Blind horses and Beauty's Barn; the barn was built to accommodate the special needs of blind horses. This page, clockwise from above: Ranch entrance sign; Steve carries Allie, fresh from surgery, to Widget's House, preceded by Kenai (who is blind) and Alayne; Alayne Marker, ranch co-founder.



It started when Smith and Marker were in their early 40s, living outside Seattle with six dogs and six cats and enjoying high-powered jobs at Boeing—she as an attorney in the corporate insurance department, he as an executive in communications. Their inner voices urged them to move to the Rockies and create an animal sanctuary, and in 1998, they purchased 160 acres of grassland in a gorgeous Montana valley; in 2000, they relocated there. As they watched their dogs roll on their backs in the ranch's grass-covered meadows, feet up, happy to be alive, Smith and Marker lit upon what they would call their enterprise—and Rolling Dog Ranch Animal Sanctuary, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, was born. What they lacked in animal-care and shelter experience, they made up for in passion—and compassion—for disabled animals.

#### Word Gets Out

Their first official resident was Lena, a blind horse. Smith credits Lena and her sweet, calm demeanor with teaching them everything they now know about caring for blind horses. Word of the ranch's existence spread to nearby animal shelters, and by the end of its second year, 12 dogs, six horses and "a bunch of cats" had joined the group. The website drew "last-ditch-effort" calls from out-of-state shelters with hard-to-place, special-needs animals.

Today, Rolling Dog Ranch provides lifetime care for 40 dogs, 30 horses and 12 cats. Over half of the animals—49—are blind, and many have chronic health conditions that require constant care. The ranch's mission is to take in as many of the most vulnerable animals—those who would not otherwise be given a chance at a happy life—as they can accommodate. When Smith and Marker take in an animal, their assumption is that it's for life, regardless of the expense; that they can and will provide whatever care is needed, whether it be eye or orthopedic surgery, or simply plenty of food, shelter and love. While



on occasion an animal they've rescued has been adopted (after the prospective new home has undergone careful scrutiny), placement is not the primary goal.

Local vets provide incredible care for the ranch's animals. As Smith notes, the sanctuary's vets welcome the challenges presented by Rolling Dog Ranch residents, as they tend to have more unusual health-care issues than the typical companion animal. All vet care requires planning. The sanctuary's large- and small-animal vet clinics are more than an hour's drive from the ranch (in opposite directions), and specialists as far away as Spokane, Wash. (or, in one case, an eye surgeon in San Diego) are sometimes needed. In 2005, the ranch spent \$33,000 on vet bills, its largest category of operating expense. Though Smith and Marker have always insisted that their animals not be considered charity cases—they want the best possible care, and so are willing to pay to ensure it is delivered—they're appreciative when their vets provide medicines at cost or free boarding if an overnight stay is required.

### Keeping the Wheels in Motion

Fundraising is a constant part of their lives, and after five years, they have at last reached a point where they are self-supporting through donations. After discovering the difficulty of finding and keeping employees who must commute long distances, especially during the winter, they obtained a grant to provide an employee cabin on the ranch. On their current wish list: an indoor riding arena for wintertime exercise for dogs and horses, a second employee cabin, and a vehicle and equipment shed. These facilities would join the three barns, a spacious dog building, three smaller animal cottages, a cat house and



Travis has a fused jaw and wears custom-made shirts to protect a stomach tube; after months of drug therapy, he's now able to eat a special liquid food on his own.



Alayne and Steve with Widget, who is blind.

Logan Photography (top), Chad Harder (middle), Mariah Scheskie (bottom)

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**“The animals are taken care of for life, and they know it. It’s just so different. I cried that first night.”**



Tyler, an English Pointer, in the woodshed behind Widget's House; Tyler is deaf, and Steve and Alayne are learning dog-specific sign language so they can communicate.

several run-in sheds now on-site. Toss in pick-up trucks, tractors and other equipment, and it's easy to see what an undertaking the enterprise has become.

### Joy Is Contagious

Laura Bratcher of Helena, Montana is one of the sanctuary's regular volunteers. Two years ago, when she was looking for a place to donate her time, her daughter happened to see a photo of a Chow featured on the ranch website and urged her mother to check it out. Impressed, Bratcher contacted Smith and Marker to arrange a visit. "It took me two days to recover," she said. "The passion and commitment of Steve and Alayne was so clear." Bratcher learned the animals' stories and about Smith and Marker's vision for the sanctuary. "You get to touch and feel these animals. I had worked six months at the Helena Animal Shelter, and the atmosphere there was desperate—to place the animals. The animals felt it. At the ranch, it's so peaceful. The animals are taken care of for life, and they know it. It's just so different. I cried that first night."

Bratcher is now a regular at the ranch. She makes the 150-mile round-trip once a month and helps any way she can. During her first visit as a volunteer, she built cat runs so that the cats could bask in the sunshine filtering through the windows of their house.

"I learn something new from the animals every visit. They're so happy. They don't know they're disabled!" Bratcher has adopted four animals from the sanctuary: Winchester the cat, who had been shot four times; Chance, an older, deaf Lab mix; Bandita, one of 28 cats rescued from the attic of a hoarder (only eight survived); and most recently Rudy (formerly known as Wobbly Wilbur), a six-month-old Jack Russell/Poodle mix with cerebellar hypoplasia, a condition that affects his balance and fine motor skills. Bratcher assures me that Rudy "is a pistol; he just bumps into things and keeps going!"

As can be imagined, it takes an enormous amount of work to shelter, feed and exercise such a collection of animals, let alone attend to their varied health-care needs and vet visits. "It's a 24/7 job," says Smith. "It's a lifestyle, an intense personal commitment." Despite living in such a beautiful area, not far from Yellowstone, Smith hasn't gone trail running and Marker hasn't gone hiking—activities they enjoyed back in Seattle—since start-



Left: Allie and Birdie both have coordination problems, but that doesn't stop them from enjoying themselves. Below: Alayne with the ranch's small herd of sighted horses; the Belgian draft horses (right) came to the ranch from the National Park Service.

ing Rolling Dog. Only in the last year did they feel comfortable quitting their day jobs and focusing completely on the ranch.

The added incentive—a special reward—that keeps Smith and Marker so committed and dedicated to their cause is the simple joy of living exhibited by each of the ranch's animals as they romp and play. Others thought these animals were hopeless cases. At Rolling Dog Ranch Animal Sanctuary, not a single animal feels sorry for himself. There is no hopeless case. "I can't imagine doing anything else," says Marker about working with, and on behalf of, these animals. Smith heartily concurs. **B**



### Helping Hands Welcomed

Smith and Marker don't like to be gone from the ranch at the same time—in five years they've only left together twice, briefly—so even emergency trips to the vet's office are taken alone. However, with additional on-site employees and a strong team of volunteers, they hope to eventually be able to take a vacation together. Maybe. If they can stand to be away from the animals for more than a few hours.

In the meantime, they care for the animals, raise funds through their website and newsletter, open the ranch to visitors and seek volun-

teers. Visitors are welcome between June and October, on the first and third weekends of the month from 1 to 5 PM, and by appointment. Volunteers should be willing to commit to a regular schedule, whether once a week or once a month, and be capable of outdoor physical labor such as exercising the dogs, cleaning the dog and cat shelters or horse stalls and, of course, scooping poop.

To donate, visit, volunteer or read more about the animals described in this story, as well as all the others who call the sanctuary home, visit [rollingdogranch.org](http://rollingdogranch.org).