

Saving India's poorest animals

How one little stray dog inspired Rachel Wright to set up a hospital helping thousands of the neediest animals and improving the lives of impoverished locals

By Katharine Wootton

All her life, Rachel Wright has felt most at ease beside an animal, finding that countless furry friends were the saviour to get her through a challenging childhood. So when, as an adult, Rachel found herself on a beach in Sri Lanka face to face with an emaciated dog, this trained veterinary nurse knew it was her time to repay the favour she'd always felt animals had given her.

"The dog was in a really bad way and when I examined her I realised she had a stick across the top of her mouth that was stopping her from eating," says Rachel. As she removed the stick, the dog started eating ravenously and slowly grew stronger.

And, as the days passed, the dog seemingly started spreading the word and soon there was a queue of doggy friends with various ailments waiting for Rachel on the beach.

"I started to think that if I could make a difference to a handful of dogs with just my first aid kit, what would happen if I had an entire animal hospital somewhere in the developing world?" says Rachel. As that germ of an idea grew, Rachel set herself a target of creating an animal hospital in exactly three years from then. But as her target grew nearer, nothing was falling into place and Rachel worried her dream



Rachel with the shelter's oldest guest, Shanti, and below, front, Black Bear, who has only two legs



It all began with a stray dog, but other animals are welcome – including this camel and cow!



hospital wasn't going to happen. Things went from bad to worse, when sadly, that summer many personal tragedies struck.

To get away from it all, Rachel booked a flight to India, but while there she learned the area she was staying in was about to host a festival.

That meant the authorities would round up and destroy inhumanely many of the stray dogs. Insistent that this would not happen, she asked the municipality for a disused building where she could take the dogs for the duration of the festival. While there, with the help of some veterinary friends from the UK, they sterilised and vaccinated them against common diseases including rabies, before later releasing them.

This was the start of Rachel's Tree of Life for Animals (TOLFA) hospital and in 15 years it's gone from strength to strength.

Today, rescue work is the biggest chunk of TOLFA's mission, as it helps the enormous numbers of ownerless animals on its doorstep including the estimated 25,000

stray dogs in the cities of Ajmer and Pushkar. Here the organisation spends most days collecting poorly animals in ambulances, before taking them to the hospital which can treat up to 600 animals a day.

Road accidents are among the most common injuries, as well as infected wounds. In addition, many of India's street animals are affected by diseases normally vaccinated

Rescue work is the biggest chunk of TOLFA's mission as it helps the enormous numbers of ownerless animals

against in the West, including rabies which is fatal to the animals and humans who contract it.

But in Rachel's hospital every animal - including dogs, cats, cows and donkeys - get the highest quality care they need, as well as being vaccinated and neutered. They're then returned to where they came from, unless they are permanently disabled or wouldn't be able to survive on the streets, in which case they get a home for life at the hospital. And many of these long-term

residents have stories that inspire Rachel every day to keep doing what she does.

One such dog is Black Bear who arrived after he tragically lost two of his legs in a train accident. "When he came in I thought he wouldn't survive, but there was something about him that said 'let me live'," says Rachel. "Now you wouldn't even know he's been disabled as he runs around almost like any normal dog.

"I always find sitting with a dog like Black Bear for a quiet moment never fails to give me a kick to remind me I can get through the challenges rescue work sometimes throws at you," she adds. In fact, most recently Rachel relied on the inspiring resilience that her animals give her when a horrific monsoon flooded the hospital with water and sewage this summer, costing a fortune in cleaning and repair work.

But she's determined to get the hospital back on its feet - for the animals she feels compelled to save, as well as the local community who rely on TOLFA to live.

For as well as rescue work, TOLFA also provides

free veterinary treatment to animals of the poorest farmers who need their livestock healthy in order to live.

Her hospital also employs some of the most impoverished local people who have a knack for animal care but, because of their low place in India's caste system, often find it impossible to get work.

What's more, Rachel and her team educate local people to live in better harmony with the animals on their streets, helping reduce fatal rabies bites and encourage compassion towards animals.

This is why Rachel has sacrificed everything, leaving behind her family in the UK, so that she can continue this vital work.

"To me an animal is an animal wherever they live, but here the animals have nothing - there are no vet services for 150 miles from where we are - so it's a real privilege to save lives," says Rachel.

■ If you'd like to support TOLFA, please send a cheque payable to 'Tree of Life for Animals' to: TOLFA, 95 Bath Road, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL5 3LA or visit tolfa.org.uk