

HIGHLAND FARM
SCOTT COATES
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TAKE 1

“We moved here to have a quiet retirement,” says a devoted Bill Deters at his farm-home in a remote corner of northwestern Thailand. “Now we care for 34 gibbons from three sub-species, an Asiatic Black Bear, several lemurs and a host of other animals in need.”

This is the story of Bill and his wife Pharanee Deters. They met in 1974 while both were working in Los Angeles and in June of 1991 bought a plot of land and retired to Pharanee’s homeland, Thailand.

“We were just going to grow things, have some turkeys, geese and other small animals,” remembers Pharanee. “We were just going to relax and enjoy doing some farming.”

‘A quiet retirement’ is not what happened.

It all began when a poacher came to the Deter’s then baron land (which they have since reforested) with a baby gibbon for sale.

“He (poacher) had shot her mother, she was wounded and missing a few fingers on her hand from the fall,” Bill recalls. “I knew if I didn’t buy her, she would have ended up in the bars in Bangkok.”

This is the all-to-common story of these apes (which unlike monkeys, do not have tails). They are often kept as pets, or worse, in bars to pose for photos with patrons. “They are fed beer, drugs and kept awake for long periods,” Bill explains. “Also, after gibbons reach sexual maturity (5-6 years old), they become unmanageable by humans, hence why so many of their owners eventually want to get rid of them after only a few years.”

“You can probably call it empathy,” adds Pharanee. “How can we turn them away? A life span in a bar for a gibbon is under a year. There was nothing for gibbons (also known as the singing apes) here in Thailand, so I knew we had to help.”

So one gibbon led to two, then three and so on. Word began to spread about the Deter’s home, Highland Farm, and their willingness to take in needy gibbons and their family quickly grew.

Some of their apes are missing limbs (as their fathers often bite them off in captivity), one is blind, another has polio and one even has a curved spine from being kicked in the back by a soldier.

They have been given several gibbons by zoos that couldn’t care for them and even rescued an Asiatic Black Bear from a restaurant in Bangkok as it was waiting to become Bear Paw Soup.

Caring for so many animals is no small task, as they can live to be 40-years-old and require constant care.

“Having not lived in the wild for so long, they’re dependent on humans for everything,” explains Bill. “The jungles are diminishing so quickly too. You can walk to a village from any jungle in Thailand in 30 minutes. Their natural habitat is quickly disappearing.”

The financial burden is also enormous. Highland Farm does not receive any funding from wildlife foundations and is kept afloat by the Deter’s pensions (about \$1,500 per month) and donations from visitors to their home.

With so many mouths to feed, the Deters have recently built some guest quarters and now welcome research students who pay to stay on their farm for a month or more to study these amazing animals.

This extra revenue helps to feed and care for their always-growing family. A single gibbon enclosure costs about \$800 to build and they must always be ready for a new addition to the family, despite extremely limited funds.

“The reason we have not become a part of an official wildlife foundation is that 90-93% of their funds go to administration and we would lose control of our sanctuary,” a frustrated Bill explains. “They (foundations) have three or four people that take care of their publicity alone. There’re only two of us here and we’re pretty busy with caring for the animals. Right now, I’m really at a loss.”

The question that now weighs heavily on the Deters is just how many animals they can accommodate. “Ya, sure, there must be a capacity, but we just can’t turn our backs on them,” says Bill. “We have 34 gibbons with no outside financial assistance. If we got a little financial help, imagine what we could do.”

Pharanees adds, “I think right now, we can accommodate no more than 40 gibbons with our current financial situation, but we can’t turn any down that need help.”

Despite needing so many things, such as materials to build new enclosures, a secondhand 4WD to rescue animals in remote areas and even a telephone, Bill and Pharanees somehow manage to remain extremely upbeat.

“I’m not a religious person, but I’m sure God will provide,” Bill enthuses. “We’ve made a commitment to put every single dollar towards the animals. We know damn well we’re going to make it.”

SIDEBAR

All donations are greatly appreciated and for US\$5 per month you can join their ‘Adopt-a-Gibbon’ program.

For more information and donations contact:

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