

Putting **cats** TO work

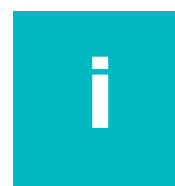


Wilson at the Amargosa Hotel

PHOTO BY CODY WELLONS

WHEN YOU FIND A SHELTER CAT A JOB, YOU FIND THAT CAT A HOME

BY LAURA MOSS



IF YOU CHECK IN AT THE Amargosa Hotel in Death Valley Junction, California, you're likely to be greeted by Wilson, the hotel's friendliest — and furriest — employee.

In addition to welcoming people to his historic home, Wilson patrols the halls in search of chin scratches and entertains guests by chasing toys around the dining room.

The long-haired tabby is quite the kitty concierge, but he hasn't always worked in the hospitality industry. Before he came to the hotel last year, Wilson lived in an animal shelter in Pahrump, Nevada. When an Amargosa employee adopted the hotel's previous cat, it left an opening that both Wilson and the hotel employees were eager to fill. "We all wanted another cat, and our manager found Wilson at a shelter," says Amargosa staff member Kelly Close. "Wilson's a good boy. He greets customers as they come inside. He loves to interact with people."



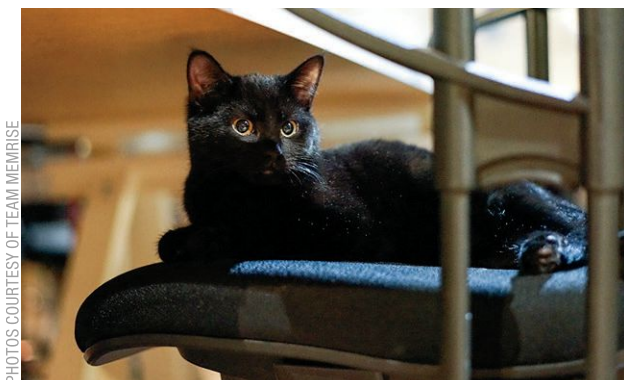
Pirate



Chomsky

“It felt like the right thing to do to mix things up with cats and let our team members take a pause from work to play and cuddle them.”

~ Kristina Narusk, Memrise



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TEAM MEMRISE

Wilson certainly isn't the first cat from a shelter to have found both employment and a loving home. From the felines who nap among the merchandise at bodegas and bookstores to those employed by farmers across the globe, countless kitties have gone from being full-time shelter cats to serving as full-time employees. So, it only makes sense that animal rescue organizations are learning that finding a cat a job can mean finding that cat a home.

FROM HOMELESS TO HIRED

The concept of cats who have jobs isn't just a growing trend in America. Memrise, a London-based company that develops online learning tools, has two rescued cats, Pirate and Chomsky, on its payroll. Their job? Providing stress relief for employees. “It felt like the right thing to do to mix things up

with cats and let our team members take a pause from work to play and cuddle them,” says Kristina Narusk, head of product at Memrise. “It relieves stress for humans and is hugely joyful for the attention-seeking kittens.” (Oh, and that payroll? Well, compensation for the cats comes in the form of kibble and lots of love.)

Pirate and Chomsky joined the Memrise team in January 2016, when they were just four months old. While Chomsky was the original candidate chosen for the position, when the team arrived at the shelter to adopt her, they met Pirate and realized they needed a second kitty on the staff roster.

“We discovered that Chomsky had an injured brother with only three legs who needed rescuing, too. So we adopted both,” Kristina says.

Memrise's newest team members were a bit skittish as they transitioned from shelter

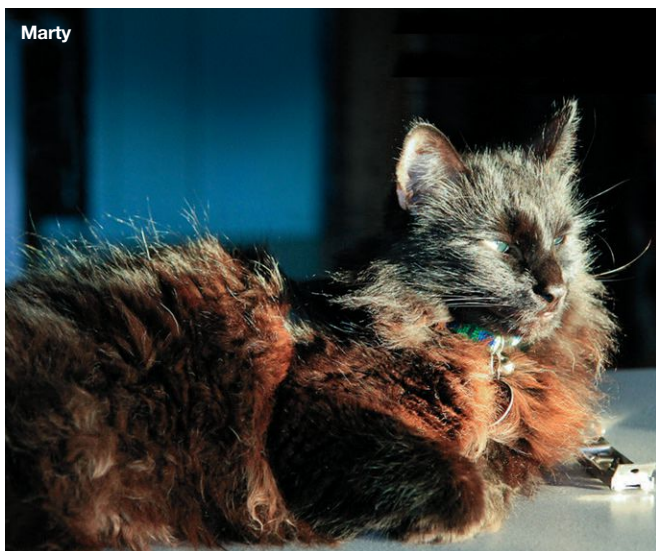
life to office life, but they soon made themselves at home and their unique personalities emerged. Chomsky is extremely social and always demanding attention, while Pirate is more subdued — although Kristina says he's “quite particular about his neck massage schedule.”

During the workweek, the cats have plenty of co-worker companionship, and on weekends, employees drop by to refill their food bowls and put in some overtime snuggles. The cats' daily escapades are even documented on their very own Instagram account, the social media platform where users upload shareable photos.

The Memrise team says they can't imagine working in an office that's not run by cats. “The cats are part of our team meetings. They appear in progress reports and have their own quarterly goals, so they are fully part of Memrise life,” Kristina says. “Office cats can



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PHOTOS BY RYAN KNAPP

do so much good and make the otherwise one-dimensional office life more colorful.”

Office cats aren't limited to business environments, however. Marty, a black cat who lives on the summit of New Hampshire's Mount Washington, is proof of that. Adopted from a shelter in 2008, Marty is one in a long line of fearless felines who have called the Mount Washington Observatory home. Cats have lived at the weather observation station since the 1930s, providing companionship for staff and serving as an indoor rodent deterrent.

When the station's previous cat retired in December 2007, the staff reached out to the Conway Area Humane Society in Conway, New Hampshire. The shelter staff suggested a few cats they thought would adjust to life on the Northeast's tallest peak, and two-year-old Marty was selected to join the team. “Marty was like a little kid when he first arrived

— high-strung and all over the place,” says senior staff meteorologist Ryan Knapp. “But over time, he has matured. In his older age, he has started to become a periodic lap cat.”

Marty spends most of his time sleeping in the weather office and in employees' private quarters, but he occasionally ventures outside and joins staff members for hikes. While he may be far from civilization, Marty still enjoys the spoils of a pampered office cat's life, including frequent head scratches and belly rubs, as well as a bounty of toys. “He loves to play with toys,” Ryan says. “Although we have to donate a lot of toys to local shelters, as he collects way too many from fans.”

IT TAKES A COMMUNITY

When it comes to feline employment, though, not every cat is equipped to work closely with people. Community cats, felines

who have lived the majority of their lives outdoors and are wary of people, are routinely killed in shelters because they're not suited for traditional placement in a home. While many animal welfare organizations assist community cats by providing food and shelter to colonies and involving them in trap-neuter-return, there's another alternative: barn cat programs.

More and more animal rescue groups are establishing these programs, which provide jobs — and homes — for community cats. “Our barn cat program exists to save the lives of unsocialized or feral cats who cannot be returned to their original habitat,” says Monica Frenden, cat program manager at Austin Pets Alive in Austin, Texas. “Our program matches these at-risk cats to adopters needing ‘working cats’ at their farm, ranch, stable or business. These cats get an enriching, appropriate environment, and



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~ Monica Frenden, Austin Pets Alive



PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUSTIN PETS ALIVE

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Since the Austin Pets Alive Barn Cat Program was established in 2010, nearly 1,500 cats have been adopted through it. Today, these cats live on the grounds of Texas stables, wineries, distilleries, warehouses and churches. “Placement locations can vary wildly,” Monica says. “The Austin Police Department Mounted Patrol has adopted barn cats for their stables. Lake Austin Spa Resort has six (of our) barn cats keeping their waterfront acreage critter-free, and several businesses in the heart of Austin have employed our barn cats as shop cats. All locations have the same criteria, however. The location is reasonably safe from common threats like road hazards or predators; there is suitable permanent shelter for the cats; and there is a caregiver who is committed to providing daily food, water and medical care.”

Putting cats to work as rodent deterrents can benefit both community cats and local businesses, but the goal isn’t to move all

community cats into these programs. The Western Iowa Feral Cat Program has placed more than 250 barn cats in the western Iowa area, but co-founder and vice president Kathy Humann says that her organization resorts to relocating cats only under certain conditions.

Kathy says, “We are in full belief that the cats colonize an area and want to live there. We do all we can to help them stay ‘home’ and with their colony.” But, she says, sometimes the “return” part of TNR (trap-neuter-return) is just not possible.

When community cats can’t be returned to their original location after being spayed or neutered, Kathy and her volunteers place the felines at eligible farms. Property owners must provide food, water and shelter, and a space where the cats can be contained for their first two weeks, to help them adjust. Kathy makes an effort to place younger cats on farms because it’s easier for them to adapt to new situations, and she keeps siblings together to help make the adjustment period easier.

While the term “barn cat” may imply that these felines are placed in rural locations, that’s not always the case. Many of the cats find placements at businesses in urban areas — such as Egon, Raymond and Venkman, the three cats who call Chicago’s Empirical Brewery home. These felines were adopted in 2014 through the Tree House Humane Society’s Cats at Work Project, a program that removes vaccinated and sterilized cats from life-threatening situations and relocates them to places where their presence will help deter rodent populations. Empirical Brewery CEO Bill Hurley heard about the program on a local news broadcast, and soon the brewery had its own working cats, which the employees named after characters in the movie *Ghostbusters*.

“When they first moved in, they were so feral that we never saw them,” Bill says. “Our head brewer was getting worried that maybe one or more of them had found a way out of the building, so we set up a night-vision camera aimed at their food bowl with a motion

“We are making a difference in the life of each cat who enters our traps. These cats would face death in shelters. Instead, they get to have a caring person provide shelter, food and water. They get to run and play without trying to raise endless litters of kittens. They get to live.”

~ Kathy Humann, Western Iowa Feral Cat Program



PHOTO BY KATHY HUMANN, WIFCAP

sensor. Every time they set it off, my phone got an alert. After about an hour, I had seen all the cats.”

Now that the cats are more comfortable in their home, they venture out during daylight hours, and Bill says his employees are always snapping photos of them, some of which are shared on Venkman’s own Twitter account. While Egon and Venkman remain a bit standoffish, Bill says that Raymond is up for the occasional cuddle, if he’s hungry enough. As for the brewery’s rodent problem? It’s a thing of the past. “Our most frequent question is, ‘How effective is it?’ One hundred percent is the answer,” Bill says. “To date, we’ve never seen a rodent or lost any grain with the cats present.”

LARGER IMPACT

While employing cats as “workers” — whether it’s in the office or on a farm — undoubtedly makes a world of difference for the business owner, Kathy Humann says

these felines and the organizations that place them are also having a much larger impact on cat rescue as a whole. Of the positive changes she is seeing, she says: “We are making a difference in the attitudes of farmers who are beginning to understand that spay/neuter and vaccinations will make better barn cats. We are making a difference in local governments that are beginning to understand that feral cat problems have solutions that don’t involve roundups. We are making a difference in shelters that are seeing fewer cats coming in.

“Most of all, we are making a difference in the life of each cat who enters our traps. These cats would face death in shelters. Instead, they get to have a caring person provide shelter, food and water. They get to run and play without trying to raise endless litters of kittens. They get to live.” 🐾

Want to follow one of these working cats on social media? (Because, hey, why not?)
Instagram: @pirate_and_chomsky
Twitter: @VenkmanTheCat



WORKING 9 TO 5, AND LOVING IT

In Los Angeles, Best Friends puts cats to work — and in homes — in order to Save Them All



Best Friends and our partners are in the home stretch of the NKLA (No-Kill Los Angeles) initiative, which aims to make Los Angeles a no-kill city in 2017. A key

component of this very large goal is finding safe placement for cats who end up in city shelters but who aren’t socialized to people. Citywide “red tape” makes it impossible to return these cats to the locations where they were picked up, so creative solutions are the only way to save them.

The “working cat” program that’s helping these felines is based out of the Best Friends Pet Adoption and Spay/Neuter Center in Los Angeles. Via the program, city cats are finding safe new places to call home in nearby horse barns, vintage car garages and wineries. It’s a great gig if you can get it, especially if your life depends on it.

Learn more:
bestfriendsla.org/workingcats