



Debbie Dawson and Bandit

STUCK: Who you gonna call when kitty's in tree?

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tried their local fire departments or animal control agency and found no help for what can be a distressing situation. Gone, if they ever existed, are the days when the fire department would come and rescue the animals for someone's dear Aunt Elma.

Dawson soon hooked up with a 65-year-old cat rescuer who had just had heart bypass surgery and was forced to retire. The woman showed Dawson the ropes - actually, telephone pole lineman's gear.

That was eight years and 171 cat rescues ago.

These days, Dawson usually rescues about one cat a week. Spring and summer, when more cats are outside, are her busiest times. Other than a North Seattle man, she is the only cat rescuer in the area.

Dawson, who climbs in any kind of weather, says she's a careful, cautious climber. A rescue usually takes between 30 minutes and an hour, depending on the number of branches in the tree.

Once she has climbed the tree, getting the cat can be tricky. The animals sometimes go out on small branches and growl at her. Once she got bitten by a cat. She often uses treats to try to entice them.

"They have to help a little bit," she says.

Once she has bagged the cat, she rappels down the tree.



Bandit parades in front of Debbie Dawson's vanity plate - which tells the whole story.

Valley Daily News photos by GARY KISSEL

The most important and perhaps the only rule to climbing is that Dawson is always tied to the tree with the lanyards. And, she doesn't climb telephone poles. Rescue costs are \$30, which covers her expenses for gas and equipment replacement.

Is it really necessary, though? Won't cats just come down eventually?

Normally, cats come down in three to five days, Dawson said. A lot of her calls come from owners who have had cats in the trees for seven to 10 days, and the owners can wait no longer.

One cat stayed in a tree for 21 days before it was rescued. It was so thin that it became lethargic in her arms, she said. The cat, who five

years later weighs a hefty 16 pounds, was adopted by a friend and is now called "Bones."

The big trick, she said, is that the cat has to come down bottom first. The animals want to come down head first, but their claws don't allow it.

Two of the 171 cats were literally stuck, however, and would have died without help, she said. One was stuck between some branches.

Dawson has also rescued three to four cats who have been declawed. The declawed cats can push their way up a tree, but without claws, they have no way to get down.

One cat was pregnant, ready to deliver, and very relieved at its rescue, she said.

Then there was the double rescue. (One cat had chased the other up a tree and then was too scared to come down. The higher cat wouldn't come down past the lower cat.)

And, then there's Shorty. Shorty holds the record for the most number of rescues: about three or four, including one 18-day stay.

Like a modest superhero, Dawson downplays the role her work plays for the community. When asked, she shrugs her shoulder, saying it's merely a "service hobby."

She enjoys climbing trees because she likes the views. And, she likes helping people.

"I've met a lot of nice people and made a lot of people happy, which is what a hobby should do," she says.