



Pet Talk

Welcome to *Pet Talk*, an occasional column about homeless pets and related topics. Today's article presents some illuminating statistics about pets in the U.S. and in the Flathead Valley.

First, let's consider some recent numbers summarized by three major organizations: American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Humane Society of the U.S., and the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Total U.S. pet numbers: dogs: approximately 86 million, cats: 61 million.

About 45% of U.S. families keep dogs, whereas 26% have cats. And the average number per household is 1.46 dogs, and/or 1.78 cats.

Unfortunately, nearly 7 million homeless animals enter U.S. shelters each

year, and only 4 million eventually become adopted.

And sadly, nearly a million animals are euthanized annually (390,000 dogs, 530,000 cats).

Luckily, today's euthanasia numbers are much less than the 2011 high of about 2.6 million—thanks in part to increasing adoptions and successful returns of strays to owners.

Now let's try to extrapolate some of the U.S. statistics to our local situation (hang onto your hat here!).

Flathead County has about 118,000 residents, which means that, based on the average U.S. family size of three people, nearly 39,000 families might exist in this county. So, there might be as many as 20,000 pet-owning families locally.

Furthermore, if these estimates based on U.S. averages are indeed representative, then Flathead pets might total as many as 29,000 dogs and/or 36,000 cats!

Wow. If those numbers strike you as too high, just ask our overworked Animal Control Officers.

(Just kidding.)

Although one can always quibble with statistics, this truth remains: The Flathead (and the U.S. in general) *really loves* pets.

Unfortunately, high pet numbers also means that many will eventually become homeless due to owner difficulties and subsequent pet surrenders, abandoned or stray pets, and other factors.

For perspective, consider the following statistics from the Flathead County Animal Shelter. First, 982 dogs and 442 cats were taken in during 2023. Most (78%) of the dog intakes were strays brought in by Animal Control Officers, and about 60% of those animals were successfully reunited with their owners.

Of the remaining 540 dogs that were classed as adoptable, about 400 (74%) were rehomed with new owners. (Nearly 300 cats also were adopted, but we won't go into more detail here because of article space limitations.)

And what about average length of stay at the shelter? In 2023, it was about 12 days for dogs, and 16 days for cats. Note, however, that some homeless pets languish in the shelter for much longer—especially those in the more difficult-to-adopt

category, such as seniors, large dogs, and black-colored (!?) pets.

And despite the common misnomer “No Kill” shelter, a few homeless pets must be euthanized each year due to intractable illness or severe behavioral issues. But rest assured that euthanasia numbers are indeed minimal (33 last year) when compared to those in large U.S. cities.

In summary, local citizens can be proud of their hard-working county shelter, as well as of the other rescue organizations in Northwest Montana.

So that’s it for today’s Pet Talk. If you too love pets, please consider adopting one (or several!) when the time is right. You can also help spread the word among family and friends in rapidly growing Flathead County.

And please remember the generous adoption incentives at the county shelter. First, a recent donation from a local animal lover has allowed the shelter to substantially reduce its adoption fees. Flathead Shelter Friends also offers a Senior Pet Voucher, which pays up to \$350 toward veterinary

care for 7+ year-old adopted pets.

For more information, please contact Flathead County Animal Shelter, phone number (406) 758-1310, or visit the website at <https://flathead.mt.gov/department-directory/animal>.

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Personal donations are always appreciated! For more information, see www.flatheadshelterfriends.org