



HSUS wildlife specialist Dave Pauli checks on the former pet turtles as they adapt to more spacious living quarters.

**LOCATION:** Montana

**ANIMALS HELPED:** 85 turtles, most red-eared sliders

**CURTIS ANN HAD NEVER BEEN IN BIG WATER.** She'd lived much of her life in a 70-gallon tank about the size of a bathtub. By most standards, her setup was spacious.

But once she was let loose in a 2,000-gallon tank, her spirit soared. A photo of her in the tank shows her floating, legs stretched out. "She couldn't do that ... at home," says Wendy Graff, her former owner. "I could tell she was so happy."

Curtis Ann was one of dozens of red-eared slider turtles turned in after Montana banned the species last summer. The nonnative turtles, most likely released pets and their offspring, are turning up in local waterways, where they outcompete natives such as painted turtles for food and habitat. With no more selling of red-eared sliders in the state and the requirement for existing pet owners to purchase an exotic species license, the turn-in seemed like the perfect solution.

Working with HSUS wildlife specialist Dave Pauli, the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks department created a program to take in pet turtles with the goal of rehabilitating them for release in their native range, a block of states in the south-central U.S.

Pauli enlisted WJH Bird Resources Center in Billings for the rehabilitation phase, and owners wanting a better life for their pets began dropping them off at specified locations. "Some had been spayed or neutered," Pauli says. "Some would get their toenails trimmed. Some lived in a converted Jacuzzi." One woman brought in her 10-year-old turtle Calypso, who'd lived in a 30-gallon tank. "She was a wonderful pet, but I knew she needed more space," says owner Kate Nicholes.

The turtles received health checks and were weighed, measured and microchipped before transitioning through a series of small to large ponds at WJH stocked with natural prey. "We had to make sure they could hunt, dive in deep water and get along with everybody," Pauli says.

Each seemed to enjoy swimming the length of the center's large outdoor ponds. When Curtis Ann was released into the water, she dove deep, ate a fish and then swam over and bumped into a couple of other turtles, a so-called turtle greeting.

Private landowners with fenced-in ponds in warmer climates agreed to take in the turtles. In October, Pauli drove the first group of 24 turtles to their new homes. The rest will be released later this spring and summer.

Curtis Ann was among those released. She used to fall asleep in Graff's hands. But she and the other turtles had changed. "They look at you now and dive," Pauli says. "That's what we want."