



# A PET'S BEST FRIEND

When the humans head out of town, pet-sitters take care of business. **By Anthony Head** Photograph by Gary Moss









## A BRIEF NOTE ON DALKING.

I've noticed a curious behavior from dog owners: The ability to speak for their dogs—not in the third person, as in, *Fluffy Girl loves when you scratch her neck*. Rather, they speak as their dogs: *Ooooh. I'll give you just 20 more minutes to stop rubbing my tummy. Ooooh*. This vocalization-by-proxy can be complete with affectations and the occasional foreign accent. So I've coined a term, *dalking*, which is a conjunction of dog and talking. You could also use it in reference to cats (*calking*) or lizards (*lalking*), I guess. But I'm a dog-owner and guilty of *dalking*, a trait that is judiciously applied to this article. —The Author.

**IT IS SUNDAY MORNING, JULY 2.** The sun already sits high and hot over Moorpark. The community is mostly peaceful, partly due to the early hour, and partly because it's the mid-point of an unusually long holiday weekend. Many people have abandoned home for lake houses, ocean-side hotels, or just cooler climes located anywhere but here. It's just a leisurely weekend for everyone, and all is mostly quiet. Except for one house, that is. Except for Heather.

It's just before 7 a.m. when I arrive for a ride-along with Heather Wiggins-Dunlap, owner of Professional Pet Care. She's up and ready to go, and maybe it's the sleep still in my eyes, but it takes a moment to convince myself that the person who greets me is not actress Meredith Baxter Birney. The resemblance is uncanny.

There's little time to dwell on that, though, because as she leads me to the backyard, I'm soon in the midst of a canine compound. Circling Heather's legs like a pair of furry little satellites are Binky, a white Maltese, and Brio, a Yorkshire terrier. On the other side of a tall fence, wanting desperately to add to the commotion, are Boulder, a boxer, and Bear, a captivating wolf-husky mix. Taking center stage is a trio of large, huggable St. Bernards, Ella, Barry, and Stone. Heather isn't boarding these dogs, though. They belong to her and her husband, Bill.

"Before I can even think about getting to work, I've got all these great animals to take care of first, including the birds," Heather says. (There's a room of colorful, exotic birds to explore, but little time to meet them. Other animals await Heather's arrival.)

As we head for our first stop of the morning (Bill actually completed a super-early 5 a.m. shift), Heather explains that she's the caregiver for family members who must be left behind sometimes. Have no doubt about it, she adds, pets are family these days. "The pet-care industry is booming. Veterinary medicine has advanced so much in the past decade. More places are pet-friendly, too, like hotels and restaurants."

She thinks that a lot of people in the area are experiencing empty-nest syndrome so pets get spoiled—beyond belief. For animals, she's prepared kosher meals, sung happy birthday, read bedtime

stories, and put the phone up to a pet's ears for a chat with the owner. "At one time I was requested to take a dog to In-N-Out Burger every Thursday to get a Double Double with no onions or tomatoes," she says with a laugh.

Heather doesn't limit herself to dogs, having also cared for cats, horses, goats, chickens, fish, hamsters, llamas, birds, and ferrets. In fact, our first stop of the morning includes a large tortoise. In the side-yard, the dusty old-timer slowly (very slowly) emerges from a plastic igloo after Heather drops some greens and strawberries in the shady pen.


When the dogs, Carmel and Daisy, are freed from their kennels, they pay no mind to their reptilian roommate, instead heading quickly to the backyard—they've got serious squatting to do—where they'll spend the afternoon before Heather returns in the evening. Being the one who breaks the bonds and offers them freedom, Heather gets the unconditional love. Heather also gets to pick up the poop.

Another stop brings us to a pair of curious basenjis, Tio and Dakota. These diminutive dogs, known as a "barkless" breed, don't need vocals to express how happy they are when company arrives. *Please, come in*, they silently intone. *Have some coffee or kibble, and watch some Larry King. Are you hungry?* The television inside is tuned to CNN, but Heather says that Animal Planet is also very popular with her clients—the animals, that is. The dogs get some food, some TLC, and a quick walk-around. They look satisfied but wistful when we leave, wordlessly expressing thanks for us stopping by. *Come back soon. We'll talk. Call me.*

The next stop proves trickier. Inside the house awaits a Bernese mountain dog, a longhaired tri-colored beauty of a dog. However, Heather says he's well over a hundred pounds and doesn't like men. The author chooses to stay in the car with the windows rolled up, and has no idea what was said inside.

Though born in Southern California, Heather was raised in Anchorage, Alaska, and has loved animals all her life. "My father was a hunter, and I grew up with German shorthaired pointers. They were great dogs, but I absolutely protested my dad's hunting.





I remember crying in the backseat of the car, sitting next to dead ducks," she recalls.

She started down her current career path working at a vet's office while in high school. Pet-sitting wasn't so popular at the time; people still boarded their dogs in kennels when they went out of town. Or the neighborhood kid would drop some food in the backyard once a day. Word of mouth spread that she would provide in-home care, which meant less trauma for the animals, and less worry for the owners.

"And now I'm extremely busy. Busy enough so that I want some help," she jokes. She estimates that over 250 clients keep her number on their speed dial. The days vary, with some requiring only three or four stops. Others, like today, put her endurance to the test, with close to twenty stops. As we crisscross the area, she says she's burning through a tank of gas a day. She goes from multi-million-dollar mansions to trailer homes to apartments. Visits last about half an hour, but when she's busy, she likes to just get everybody out for a little relief, then double back to spend more time with them socially. But it all depends on the animal.

When we arrive at the home of a snowy white Samoyed named Lexi, it's obvious that he'll not be satisfied with a simple meet-n-greet. Letting him outside is like releasing white lightning, his polar-bear face brightening with glee and pure puppy energy. *Whadya say we go for a walk?*—that happy face begs—*I've been thinking about a walk all morning. Actually I started thinking about it last night and I woke up several times thinking about it and oh, well anyway ... let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go!* And so we do.

Overhead, the last wisps of clouds are starting to burn off as temperatures rise, and Heather is very careful to avoid letting Lexi wander through any areas where rattlesnakes may be hiding. Lexi is overjoyed to be outside again, as if EVERYTHING has changed in the last 12 hours.

At the next house, Jake the Jack Russell terrier waits patiently until Heather springs him from his kennel. Deeper in the bedding is an elderly dachshund. Her name is Georgia, but Heather has nicknamed her "Tweak," and it's easy to see why. She bips and

bops on stiff arthritic legs across the kitchen floor, looking a bit like a wind-up toy that has popped a spring.

I engage in a little playful dalking on Tweak's behalf, but Heather merely smiles while fixing some canine breakfasts. I've figured out that Heather is much more pragmatic about her dogs than I am. She's almost like a nurse in an emergency care unit. Not that she sees many emergencies, but there's a strong not-on-my-watch attitude, which is a good thing.

First off, she's awfully resourceful. In her trunk are carpet cleaner, leashes, pepper spray, air fresheners, a lot of poop bags, and a cat-litter scoop. On countless occasions, she says that she's been given the wrong house-keys so she's got a regular locksmith on call. Having arrived at homes to find smoke alarms going off and washers and toilets overflowing, she knows whom to call to put out fires—not that she's discovered a fire ... yet. She's also very well-qualified, having been with the Agoura Westlake Animal Hospital for almost a decade, including several years as a technician, so she knows intimately how to administer medicines, set up IVs.

While I play around, she maintains order. This morning, at various locations, she waters plants, checks mail, puts out the trash, takes in recycling receptacles, and collects newspapers. "I want people to feel confident and trusting of my services. So they know that I don't just love their animals, but that I'm really taking care of them. And, no less importantly, their homes," she says.

The morning shift winds down with felines. Elsa Pie and Remmy Bear stoically await their vittles; while in the final house, no cat ever makes an appearance. Heather says she's seen it twice in five years.

We end the first shift nearly four hours later at the same place we started. As we part, Heather walks to the backyard and I hear the commotion as her dogs get wound up at her appearance. I can just imagine what they're saying back there. ■

*Professional Pet Care can be reached by calling 805-499-2220.*

