

Meet the REAL Slum Dogs of India

A British photographer captures the daily lives of the subcontinent's street dogs

BY JIM BAKER

When she left England in 2007 to travel through India, Eloise Leyden knew she'd see street dogs. She'd traveled in Asia and Central America in the past, and seen the profusion of stray animals who roam many city streets. She planned to put her newly minted degree in photography to good use by undertaking a project that would give her trip to the subcontinent more meaning.

"So I had it in my head that I would concentrate my camera on the stray dogs, and so I got there, and the more I was photographing them, the more I sort of fell in love with them ... but I never anticipated that I would get so involved in their actual place in India, the situation that is out there, and how they can be helped," Leyden says.

Through a chance encounter in Pushkar—a city in the Indian state of Rajasthan—Leyden heard about the work of Tree of Life for Animals (TOLFA), a non-profit group that runs an animal hospital and shelter in the city. Founded by fellow Briton Rachel Wright, TOLFA's goal is to take steps to humanely control the dog population through spay/neuter programs and provide veterinary care to any animal who needs it—especially street dogs.

Leyden spent three days at TOLFA's compound, helping to take care of its permanent residents (at that time, about 20 dogs, as well as cats, cows, and goats) and photographing the animals, then left to continue her travels around the country.

But the shelter stayed in her mind as she continued taking photos while making friends with the dogs, learning to love them, and seeing "their spirit and their personality and the hard life they live," she says. "And yet so many of them, all they really wanted was a big cuddle, and if I had a *chapathi* [Indian flatbread], then all the better."



Sharda Chandeliya, a staff member at TOLFA, prepares the daily food for the former street dogs living at the sanctuary in Pushkar, Rajasthan. The happy guy on her lap is permanent resident, Squirrel.

Change is slow to come, especially in a society plagued with other problems; more than once, Leyden's lens captured people living on the street in conditions little better than that of the dogs. And the dogs have lived this way for hundreds of years. "They're hardy, they're survivors, and they bear the scars of their survival," Leyden says. "I didn't want people to see the book and go, 'Oh, isn't it dreadful?' I wanted to get across that it's just part of life out there, and that actually it's kind of beautiful in a way. You have to leave your perceptions at home, and just see it for what it is."

But while she recognized the reality, Leyden still wanted to help. Later in her trip, she returned to TOLFA, this time spending a month feeding and walking those dogs who, due to illness or infirmity, will live the rest of their lives at the shelter.

Upon returning to England, Leyden decided to shape her photos into a book. The result was quickly picked up by a publishing house, where it became *Slum*

Dogs of India (Merrell Publishers Limited, 2009). A portion of the proceeds from the sale of each book is donated to TOLFA; Leyden now serves as one of the organization's trustees.

Leyden says two huge things must happen to improve the situation of India's street dogs: India must find a way to reduce the trash that litters the streets, providing an endless supply of food; and spay/neuter programs must be established nationwide.

She found that the attitude of Indians toward street dogs ranges from indifference to hostility to the occasional gesture of kindness—a scrap of food tossed their way. But they are such a normal part of the fabric of Indian life that, for most people, they simply fade into the landscape.

Maybe her book, depicting the dogs as the individuals that they are, will help to change that.

To learn more about Leyden's photography, visit her website at eloiseleyden.co.uk. To learn more about TOLFA, visit tolfa.org.uk. 

