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## Former Telluride residents open primate rescue center

Cari and Ryan Mackey are embracing conservation in Panama

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Cari and Ryan Mackey inside Melikki's primate rescue at Morillo Beach. The former Telluride residents recently opened the new rescue center (Cari Mackey)

Earth Day, this Tuesday, April 25, honors the world's flora and fauna, a cause that former Telluride residents Cari and Ryan Mackey have embraced at Morillo Beach Eco Resort — which they have owned and operated along the shores of the Azuero Peninsula of Panama since 2018. While the Mackeys have always supported a local sea turtle

conservation center, last month, with the help of fellow Coloradan Dr. Matt Rooney, DVM, they unveiled the country's first primate rescue center dedicated to rehabilitating and releasing injured and orphaned primates, particularly critically endangered Azuero Mantle-Backed Howler Monkeys.

Over the years the Mackeys saw monkeys electrocuted by high voltage power lines. Because they're openly passionate about conserving wildlife and had an empty chicken coop available to serve as an enclosure, the local department of wildlife — Pro Conservation Foundation of Panama Primates — brought them a sick, orphaned howler monkey named Melikki (Goddess of the Forest) to foster until she could be released back into the wild. With no facilities or vets to care for injured and sick primates in the interior of Panama, Cari contacted friends, zoos and even pediatricians in the U.S for help, but in July 2023, Melikki died.

"It destroyed us because we had no way to get her help," Cari lamented. "We buried Melikki in a peaceful memorial garden we keep at the resort where we also buried our border collie from Telluride, Remo."

When another monkey — Soldier — was electrocuted, Cari was able to get him to a vet who amputated his tail.

“We brought Soldier back here to heal and were able to successfully release him back into the wild while two Telluride guests were staying at the lodge,” she explained. “He’s thriving now among his family in the resort’s jungle, so we know we can help.”

In 2023, the Mackeys hired a crew of private electricians to replace electric cables in power lines across their property with insulated cables to protect monkeys from electrocution. In partnership with Proyecto Primates of Panama, last year they hung six monkey bridges so guests can now watch wild monkeys crossing over the main road.

The primate rescue center began taking shape when Cari met veterinarian Matt Rooney who’s had a long career treating primates and operated a private vet practice in Colorado.

“From day one, he committed to serving as our virtual primary care vet,” Cari recounted. “He’s a superhero.”

A surgical specialist with extensive experience in wildlife care especially among endangered species, Rooney jumped in to help with initial research and planning for the rescue, ascertaining needed supplies, equipment, and safety protocols. He now serves on the rescue center’s board of directors.

“There are numerous diseases we can give to primates and vice-versa,” he explained. “So strict safety protocols must be upheld.”

Caring for wild animals, Rooney says, can be challenging.

“We could stitch a cut back together with sutures or special skin staples,” he explained. “But when the primates wake up, they’ll start picking at them.”

The Mackeys proceeded to build a 250-square-foot open studio with four enclosures and shelving space for medicines, centered by a stainless-steel table. Cari and a retired vet-tech now staff the primate rescue center, and a managing vet out of Santiago consults with Rooney.

The Mackeys have always operated their resort according to the acronym SEIS: Share, Educate, Inspire, and Stoke.

“All our adventure, cultural, and environmental programs touch on these principles that empower and educate our guests,” Cari explained. “This primate center is about showing our guests what I can do — and what they can do — to make a difference.”

The new primate center is an educational resource, but visitors aren’t allowed to interact with or touch the animals.

“We’re in this for the monkeys,” Cari insisted. “We’re focused on doing the right thing and not exploiting the animals in any way.”

While they're partnering in this venture with family and friends, Rooney suggested that guests donate to the cause via their check-out bills.

"One percent of our gross profits have gone towards our sea turtle conservation center," Cari explained. "Now we're donating a percentage to this effort. Since 99% of guests donate between \$25-\$50, over time, this will really add up."

Moving forward, Cari will solicit first aid supplies from guests to bring with them as a donation.

"As we get the center going, we'll have a page that describes what's needed so our guests can help and be a part of its success," she added.

For five years in a row, Morrillo Beach Eco Resort has earned the "Best of the Best" Traveler's Choice Award from Trip Advisor, recognizing the overall resort and the Traveler's Choice Award, honoring its restaurant. With six private rooms, each with a balcony, the Mackeys have welcomed approximately 100 visitors from Telluride, and the Daily Planet ran a story about the resort in November of 2023.

"This primate center is something I'm very passionate about," Cari concluded. "It's giving my life a whole new meaning that I could never have known. And I'm totally in."

For more information on Morrillo Beach Eco Resort, visit [morillobeachresort.com](http://morillobeachresort.com).

