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Lyons-area veterinarian helps open animal rescue center in Panama



Matt Rooney, a veterinarian from the Lyons area, helped open a primate rescue center in Panama. (Cliff Grassmick/staff photographer)



By **DANA CADEY** | dcadey@prairiemountainmedia.com | Longmont Times-Call

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The primates of Panama have more access to life-saving resources thanks to support from a Boulder County

Lyons-area resident Matt Rooney is a retired veterinarian who used to run Aspen Meadow Veterinary Specialists in Longmont and Boulder. While Rooney has provided care for many kinds of animals, he's also spent a lot of time with primates in Guatemala, Uganda and other places.

"I've been fortunate to have a lot of different zoo wildlife experience," Rooney said. "I've worked with primates throughout my career. There's a lot of nuance to that because of the safety both for primates and for people."

Rooney's medical expertise with primates came in handy when he was introduced to Cari Mackey, co-owner of [Morrisillo Beach Eco Resort in Panama](#). Mackey, who moved to Central America from Colorado, was committed to opening a primate rescue center at the resort to provide critical care for the region's monkeys.

"The idea really resonated with him right away," Mackey said of Rooney. "Even though I really want to care for monkeys and help them, I'm not a veterinarian, and I don't have those skills. So I sent him the plan, and he was on board with it."

For the last couple of years, Rooney has served as a veterinary advisor for the center during its construction. Rooney shared safety protocols to follow when working with primates, which impacted the design of the enclosures and the clinic. The center opened this week.

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Through Rooney's guidance, the center has a kitchen big enough to store food for several primate species, a quarantine area for the new arrivals and proper medical care facilities.

The rescue center will mostly serve howler monkeys, along with other species like capuchin monkeys, who have been hit by cars or electrocuted by power lines. The center will also treat injured and debilitated primates brought in from Panama's national parks.

The clinic, which is only around 200 square feet, will be an educational resource for guests at the resort to learn more about endangered howler monkeys, specifically.

"Being able to show our guests what we can do in this small space, and what we can do to assist this critically endangered species, is going to be extremely impactful for everybody," Mackey said.

Rooney explained that before the Morrisillo Beach Eco Resort rescue center, the closest facility to treat

“The roads are mostly dirt, so it’s a very long trip to have a sedated primate go that distance,” Rooney said. “The mortality rate of anything injured really is quite high.”

Rooney has lived in the Lyons area for around 25 years. He’s a partner at Spirit Hound Distillers in Lyons, and previously served on the board of the Longmont Humane Society.

In his retirement, Rooney said he has embraced nonprofit work.

“The wild animals of the world are suffering,” Rooney said. The center “is just a great first step for Panama.”

Rooney plans to visit the center in either April or May. He hopes to travel to Panama a few times a year to assist in person going forward.

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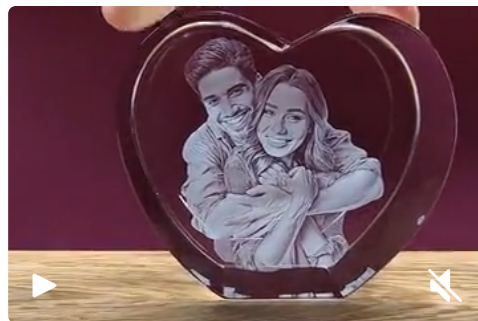
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