



Lampedusa, which is the largest of Italy's Pelagie Islands, has opened its arms to the migrant feline Pupi.—Photos courtesy of Lampedusa Mayor Toto Martello via Courthouse News

Migrant-cat survives voyage, heads to quarantine in Italy

A six-month old cat named "Pupi" who survived a trip with his Tunisian owner across the Mediterranean before landing at Lampedusa is in good health and will be cared for, the island's mayor said Wednesday. Mayor Toto Martello wrote on Facebook the orange male tabby with a white chest and paws had spent a few days at a migrant reception centre with his owner after their arrival by boat in Italy on July 1. It was then sent to a veterinary clinic for observation.

Provincial health authorities determined the cat was "in good health" and did not present symptoms of disease, said Martello. But it would still have to be kept away from other animals for six months under an anti-rabies quarantine. A woman from Lampedusa offered to take care of the kitten, said Martello, who signed a "custody" order for Pupi. Migrants from Libya and elsewhere in North Africa continue to arrive at Italy's shores, either after being picked up by humanitarian rescue boats or in their own small vessels.

La Repubblica daily wrote that over 100 migrants had landed on Lampedusa on July 1, in 11 separate landings. "It's a story that may seem to some of little importance but it shows how many procedures and tasks, sometimes even the most unexpected, weigh down the municipal administration when we are faced with a landing of migrants on the island," Martello wrote. But, he added, "even if it's a small story, I'm glad it has a happy ending". —AFP



Two baby elephants walk among a herd at the Minneriya National Park in Minneriya.—AFP

Meet Buckwheat, the donkey you can hire to crash Zoom meetings

The coronavirus pandemic has led millions of people to embrace meetings via Zoom, but admittedly, those can be as tedious as in-person conferences. So one animal sanctuary in Canada, in dire need of cash after being forced to close to visitors, found a way to solve both problems. Meet Buckwheat, a donkey at the Farmhouse Garden Animal Home, who is ready to inject some fun into your humdrum work-from-home office day—for a price. "Hello. We are crashing your meeting, we are crashing your meeting—this is Buckwheat," says sanctuary volunteer Tim Fors, introducing the gray and white animal on a Zoom call.

In the video application's signature window panes, the call attendees offer some oohs and aahs as they realize what's happening—and then erupt in laughter. "Buckwheat is crashing people's meetings in order to make some money," Fors tells AFP. "They donate to the sanctuary when they want her to crash a meeting, so it's mostly a fundraiser so we can feed the cows, especially during COVID." The Farmhouse Garden Animal home in Uxbridge, about an hour's drive northeast of Toronto, used to rely on visitor donations and paid on-site activities to make ends meet. But since the pandemic erupted in mid-March, the former cattle ranch can no longer welcome outsiders, putting a serious dent in its finances.

Big money for 10 minutes

"About four years ago, Mike Lanigan, who is the farmer here—he is a third-generation cattle farmer—he had a change of heart and decided not to send his cows to slaughter anymore," Fors explains. The animal sanctuary was born: it's now home to about 20 cows, chickens, ducks, a horse and Buckwheat, the female donkey born 12 years ago. With the pandemic threatening the sanctuary's survival, its leaders quickly realized they needed to identify other ways to bring in money.

They themselves were using Zoom calls for work—and thus was born the idea of having animals sit in on people's work calls to lighten the mood. On the sanctuary's website, interested parties can fill out a form to hire Buckwheat, Melody the horse or Victoria, whom Fors calls the "matriarch of the herd." A 10-minute Zoom appearance costs CAN \$75 (US \$55). For double the time, the price shoots up to CAN \$125, and \$175 for 30 minutes, sanctuary co-founder Edith Barabash told Toronto Life magazine. "We are always happy when the people on the meeting are sur-

prised," says Fors. "We started about the end of April, and I think we done about 100 meetings and sometimes we are crashing meetings three or four times a day." On one call, Fors tells attendees that he hopes they will visit the sanctuary once lockdown measures are lifted. "Definitely," one of them says. —AFP



This undated handout photo shows Buckwheat the donkey at Farmhouse Garden Animal Home, a sanctuary for animals near Uxbridge, Ontario, Canada.—AFP

Sri Lanka rangers spot possible rare baby elephant twins

A pair of baby elephants feeding from the same mother have been spotted in a Sri Lankan national park, with officials speculating Wednesday the two could be a rare set of twins. The young tuskers—who rangers estimate are three to four weeks old—were spotted in the Minneriya sanctuary about 200 kilometres (125 miles) north-east of Colombo, grazing with a herd of about a dozen elephants. After observing the pair from a distance, officials are confident enough to "say they are twins," Department of Wildlife Conservation Director-General Tharaka Prasad told AFP.

The two were also photographed feeding from the same cow on Monday by renowned conservationist Sumith Pilapitiy, who also told AFP he believed the two were twins.

Rangers were carrying out DNA tests on the herd's dung to confirm, Prasad said. If the results matched, it would mark the first time wildlife officials on the Indian Ocean island had sighted twins alongside their mother, he added. The sighting was near the area where seven elephants died from poisoning in September, in an act blamed on local farmers.

Nearly 200 elephants are killed every year on the island, many by farmers after the pachyderms stray onto their land. Marauding elephants kill an average of 50 people annually, mostly when they stray into villages near their habitat. The country's elephant population has declined to just over 7,000 according to the latest census, down from an estimated 12,000 in the early 1900s. —AFP