

Dear Dillie
By E.M. Fay



Veterinarian Dr. Melanie Butera and her husband, Steve Heathman, live in Canal Fulton, Ohio, with a couple of beloved pets. Nothing out of the ordinary about that, of course, until we learn that while one of their animal companions is a now-15-year-old standard poodle named Lady, the other is a seven-year-old doe named Dillie.

Dillie came to live with Steve, Melanie, and Lady several years ago when she was only a little fawn three days old. As Melanie explained, they received a call from a local deer farmer at 3 am one June night. "Dillie's mother was not taking to her, and he asked if we wanted to try to nurse her back to

health." Dillie had been born with cataracts, so she was blind at birth, which is possibly why her mother pushed her aside and would not nurse her. Dillie was raised by Melanie on goat's milk right from the goat, and she did well on it.

Melanie, an experienced veterinarian, put Dillie on an IV drip to maintain her strength. She only weighed four pounds at the time. The treatment worked. "We got her up and running around after about two weeks," Melanie said. Luckily, she and Steve have a property of 5 acres, so there was plenty of room for Dillie to stretch her young legs.

After Dillie had gained sufficient strength, Melanie and Steve had to decide what to do next.

"We then realized that she couldn't go back to the farm and live with the other deer and she couldn't live with our horses because they scared her too much."

Happily, Lady the poodle got along well with Dillie and vice versa. The couple decided to keep Dillie as a member of the family. Dillie's comfortable adjustment to the domestic life was a delight to observe. She had no qualms about making full use of the whole two-story house.

"This became apparent to us when we came home one day and couldn't find her downstairs.

We walked upstairs and found her standing on our bed with Lady. She had obviously learned a few tricks from the old dog."

Dillie behaved in a similar way to other pets, making use of the couple's bed in the early years, climbing the stairs, and even enjoying the family swimming pool! This clever deer is also house-trained, and knows to do her business in the proper place.

Among her other accomplishments, Dillie has learned how to turn the house lights on and off, and get ice from the refrigerator dispenser.

As in any family, health problems are dealt with. Because of her cataracts, Dillie had to be looked after carefully at first. Low light and distances can be difficult for her vision, but her eyes have grown larger since, and the cataracts have not, so she gets around quite well. Steve and Melanie knew their dog Lady was a most suitable caretaker, and Lady did indeed look out for her companion. The two spent so much time together that Melanie says Dillie learned to act like a dog herself. They shared the family bedroom equably for several years. And, like any family "dog," Dillie even warmed Steve's feet by lying on them.

Dillie caused the family a brief scare when she wandered into the front yard one day, but all was well, as she never actually left the property. Melanie and Steve took prompt action to



keep her safe. They got a GPS tracking system collar for Dillie to wear, so as “to keep our minds at ease,” Melanie added. Deer who wander loose are liable to be destroyed, so they make sure to keep Dillie close to home at all times.

Having Dillie as a member of the family may make this home a little bit different from the average household, but her presence has come to seem quite normal, even indispensable to her “mixed-species” family.

Dillie the deer had a rough start in life, but she is living the “life of Riley” now, thanks to some compassionate people – and Lady the poodle – who were willing and able to open their hearts and their home. Dillie will be 8 years old this coming June 6th. She has a popular facebook page and webcam site where animal lovers may follow her story:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Dillie-the-Deer/167382209972167>
and www.www.com/dilliecam,

Note to Readers: Dillie was born in captivity on a deer farm and so cannot survive in the wild. She was not taken from the wild, which is illegal in Ohio. Only specially trained persons, such as state-licensed wildlife rehabilitators, are qualified in the safe and proper way to handle non-domestic animals.

At Wildlife Watch, we have seen and heard many stories of inter-species love and cooperation, and it is always a joy to find new examples of happy relationships like Dillie’s family.

Even though a deer in the house is not the norm, and Wildlife Watch does not endorse trying to convert any wild animal into a pet, in Dillie’s case it is clearly the only reasonable solution for Dillie and her family. Dillie did not receive the normal nurturing that a fawn receives from the mother to learn how to live on her own in the wild. Dillie is alive and happy with her family, Lady has a good friend, Steve and Melanie obviously enjoy her company, and feel happy that she has accepted them as family.

Wildlife Watch believes that the larger importance of the Dillie story is that it demonstrates that the fear deer have of humans is not a function of “nature” – it is not instinctual, it is not wired into the wild animal, but rather it is a function of “ ” – it is a learned behavior based on fearful encounters with humans. It is a lesson passed to offspring in the wild. When the conditions that trigger fear change, wild animals and humans will be able to bond once again.

This article was based on an Interview by E.M. Fay with Dr. Butera and her husband.