



## Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

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# Reindeer helps save younger brother from devastating illness

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### Reindeer Helps Save Brother from Devastating Illness



Some reindeer live a bit south of the North Pole. In Shortsville, N.Y., about 30 miles east of Rochester, reindeer brothers Moose and Little Buddy call a little farm home. Their owner Mike Schaertl was looking forward to Little Buddy's first holiday season, but last month, the five-month-old reindeer got very sick.

Reindeer are vulnerable to tick borne diseases and living in areas where deer graze can increase the risk of infection. When Little Buddy lost his energetic personality and had no interest in eating his favorite beet pulp or playing with Moose, concern grew.

"When I came home from work one day to check on Little Buddy, I noticed his urine was dark red," Schaertl explained. "That's when I realized this was a serious problem."

Schaertl called his veterinarian Dr. Michael Carey, himself a reindeer owner, at the Towne & Country Veterinary Hospital, who referred him to the Cornell University Equine and Nemo Farm Animal Hospital right away. By the time Little Buddy arrived, his condition was quickly getting worse. He was lethargic, open-mouth breathing and had a very high fever.

Dr. Melissa Fenn, Large Animal Internal Medicine resident, began stabilizing him immediately with oxygen and fluids. Initial bloodwork diagnosed Babesiosis, a potentially fatal parasitic disease spread by ticks. The parasite was invading and destroying Little Buddy's red blood cells, making him severely anemic. Fenn and her team ordered the appropriate medication to combat the parasite and monitored him closely overnight in the ICU. Despite their efforts, the next morning, Little Buddy was significantly more lethargic. Because of his anemia, there was an inadequate amount of oxygen being delivered to his tissues, a problem requiring a blood transfusion.

Things were not looking good.



Dr. Melissa Fenn (left) with Little Buddy (left) and Moose. Photo by Stephan Wagner.

“We were very worried about Little Buddy. Most reindeer that present to the hospital with this disease do not survive,” said Fenn.

Moose had traveled with Little Buddy to the hospital. Reindeer are social creatures who gain comfort from being in their herd, so Fenn knew that bringing in Moose, Little Buddy's herd-mate and half-brother, would ease his stress. Moose would also be able to donate the blood that Little Buddy badly needed for a transfusion.

A day and a liter of blood later, Little Buddy could stand and began to eat again. Although still very sick, the young reindeer continued to show signs of gradual improvement. By the sixth day, Little Buddy was able to play with Moose again, and his bloodwork results were looking better. He no longer needed oxygen and could be moved out of the ICU.

The Cornell University Equine and Nemo Farm Animal Hospital is equipped to keep many species of large animals, though special care and consideration was needed for Moose and Little Buddy. For example, bars and a grill work on equine stalls would present some hazard to reindeer antlers that could get stuck. The hospital retrofitted an existing padded stall normally used for horses with neurologic conditions. The stall was also ideal because it was closest to the end of the barn, where the door could be opened to let in some cool November air. Little Buddy needed cold temperatures to be comfortable, so large box fans were hung in the stall as well.

Fenn noted, “The hospital team was so creative and came up with a great solution to keep him as comfortable as possible during his recovery.”

After a week, it became clear Little Buddy would make a full recovery. The treatments including Moose’s blood transfusion had worked. He was more energetic, interactive, and there was no longer any evidence on his blood smear of the organisms that made him sick in the first place.

Fenn was thrilled that her patient had pulled through the worst. After more observation and treatment for an unrelated eye issue, both reindeer were discharged with a clean bill of health. They could return to their home in time for the holidays.



Little Buddy with Dr. Melissa Fenn. Photo by Stephan Wagner.

Schaertl reports that the brothers are happy as ever in their northern N.Y. home. The family even threw a party in the brothers’ honor, a barn-warming celebration where all of the Shortsville community was invited to meet Moose and Little Buddy. Several hundred friends and community members came to celebrate.

“We are extremely lucky to have a facility like Cornell’s so close by,” Schaertl said. “Our referring vet, Dr. Mike Carey, knew exactly what had to be done and he knew that Cornell was the best place to give Little Buddy a chance at surviving this almost always fatal disease. The superb staff at Cornell, led by Dr. Fenn, was in daily contact with us

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and Dr. Carey. Through their efforts, Little Buddy is still able to bring smiles to hundreds of children this holiday season.”

By Sarah Bassman

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