

Meet Your Neighbors

Robin and Rob Lyon



A pretty young farm girl dreamed of a country home with lots and lots of animals.
Dreams really can come true.

Well, they did for Robin Lyon.

This is the story of Robin's original dream and how her husband Rob signed on and adopted it as his own as well.

Robin Wolfe Lyon was born in Napa and raised on the family's Wild Wolfe Ranch in the eastern hills of Napa. She went to UC Davis, leaving her pet skunk behind. As a result of her campus job as a campus airline representative for PSA and PanAm, she got an opportunity to travel during school breaks and loved it. After graduating from college, she became a flight attendant and saw the world.

Rob was born in Atlanta, went to Bowling Green University (like Wayne Schake) and after a sailing trip to Fiji with two pilots, became a US Navy fighter pilot, flying 192 missions in

Vietnam. He joined Western Airlines (now Delta) initially as a co-pilot. He retired as a captain in 1999. (He was awarded the Navy-Marine Corps medal for saving a pilot's life, but that's another story—ask him about it yourself.) And now he loves animals, maybe as much as Robin does.

One day, the beautiful flight attendant and the handsome co-pilot, both in the midst of divorces, happened to be working the same flight. There was some awkwardness at first, but the entire flight crew on a very long layover ended up in a cowboy bar in Houston. (That's another story—ask them about it yourself.)

So began an on-again/off-again courtship, an act in this play ending with the handsome co-pilot driving to the beautiful flight attendant's house in a beat-up pickup with a rescue dog and a chain saw in the back to show that a city boy could become a country boy by marriage. (Yep, that's another story, too, but he still doesn't know how to use a chain saw.)

35 years, two kids, one successful cancer surgery and one new knee later, here we are.

While still single, Robin had bought 12 unimproved acres of land in 1978 from a Diamond A resident and PanAm pilot named Wes Monsen. He liked her dream of planting an orchard and having lots of rescue animals. From the first of their many meetings, he was an understanding and supportive seller. He confided that at one time he'd had a similar dream, but for personal reasons it just did not work out.

Lots of hard work and love created Lyon Ranch, which is now known far and wide as the home of more than 80 animals, many of which are exotic—rare and endangered ocelots, Asian camels, African foxes and more. Upon entering their kitchen, I noticed what turned out to be an African serval, which looks like a small bobcat, nesting alertly but contentedly atop a cabinet. The Lyons have state and federal licenses (including being subject to multiple unannounced inspections each year) to keep the animals, and they are a repository of confiscated exotic animals—most recently three alligators which DEA captured guarding meth labs.

For those of you who don't know, Rob (not his original name, but, yes, that's another story, too) and Robin truck selected animals to hospitals, schools, nursing homes and other places where the animals can bring joy to people whose pile of joy is otherwise not tall. And they host pre-arranged groups at the Lyon Ranch as well. They have a non-profit that recently held a fund-raiser, bringing more than 100 people to the ranch. The food bill for the animals is about \$3500 per month.

To be able to maintain this menagerie, they are up and at-'em by seven each morning. Rob tends to clean up after the larger animals, and Robin takes on the smaller ones. They have help from their daughter Lynette (28) who lives on premises and an ER doc who also lives on premises. But it's a big job indeed. (Son Bill, 31, is training to be a firefighter in Washington State.)

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As usual, I asked them a few questions:

Favorite Restaurant? Both: Swiss Hotel. Honorable mention to Breakaway Café.

Famous People You've Met? When Robin was a flight attendant, she had the bad fortune to assist Zsa Zsa Gabor. (That's another story, and not a pretty one.)

Favorite Vacation Spot? Both: cruises, especially in the Caribbean. Because of their ranch responsibilities, they are not inclined to take long vacations.

Favorite Season in Sonoma: Both: spring, with its promise of new growth.

Giants/A's? Rob: A's; Robin: Giants. But neither with any great intensity.

Niners/Raiders? Neither.

Favorite exercise: Cleaning up after 80 animals; there is no second favorite.

Pivot point of your life: Rob: starting to sail around the world at age 21 with two compatriots who were pilots—it just sounded like too good a life. Robin: being the campus rep for an airline, delivering tickets and then getting a trip to Guatemala which infected her with the travel bug.

Favorite TV shows: Both: real life-type crime shows.

Beatles or Stones: Both: Beatles.

Who does the cooking/cleaning?: This was agreed pre-wedding--Rob does the heavy stuff, but Robin does most of the cooking.

Bucket List: Robin wants to improve oversight for nursing homes; Rob wants to get his Navy/Marine Corps medal back. (There's that story again.)

Motto: Both: Live for the moment.